Addressing the challenges COVID-19 brought to education systems and facilities in Indonesia

When the COVID-19 pandemic started, UN Volunteer Clarissa Jazzlyne Gunawan was two months into working with the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in Indonesia as an intern. She later joined the team as a national UN Volunteer Education Officer, focusing on foundational skills. Jazzlyne reflects on the work she has carried out so far and lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I started my assignment in UNICEF’s Social Policy Cluster, and as the pandemic hit, I took on an additional role supporting their Education Cluster in their COVID-19 response team. My work focused on compiling evidence on the severity of the pandemic’s impact on schools and learning in Indonesia’s rural and remote areas and providing feedback to inform the Ministry of Education’s COVID-19 response plan. This involved consolidating and extracting lessons from studies conducted by various government agencies, non-governmental organizations and research institutions studying the impact of the pandemic both locally and globally.

We provided reliable information to policy decision-makers, which is critical when
government capacity may be stretched. We also helped teachers and schools develop capacity and acquire material to teach from a distance. Development Partners (a group of non-governmental organizations and UN entities) compiled and shared resources to support the ministry’s dissemination strategies to reach schools in difficult-to-reach areas through print and online means.

As the pandemic spread, so did the questions. People could not meet and travel. Students and teachers were sometimes in places where there was minimal infrastructure for digital and distance learning. I saw organizations and governments reorienting their practice. There was a growing desire and comfort level with exchanging ideas across different sectors and finding solutions together.

“I have seen individuals step up to respond to this emergency, becoming leaders in their own field and teams, adapting to changes and maximizing knowledge within their sector and from beyond. No matter how new to the field one may be, taking initiative creates trust and a deeper sense of interdependency.”

The pandemic highlighted issues of mental and psychosocial health, the importance of early grades and foundational skills, and structuring policy around children’s learning and the conditions families are facing. People have been braver about addressing sensitive issues and engaging in cross-organizational discussions to respond to them through dialogue and collaboration, placing at the centre children, teachers and learning.

Challenges

There are two main challenges I’d like to highlight. One is related to balancing and communicating priorities, and another to organizational learning. An evident challenge when it comes to leading during the height of the pandemic was deciding how to balance multiple priorities, all of which were important to address and consider. Pressure is constantly increasing, with high expectations to produce quality work in minimal time, especially when working with and between various teams. When working across sectors and among various organizations and teams, effectiveness and efficiency are key, and trust among team members is paramount.

Lessons learned

The pandemic has magnified existing gaps in our education system, from the growing challenges children with disabilities face to the widening gap in infrastructure and access between rural and urban areas. It has also urgently pushed for new and different approaches to leadership, including flexibility, adaptability and relatability, being adopted
intentionally to enable and enrich connections to empower collective, sustainable change.

I note the following points that helped teams thrive:

(1) Great leaders create enabling environments, practice compassion, build trust and lead by example.

Teams are strengthened through the collective support individuals provide. As COVID-19 quickly became an inextricable part of our lives, I noticed increasing compassion expressed among colleagues through active and intentional efforts to build genuine connections.

Conversations with colleagues about our work provided invaluable lessons and reflections, broadening how I think about and approach my work; and how such values and actions need to be embraced in policy decisions.

(2) Strategic positioning and communications are key.

Advancing education access and quality is engrained in broader political dilemmas and intertwined across different fields. Finite resources must be prioritized over competing agendas; all are important, where problems are exacerbated by COVID-19. This includes health and nutrition issues – from vaccinations and ensuring health protocols are met; growing mental health and psychosocial concerns; economic, infrastructural and access concerns; hygiene facilities and internet connection; and child protection concerns.

Intentionally and consistently clarifying tasks, asking questions, discussing ideas and engaging with different sectors have provided me with deeper insight and increased engagement in my work. It has enabled a greater sense of certainty and connectively during demanding situations, working together towards a collective goal, and allowing for wider perspectives to better base future decisions from.

Especially during COVID-19 and in advocating for better education, we need to care for ourselves and others to continue doing the work – work that is ample and demands creative and innovative solutions, needs us to keep showing up and leading with compassion, in smarter and more sustainable ways. I am grateful to have had this opportunity to serve as a UN Volunteer and hope that the work I do will continue to serve and empower the most vulnerable communities during the pandemic and beyond.

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• International Day of Epidemic Preparedness

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 3: Good health and well-being SDG 4: Quality education SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals