

POLICY BRIEF

Delivery Approaches in Crisis or Conflict Situations

January 2022

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This policy brief was written by Paula Villaseñor (Education Commission) with guidance and inputs from Kate Anderson (Education Commission) as part of an ongoing series for the [DeliverEd Initiative](#). It builds on the previous policy brief:

The Education Commission (January 2022). “Design Choices for Delivery Approaches in Education.” <https://educationcommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/DeliverEd-Policy-Brief-2.pdf>

*The DeliverEd Initiative is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The Education Commission and the Blavatnik School of Government, with support from the University of Toronto, are leading this initiative. Other partners include IDEAS, IEPA at University of Cape Coast, Georgetown University’s *gui2de*, and the World Bank. From the Education Commission, Charry Lee, Liesbet Steer, and Lana Wong contributed to this policy brief. In addition, we would like to acknowledge the feedback received from Salim Youssef Salama (FCDO), and Zahra Mansoor, Dana Qarout and Martin Williams (University of Oxford). We are extremely grateful for the valuable experiences of Miguel Brechner (Former President of Uruguay’s Plan Ceibal) and Grace Kargobai (Head of MBSSE Delivery Team, Sierra Leone).*

For questions or requests for collaboration, please contact deliver.ed@educationcommission.org

Key messages

- Crises – whether natural disasters, violent conflicts, or pandemics – can affect the delivery and quality of education services, both in local and external education systems, producing severe learning losses and other related social risks, particularly among the most vulnerable children.
- A delivery approach is an institutional unit or process used by governments to improve their performance when delivering services and implementing policy, via five core functions: target setting and prioritization; measurement and monitoring; leveraging political sponsorship; accountability and incentives; and problem-solving and organizational learning.
- Some evidence provides useful recommendations to prevent and contain the impact of crises on education outcomes, to manage continuity and return to “normalcy,” and to use crises as an opportunity to improve the system.
- In practice, implementing these recommendations in the education sector during a crisis and establishing the corresponding mechanisms in each stage can prove to be extremely challenging, particularly during the peak of the crisis.
- For this reason, delivery approaches can help to implement the agile, flexible, and accountable responses that crises require, develop tight linkages between functions that usually are carried out separately, use data effectively, and bridge the gap between politicians and bureaucrats.
- The evidence on the impact of delivery approaches is still limited, not necessarily in terms of their impact but rather in terms of the availability of studies, particularly in low- and middle-income-countries. Further studies are needed.

“Nothing showcases leadership – or its absence – like a crisis.”¹

How crises impact the education sector

Crises, “whether occurring locally, regionally, or worldwide, have the potential to disrupt and do permanent damage to the course of human development.”² Three main types of crises can affect both the provision and quality of education services, primarily in the very short run, but also in the long term:

1. **Natural disasters**, either climate-change-related or simple natural hazards, such as hurricanes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, droughts, or earthquakes.³ Over 50 percent of the population, in at least 47 countries, is at relatively high mortality risk from at least two types of natural disasters ([Amin and Goldstein 2008](#)).
2. **Violent conflicts**, also known as human-driven disasters, such as wars between countries, civil wars, and terrorism. Violent conflicts refer to “organized acts of social and political violence pitting one or more groups against one another and/or the state, or pitting states against each other” ([Coletta 2004](#)).
3. **Highly contagious diseases**, such as epidemics or pandemics, that affect many people within a population, a region, or the whole world, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the West African Ebola epidemic.

Regardless of their type, these emergencies typically entail:

- **(Forced) migration**, with different implications for children and their families, either children at destination (temporarily or permanently settled in a place other than their own country or place of origin), children on the move (who are moving for different reasons within or between countries, either voluntarily or not), or children who stay behind (whose relatives have migrated while they stay at the country or place of origin).⁴ Approximately, 31 million children are migrants, 13 million children are refugees, almost 1 million are asylum-seekers, and 17 million are internally displaced persons within their countries ([Caarls et al. 2021](#)).
- **Partial or total destruction of public infrastructure**, such as public schools, or infrastructure that serves public schools, such as electricity and internet access. Every year, disasters interrupt the education of approximately 175 million students

¹ [Andrews 2009](#).

² [Lundberg and Wuerkli 2012](#).

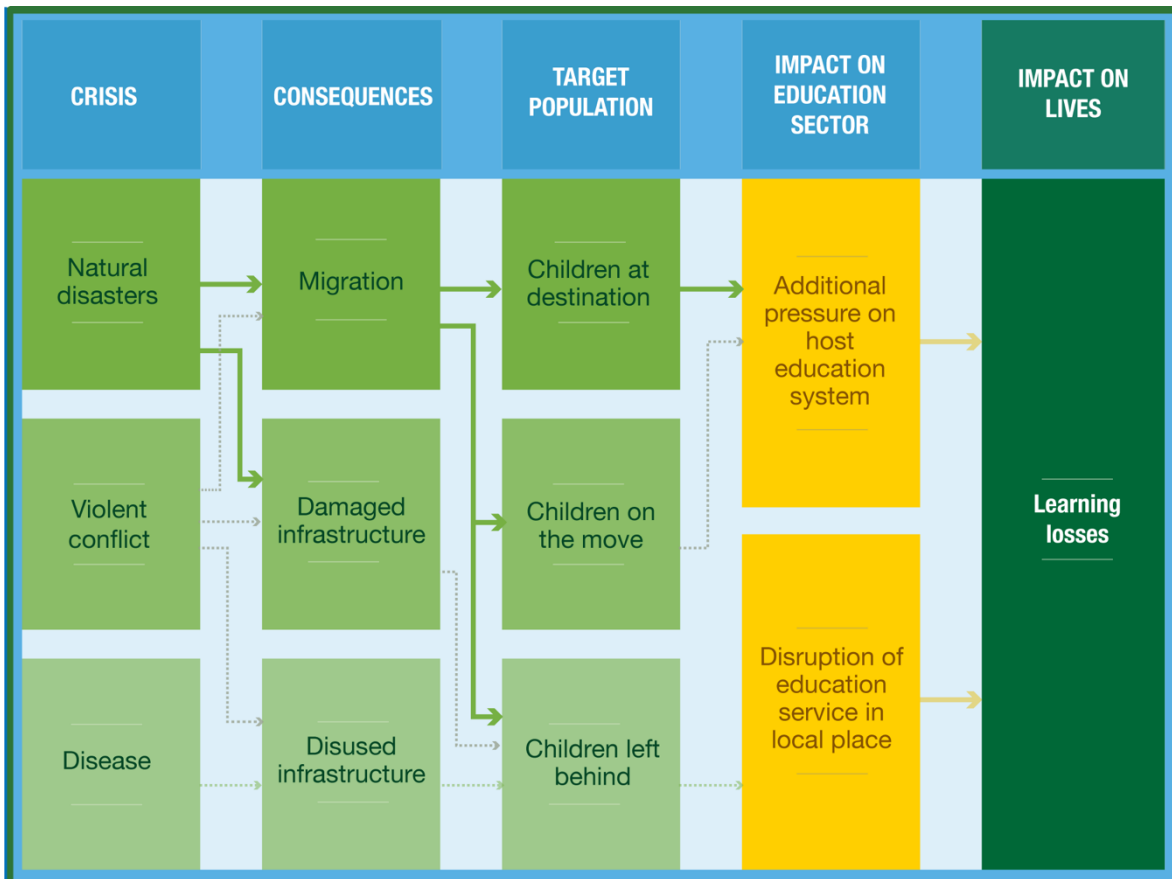
³ According to [Amin and Goldstein 2008](#), “the term *natural*, if used to qualify disasters, is not meant to deny any human or societal responsibility in the consequences of the truly natural hazard.”

⁴ [UNICEF](#)’s definitions. These categories refer to asylum seekers, refugees, and internally displaced people (IDP).

worldwide ([World Bank 2020](#)). Education sector infrastructure includes not only school buildings, but also water supply, sanitation, and hygiene facilities (WASH), learning resources and furniture, and information technology ([World Bank 2020](#)). In sub-Saharan Africa, where 25 percent of the world’s refugees live, 82 percent of students lack internet access ([World Bank-UNHCR 2021](#)).

- **Disuse of existing infrastructure**, regardless of their physical condition, such as school buildings. For example, at its height, the COVID-19 pandemic caused school closures in 190 countries, affecting roughly 90 percent of the world’s student population ([UNESCO 2021](#)). Also, violent conflicts typically prevent families from sending their children to school out of fear for their lives and well-being. In conflict-affected areas of West and Central Africa, the number of schools that had to close tripled between 2017 and 2019, affecting almost 2 million children and 44,000 teachers ([UNICEF 2019](#)).

Figure 1. Crisis implications for the education sector



Source: author’s elaboration, based on [UNICEF’s](#) definition of migration situations.

Specifically, for the education sector, these emergencies entail:

- **Additional pressure on education systems in receiving countries**, putting the quality of education at risk, both for local and migrant children at destination. The evidence shows that migration shocks have negative effects on completion, promotion, and dropout rates in receiving education systems, both for native and foreign children ([Roza and Vargas 2020](#) and [UNICEF 2020](#)).
- **Disruptions in education services in local places for children who stay**, jeopardizing their permanency in school and academic performance. Conflicts reduce the likelihood of children completing primary school by 30 percent and lower-secondary school by 50 percent ([UNICEF 2020](#)).
- **Learning losses for children in general**, either for [local children](#), native children in receiving countries/places, migrant children at destination, or children who stay behind. To assess the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning poverty, [World Bank's simulations](#) estimate that, of 720 million primary school age children, approximately 454 million, or 63 percent, would be learning poor – either out of school or below the minimum proficiency level in reading.

Box 1: Challenges of crises for children and their families

[UNICEF 2021](#) emphasizes that education is one of the first services that families and children ask for in emergency contexts, but it is also the first service to be postponed and one of the last to restart. The evidence shows that children and youth are particularly vulnerable to crisis for two reasons: their lack of agency and the developmental milestones they are supposed to achieve during this period ([Lundberg and Wuermli 2012](#)). In a context of emergency, children's education faces several challenges:⁵

Administrative barriers to access the formal education system, such as lack of documentation, lack of nationality, or residency status.

Financial and opportunity costs to purchase materials, pay potential fees, and/or attend classes, particularly when the location of education services is far.

Cultural matters, such as the language of instruction or crisis-insensitive curriculums, particularly for children on the move.

Exposure to prolonged stress, which can have negative effects on their cognitive development and aspirations.

For these reasons, policies aimed at protecting children, and children's education, need to be highly adaptive, include and acknowledge children's experience, and reduce the different risks and costs that crisis entail ([Lundberg and Wuermli 2012](#), [Thomas 2002](#), and [World Bank-UNICEF 2019](#)).

⁵ Based on [UNICEF-IRC 2021](#), [Lundberg and Wuermli 2012](#), [Wrobel 2019](#), and [Cassio et al. 2021](#).

- **Other social risks**, such as early marriage, child labor, gender-based violence, and mental illness in children, their teachers, and their caregivers. These needs require education systems to improve the breadth of services offered to families—a difficult mandate in education systems that were already fragile.
- **Lack of funding:** Emergency situations cut financial resources even more in a sector like education, which is already underfunded and under-resourced ([UNICEF 2020](#)). This is not only because countries experience a large reduction in their tax revenues, but also because they tend to reallocate resources to deal with the crisis in place ([Hincapié et al. 2020](#) and [UNICEF-IRC 2021](#)), affecting critical elements of the education service such as salary payments to teachers ([Almoayad et al. 2020](#)). Emergency situations also tend to increase both the financial and opportunity costs in accessing education for families that are already experiencing financial hardships, even when education services are officially free ([Hovil et al. 2021](#)).
- **Lack or loss of data:** Crisis-affected countries typically lack accurate, reliable, and timely data systems to make decisions to effectively tackle the emergency ([UNESCO 2021](#)). Additionally, the chaos that a crisis brings makes it more difficult to manage and use information, not only because some or most infrastructure is destroyed – including electricity and internet – or because population groups are displaced, but also because new actors emerge, such as humanitarian agencies ([Amin and Goldstein 2008](#)).
- **Unclear roles and responsibilities:** One of the most important conditions to respond effectively to a crisis is knowing who needs to do what.⁶ In the presence of deficient regulatory frameworks or new types of emergencies, different levels of government may struggle to understand and take on their responsibility in containing and solving the crisis, even if national governments are expected to take the lead.⁷ Even if national or local governments have the institutional capacity to respond, some governments may be reluctant to share the costs of disasters, especially before the absence of explicit legal obligations or co-financing risk management mechanisms between different levels of government ([OECD and World Bank 2019](#)).
- **Parallel measures vs. integrated systems:** Quite frequently, countries' responses to crisis are structured and implemented as parallel measures or schemes to mitigate the emergency more rapidly, with less financial resources, monitoring, and quality control ([World Bank-UNHCR 2021](#)), in lieu of fully-integrated national-led systems that can align financial resources, legal frameworks, and delivery mechanisms more successfully and, therefore, obtain better outcomes ([Sandford et al. 2020](#)).

⁶ [Adelman and Lemos 2021](#).

⁷ The [World Bank 2020](#)'s conceptual framework for action "Build Back Better" identifies multiple levels and entry points for decision-makers throughout the disaster cycle.

The essence of delivery approaches

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that “everyone has the right to education.”⁸ Typically, in democratic regimes, constitutions recognize their citizens’ right to education. However, in crisis or conflict situations, ensuring access to education for every child, particularly for the most vulnerable, is in practice tremendously challenging, especially in the short run. For example, in some countries, access to education depends on citizenship or residency status, which hinders the education opportunities of children at destination.⁹

A delivery approach is an institutional unit or process used by governments to improve their performance when delivering services and implementing policy ([Williams et al. 2020](#)).¹⁰ Around the world, at least 80 countries have used delivery approaches to improve the delivery of government services ([Mansoor et al. 2021](#)). Typically, a delivery approach in the education sector seeks to ensure that improvements in implementation that usually begin at the education ministry level extend all the way down to schools. In a [global mapping](#) of 152 delivery units around the world, the DeliverEd research team found 15 delivery units established during crisis situations. In this policy brief, we explore how education service delivery can be affected by crisis and conflict, and how delivery approaches may be used to ameliorate some of the damage to the education system.

Delivery approaches can draw on five core functions¹¹ to achieve their goals:

- 1. Target setting and prioritization:** Establishing a set of key priorities and objectives, creating measurable indicators to characterize progress against these objectives, and/or setting benchmark levels of performance to be achieved in a specified time period.
- 2. Measurement and monitoring:** Establishing and using mechanisms to collect and report information about the performance of divisions, districts, teams, schools, and/or individuals across the organization or sector.
- 3. Leveraging political sponsorship:** The president, minister, or other top leader uses his/her political clout to enable better policy and service delivery.

⁸ More details on international human rights law and other related frameworks can be found in [UNESCO 2020](#).

⁹ [UNICEF-IRC 2021](#) pp. 18-19.

¹⁰ [DeliverEd](#) defines a delivery approach as an institutionalized unit or structured process within a government bureaucracy that aims to rapidly improve bureaucratic functioning and policy delivery by combining a set of managerial functions in a novel way to shift attention from inputs and processes to outputs and outcomes.

¹¹ The Education Commission’s [Policy Brief N°2](#).

4. **Accountability and incentives:** There are rewards and/or sanctions linked to performance – more simply, the “carrots and sticks” associated with delivery approaches.
5. **Problem-solving and organizational learning:** The team keeps high-level leaders informed of progress and barriers and works to organize and motivate the bureaucracy around the key priorities and objectives.

A general framework for crises

In general, the literature provides useful recommendations to prevent and contain the impact of crises on education outcomes, to manage continuity and return to “normalcy,” and to use crises as an opportunity to improve the system’s functioning.¹² Basically, these recommendations refer to implementing the following:

