

GUIDANCE NOTE

Reading and Learning During Global Emergencies

THE CHALLENGE

With 810 million children in low and lower-middle income countries out of school due to the COVID-19 pandemic,¹ mitigating learning loss is critical. Access to reading materials is essential for the continuity of learning.² **The Global Book Alliance (GBA) and the international education community now face the challenge of ensuring that all students can access print materials in their homes to learn to read, and to read to learn.**

Even prior to the current pandemic, the global book gap was severe. Fewer than 50% of the students worldwide were estimated to have access to all the books needed for their age and grade, and almost all access to books was through schools.³ COVID-19 has greatly exacerbated this lack of print access. Classrooms are no longer an option for accessing reading material. Waves of COVID-19 infection are anticipated to be cyclical, creating ongoing and unpredictable patterns of school openings and closures, until a vaccine or cure is found. Prolonged book shortages are predicted. Ongoing lack of access to reading materials will exacerbate the global learning crisis and pose long-term threats to human capital development and economic progress.

It is now more urgent than ever that book access be expanded to families and communities through avenues that do not depend upon schools. Books are an essential component for resilience; without them, other measures such as community schooling, teacher training, and family outreach will not promote reading or literacy. This GBA Guidance Note provides a roadmap for ensuring access to age and language-appropriate reading materials for the poorest and most vulnerable, both during the COVID-19 crisis, and beyond.

¹ UNICEF, 2020

² US estimates suggest that students will experience a roughly 30% learning loss purely due to COVID-19 impacts, which will be in addition to any other typical learning loss due to vacation time away from learning, NWEA, 2020.

³ USAID, *Global Book Fund Feasibility Study, 2015*

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR GETTING APPROPRIATE READING MATERIALS TO THE MOST MARGINALIZED

- **Do No Harm:** In the midst of a pandemic or other crisis, no action to support education is worth an elevated risk of transmitting pathogens or endangering lives. In providing books to families during COVID-19, strategies for maintaining social distancing, disinfecting packaging, and ensuring that collaborative work to print, transport, and deliver books follows medical protocols will help reduce the risk of transmission of a disease. As we have seen, these protocols vary by context, but should be taken seriously in planning distribution efforts.
- **Prioritize the Home:** Homes and families must be the new focus of global efforts to improve and sustain book provision. While many in-country systems for book distribution have focused on ministries of education and school systems as their primary clients, responding to COVID-19 requires more intentional analysis and fulfillment of parents' and families' needs for books. While the challenge of learning to read at home is significant, the COVID-19 crisis has nonetheless created an unparalleled opportunity to foster and encourage a stronger global "culture of reading," including ensuring access to materials in students' living spaces, and equipping parents to provide the necessary support.
- **Adopt a Long-Term, Resilience-Focused Perspective:** The book gap presents an immediate concern, as well as a longer-term, systems-level challenge. In the short term, responding to the emergency requires rapid responses, like book "gifting" actions, where one-time purchases are provided free of cost to certain families or communities. Over the longer term, and in preparation for future crises, resolving the book gap will require market shaping efforts to allow publishers and local book sellers to sell books for a profit in their town or region. In parallel to short-term actions to gift or donate books, therefore, the development of a vibrant local publishing sector should be prioritized.
- **Promote Inclusion and Equity:** All children need access to learning opportunities, and to text in some form. Early in the response effort, consider which children will not be able to use books in paper format. How will deaf and hard of hearing, as well as blind and low vision learners, access books? What systems will need to be in place to sustain book supply for these students? The earlier a response to these questions can be formulated, the more inclusive and equitable responses to increasing book access will be.
- **Promote Book Quality:** Although it is tempting in a crisis to privilege quantity over quality, simply dumping excess books from book drives or other "wide net" collection efforts is not likely to result in children's engagement with that material, or in any profitable academic practice. Among other difficulties, languages and vocabulary levels in charitably collected books can vary greatly, and may not always be appropriate for the beneficiary populations to whom the books are eventually distributed. It is essential to understand and respond to the context of the children for whom the books are intended.
- **Emphasize the Most Marginalized:** While tech-enabled access points will serve some learners, many children will not be able to access the devices and level of connectivity

needed to benefit from technology-based reading practice due to geographic and/or cost limitations. Equity considerations such as these must be central to response efforts in order to avoid further exacerbating inequalities and widening achievement gaps. Budgeting must allow for paper printing and transport to homes, even where technology is also playing a role in distance learning.

- **Engage the Private Sector:** The private sector can be a powerful ally in assuming the costs of supplying students at home with the books they need. Private sector actors can play a variety of important roles, among them subsidizing book printing and delivery, pooling funds to support adaptations for learners with disabilities, donating books to reach the most marginalized learners, and/or engaging in supplying technology that can promote reading in homes.

CONSIDERATIONS

- **Home and Family Context:** Students cannot be expected to spend the same amount of time reading at home that they might have been expected to in school. Parents cannot be expected to replace classroom teachers. In this context, small simple books and texts, like storybooks written in local languages and downloaded from open source collections, may prove more useful for learning activities than more standard-issue schoolbooks, such as textbooks.
- **Sources of Openly Licensed and Accessible Material in Appropriate Languages:** Many sources of reading material are available across the internet, but not all prioritize open licensing and not all have quality control functions that result in collections appropriate for young children or for teaching any given skill. It is essential to understand both quality assurance and licensing considerations prior to distributing a book or set of books. In addition, materials that are “born accessible” or are available in many formats (i.e. with sign language recording, or with braille versions, etc.) should be sourced whenever possible. The [Global Digital Library](#) is one source of openly licensed materials.⁴
- **Getting Books to Children:** Due to low rates of internet connectivity among families, institutions that can download, print and bind storybooks will have a key role to play in providing reading material to homes during COVID-19 or similar crises. These actors and institutions may include religious organizations (churches or mosques), community health workers, school management committees, community-based/civil society organizations (CBOs/CSOs), local businesses (such as print shops), and/or NGOs already contracted and on the ground to supply services as part of the COVID-19 response. They could also include the post service, newspaper, or other delivery channels, if these still function.
- **Matching Materials to Activities:** For general reading enjoyment, where an adult is available to read to children, (either in person in the home or as a voice coming from a television or radio), simple story books in a language children understand that include an intriguing plot line are ideal. For learning basic sound-symbol correspondence, letter boards, picture cards, or other simple manipulatives can serve. When there is an expectation that students will continue to build their own ability to decode new words and become more fluent in reading, decodable

⁴ In response to the COVID-19 crisis, the Global Book Alliance has developed [FreeLearning](#), a platform that sources high quality materials for early readers from across the internet in a single search.

books, leveled readers, and short chapter books in languages children understand and in accessible formats will be necessary. Both fiction and non-fiction titles will be needed to build these skills.

- **Support to Book Usage:** Book provision efforts will only be effective if books are **used** to maintain reading ability, build skills, and/or expand understanding. Providing families with activities to use books, like reading them along with a radio broadcast, will be essential if students' homes are to become places where reading and literacy skills are fostered during a crisis.
- **When and Where Technology Can Play A Role:** For most children, access to printed books will be the only way they can have reading supplies during COVID-19. However, when children and families can access it, technology can play an important role in connecting isolated children to print. Phones, computers connected to the internet, and “dual-mode” devices can all be used to furnish children and their families with reading material if the context makes that feasible, and a number of platforms now include games, activities and other supports to reinforce reading skills.⁵ Broadcast technology, too, like radio or TV, can be used where appropriate to support the activities and games that encourage the use of the books or texts provided.

KEY TAKEAWAYS: DOWNLOADING, PRINTING, AND DISTRIBUTING IN CRISIS AND BEYOND

- **In the Immediate Aftermath of a Crisis:** The immediate response effort will require the use of existing resources rather than developing materials from scratch. Identifying openly-sourced materials, such as those available through the Global Digital Library <https://www.digitallibrary.io/> and its partners sites (linked through a cross-platform search), and then using **innovative/localized/non-standard models**, such as on-demand printing through local copy shops, is one possible approach. If donor funding is available and health conditions permit, humanitarian response workers and NGOs can be provided with fixed-price grants to assist in jumpstarting such a print routine and conveying copies to homes. Also, short-term options may exist for **“piggybacking” on existing delivery channels in the private sector**. For example, reading materials may be able to be printed at reduced cost in local newspapers, or dispatched via existing private sector commodity supply chains. Alternatively, instructions could be given by radio as to ways in which to access resources like those on the GDL from a simple feature phone, or affiliated “offline” partner using a local area network (LAN).⁶
- **During the Recovery and Resilience-Strengthening Phases:** These phases will require renewed attention to strengthening the entire book supply chain. Government and local capacity to develop high quality materials, to select the best physical and volume specifications for cost-effective printing, to make informed selections between local and international sourcing, and to choose how to print and distribute material will have to be built and sustained.

⁵ A few examples include the [Global Digital Library](#) and [FreeLearning](#)'s interactive games, Google's [Read Along](#) App, and Bloom's [Talking Book](#) function.

⁶ Kolibri (<https://learningequality.org/kolibri/>) is one example of an organization offering Global Digital Library books through a local area network.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Global Digital Library \(GDL\)](#) and [GDL Print Repository](#)
- [World Bank Guidance Note of Remote Learning and COVID-19](#)
- [Three Actionable Steps to Measure the Impact of COVID-19 on Education Equity Globally](#)
- [Best Practices for Developing Supplementary Reading Materials](#) (USAID, 2014)
- [Learning and Teaching Materials: Policy and Practice for Provision](#) (DFID, 2011)
- [Free Learning](#) Cross-Platform Search for early grade reading materials