- **Legal and institutional frameworks** that (i) ensure, in practice, the provision of the education service; (ii) define responsibilities for different levels of government and sectors; (iii) establish cost-sharing mechanisms to finance crisis recovery between different levels of government; (iv) anticipate and deal with administrative barriers to education; (v) enable data collection; and (vi) allow for the provision of alternative education methods during the emergency.¹³
- **A multisectoral, crisis-sensitive,** and culturally-informed approach to (i) ensure that all children, regardless of their origin and condition, access basic services that are also related to their education; (ii) include stakeholders from multiple sectors, such as child-protection services; (iii) consider social norms, especially in contexts of conflict; (iv) understand how differences in context, even within the same country, affect recovery operations; and (v) implement training programs to prepare stakeholders, from government authorities to teachers, to face the crisis.¹⁴
- **Resource reallocation mechanisms** to (i) channel existing and incoming resources more effectively, both in financial and logistical terms; (ii) ensure the payment of teacher salaries; (iii) develop partnerships and create innovative financing methods; (iv) define more even cost-sharing mechanisms between different levels of government; (v) pre-register and contract providers more easily during the emergency; and (vi) ensure financial efficiency and sustainability.¹⁵
- **Information management systems** that (i) satisfy information needs considering institutional structures and operational procedures; (ii) collect relevant and crisis-

¹² Based on the [World Bank’s framework](#) for reopening schools. Other World Bank documents talk about risk reduction, relief, early recovery, and reconstruction in general, not only for the education sector though.

¹³ [UNESCO 2020](#), [UNESCO 2021](#), [Caarls et al. 2021](#), and [World Bank 2018](#).

¹⁴ [Hovil et al. 2021](#), [Wrobel 2019](#), [World Bank 2020](#), [World Bank 2019](#), and [UNESCO 2021](#).

¹⁵ [Multilateral Development Banks 2017](#), [World Bank 2020](#), [World Bank-OECD 2019](#), [Sandford et al. 2020](#), [World Bank 2021](#).

sensitive data; (iii) produce good baseline data; (iv) establish definitions, codes, and categories to ensure compatibility between sources; (v) allow for the necessary level of data disaggregation; (vi) create positive incentives for information sharing; and (vii) support management decisions to cope with, manage, and solve the crisis.¹⁶

- **Minimum standards for education**, in terms of community participation, coordination, analysis, access and learning environment, teaching and learning, among others, as a first step to ensure that in emergency situations the education service protects peoples' right to education and provides a solid basis for response and recovery ([Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies 2004](#)).
- **Education technology** to strategically provide the education system with flexibility and agility, avoid disruptions in the education service during future crises, have education delivery alternatives, foster inclusive education, narrow the digital divide, diversify the range of learning tools, and customize learning ([Mateo-Berganza Díaz et al. 2020](#)), particularly for the most vulnerable and unreachable populations.¹⁷
- **Communication campaigns** to raise awareness about the importance of education, to ensure accountability, to promote school enrollment, parental engagement, teacher engagement, the use of digital educational content, the implementation of applicable measures, and to make prevention a common practice, or in other words, to bring children back to school.¹⁸
- **Adjustments to the education system**, based on collected data, to make the most of the system's existing capacity and infrastructure, such as providing afternoon school shifts to accommodate the demand for schooling, establishing criteria to build schools based on their context and exposure, for example, to natural disasters,¹⁹ or training teachers and school staff to be more aware and skilled to identify children at risk and successfully include new children in school communities.²⁰
- **A long-term delivery vision** to focus on and solve pre-crisis goals, or even post-crisis new goals, their corresponding challenges and barriers, the systems, organizations, and people involved, potential threats and opportunities, and every factor to be considered to develop a delivery plan ([Delivery Associates 2020](#)).

¹⁶ [Amin and Goldstein 2008](#).

¹⁷ [World Bank 2021](#), [Dreesen et al. 2020](#).

¹⁸ [Cho et al. 2021](#), [Hincapié et al. 2020](#), [Powell et al. 2020](#), [World Bank-UNICEF 2019](#), [World Bank 2020](#), and [World Bank 2021](#).

¹⁹ [Caarls et al. 2021](#).

²⁰ [Thi and Shaw 2016](#).

Box 2: Uruguay's vision to bet on new pedagogies

Miguel Brechner, Creator and Former President of [Plan Ceibal](#) (2007-2015), reflects on Uruguay's ability to better cope with the COVID-19 pandemic:

“The world is much more dynamic than policymakers want to acknowledge. We need to design public policy from an innovative perspective, not a traditional one. We cannot go back to a pre-pandemic world and think about education as an in-person scheme exclusively. We need to consider new pedagogies for new challenges. To develop the right solutions, first we need to identify exactly what problem(s) we want to solve. The institutional design that we choose to deliver policy will account for a large part of its success. That requires plenty of political support and clarity to understand that the policy or program in question is not a competition against other departments or institutions, but rather a source of support.”

The contribution of delivery approaches

Even if countries implement the previous recommendations to deal with a crisis in the education sector, establishing the corresponding mechanisms in each stage can prove to be extremely challenging in practice, particularly during the peak of the crisis. For that reason, delivery approaches or units can potentially respond to a crisis by:

- **Providing the agile, flexible, and accountable responses** that crises require in a context of complex governance and limited financial resources.²¹
- **Connecting sectors and stakeholders** within the same sector to identify cross-sectoral barriers and implement multilateral and specific solutions.
- **Bundling and centralizing a set of functions together** that usually exist within a system but are carried out separately, and making the most of this multiplying effect to tackle the crisis.
- **Bridging the politician-bureaucrat gap** more rapidly, which is even more urgent during a crisis, and therefore facilitating policy delivery and achieving outcomes.
- **Using existing and producing new data more effectively** to identify concrete barriers and bottlenecks, to monitor progress in the establishment of mechanisms and solutions, and to achieve outcomes.
- **Guiding human resources under chaos** and therefore achieving results more effectively and rapidly.

²¹ [Coletta 2004](#).

- **Providing the possibility to innovate** within a fixed bureaucracy and therefore contributing to the improvement of system after the crisis ends.

Box 3: Education service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone

The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) Delivery Team was set up in May 2020, around the time schools partially reopened after the COVID-19 closures. The Head of the Delivery Team **Grace Kargobai** describes the role her team played during that time and continues to play:

“Every ministry is comprised of an appointed minister who serves as the political head of the ministry, and who is supported by an administrative and professional wing. Our Delivery Team serves as a bridge that connects those three entities. The Delivery Team consults and mediates between the respective units of the Ministry to understand the work that needs to get done and ensures that the strategic plans and priorities of each of the units are implemented within the stipulated timeframes. It also facilitates collaboration and minimizes working in silos. The Delivery Team plays a critical role in meeting the objectives of the Ministry and liaises between the various units and the Minister to ensure adequate resources are allocated for priority projects and identified gaps are addressed. The Delivery Team coordinates, collaborates, and facilitates expediency of project delivery in a timely manner resulting in successes like supporting in the organization of the Emergency Education Taskforce to scale up collective efforts to help children continue their learning in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Limitations and opportunities

These policy recommendations, however, come with several caveats:

1. **Nonexistent or very limited research:** In general, the evidence on the impact of delivery approaches is still limited, particularly in terms of the availability of studies, especially in developing countries. The evidence of delivery approaches in crises is, therefore, even more limited. As [UNESCO](#) highlights, little research and data collection have been conducted to understand the relationship between climate change, displacement, and education, and its consequences. Further studies are needed to understand the complexities and opportunities of delivery approaches to contain and improve the conditions that emergencies impose.
2. **Lack of focus on outcomes and processes:** In the education sector, most research tends to focus on goals – such as teacher training, years of schooling, coverage, or school infrastructure, rather than processes – particularly on managerial processes to improve education policy delivery in an increasingly

digitalized world. This reduces the knowledge of delivery approaches applied to the education sector, and therefore countries' capacity to improve their management of education systems and be accountable ([World Bank 2021](#)).

- 3. Governance dynamics:** Intuitively, a key ingredient for the success of delivery approaches is an effective governance structure, regardless of its design. In general, the challenge is to actually build a functioning structure, one that includes both formal and informal coordination mechanisms and that, ideally, has the explicit support of the chief executive to acquire legitimacy ([Alessandro et al. 2014](#)). However, in crises specifically, the main challenge per se is typically to identify, establish, and respect the authority that will make the decisions and be accountable.

The education sector was already facing considerable challenges before 2020, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only intensified the urgency of the global learning crisis. Nonetheless, crises also provide a unique opportunity to improve and transform the system. In a real crisis, the job typically gets done, precisely because the priority is to solve the problem and all the necessary resources are aligned for this purpose.²² Delivery approaches can be extremely helpful to deal with crises and, at the same time, to rethink the future. Countries and leaders can seize this critical opportunity to identify and use their own local strengths to transform their education systems so they become more resilient, innovative, and equitable.

²² [Michael Barber 2017](#).