

SOCIAL SCIENCES
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CASS



COVID-19 SCHOOL CLOSURES IN THE DRC: IMPACT ON THE HEALTH, PROTECTION AND EDUCATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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INTRODUCTION

Global data suggest that the [risk of transmission of COVID-19 between children in a school setting](#) is minimal when adequate protective measures are applied (mask wearing, physical distancing, hygiene practices). However, in response to the pandemic, many governments around the world implemented temporary school closure measures. As of March 2020, as part of its efforts to contain COVID-19, **the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) decided to close schools nationwide**, [depriving over 27 million children of access to education](#). Schools in the DRC first reopened in October 2020, only to [close again after two months in response to a second wave](#) of the outbreak. Following [advocacy efforts](#) by national and international organisations working in the DRC, the government reopened schools and universities on February 22 2021.

[Analyses of previous epidemics where schools were closed](#) show a reduction in the proportion of children and adolescents who return to school once they reopen. [Children who lack the structure and safe space provided by school](#) are potentially more likely to face protection-related risks, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and [transactional sex](#), which increase the chance of early pregnancy and transmission of sexually transmitted infections. In addition, and particularly in conflict-affected areas, school closures may increase the likelihood of children being [recruited by armed groups](#) or subjected to forced labour¹. The [risks are exacerbated for children living in the poorest households](#) in rural areas where school attendance is already lower. Even after schools reopen, communities continue to feel the effects of their prolonged closure.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic in the DRC, the Social Sciences Analytics Cell (CASS) has conducted [integrated analyses of the impact of the pandemic and response](#) on the health, protection, and economic security of communities. This report presents an analysis of the impact of school closures as a COVID-19 response measure in the DRC, and is intended to **inform evidence-based programming to mitigate the short- and long-term consequences to health, protection, and education of children and adolescents in the DRC**. It demonstrates that the impact of school closures does not end with the reopening of schools; the evidence shared in this report highlights the long-term impacts that will continue to be felt following two extended periods of school closures in the DRC, and calls for an urgent response.

INTEGRATED ANALYTICS

In the absence of a specific nationwide study to this effect, the CASS has conducted a **meta-synthesis to examine existing data from different sources and different parts of the country to highlight the impacts of school closures on children and adolescents**.

Each data source or study included in this meta-synthesis has its own methodology, and sources may be accessed via the hyperlinks available in this report. More information on this integrated analytics approach is available through these sources [here](#).

The CASS proactively contacted 26 national and international NGOs, and 7 academic/ research institutes for any pre-existing or ongoing analyses and sources. In addition, ongoing public studies and data were identified through extensive review of online sources. Data were analysed according to recurring themes, and this report presents a summary of the key themes and findings emerging from the available data. It is not intended to simplify complex issues, nor of representing all realities within the country, but to report on the impact of school closures as observed and reported in the available data.

PARTNERS AND CONTRIBUTORS

This report was developed with the support of CASS partners who reviewed and contributed to the content. The information presented has been reinforced by additional openly available data and reference material.



¹Recognising that more complex contextual factors will also contribute to these consequences.

SUMMARY OF KEY RESULTS FROM INTEGRATED ANALYSES

While acknowledging the potential influence of pre-existing contextual aspects, this analysis highlights factors contributing to a decline in school attendance, in addition to potential consequences for children unable to return to school following their reopening.



A **general decline in school attendance was identified after the initial reopening in October 2020**: the main explanation was a reduction in household income and parents' inability to pay school fees.



Community and NGO reports indicate an **increase in the number of girls who engaged in transactional sex** whilst schools were closed as a means of supporting themselves (and their families).



An **increase in teenage pregnancy and unsafe abortion** was reported by health workers and the community (associated risks: maternal death, pre-eclampsia, premature delivery, low birth weight). Similar trend observed in data from health facility patient registries.



An **increase in the risk and incidence of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)**, transmission of HIV and sexually transmitted infections for children and adolescents was reported by teachers, health personnel and communities.



An **increase in the number of boys recruited by armed groups in rural areas affected by conflict** was reported by parents, teachers and students.



Teachers and parents reported an **increased risk and incidence of forced labour, domestic violence, and sexual violence for children at home when schools were closed**, and NGO reports highlight a greater number of children living on the streets.



Very few students reported being able to follow distance learning courses, or had access to materials during school closures: girls were apparently less likely than boys to engage (influenced by: household responsibilities (chores and caring for other siblings); less motivation for informal learning; gender inequalities in access to digital technologies).



The closure of schools was largely deemed detrimental by students, teachers, and parents in terms of lack of education, safety, and a structured environment for children. **Most would have preferred for schools to remain open with appropriate hygiene measures implemented.**

DETAILED RESULTS

1. Reduction in the number of children and adolescents enrolled in school compared to the same period in 2019

A CASS study in December 2020 exploring the impact of school closures on children and adolescents confirmed an overall **reduction in the number of children (aged 12-17) who returned to secondary school** in Goma in October 2020 compared to October 2019 (all school types combined). This was clearly identified in private secondary schools (n=28), which experienced a considerable reduction in attendance during this period (boys: -18.7%; girls: -24.1%). However, public secondary schools (n=42) in Goma saw a slight increase in both boys' and girls' attendance (boys: +2%; girls: +6.8%) (Figure 1).

SECONDARY SCHOOL ATTENDANCE: GOMA



Fig. 1

Despite a general reduction in the number of students attending secondary schools (all school types combined) in Goma following their reopening in October 2020, this figure highlights an increase in school attendance at public secondary schools².

The [number of private schools in the DRC has increased in recent years](#) in response to a growing demand of the population and a limited capacity of the government to respond through provision of sustainable, state-run alternatives. [Many of these private schools are unlicensed](#), do not meet the educational standards set by the Congolese government, and lack the equipment and infrastructure to accommodate the increasing number of students. Private school fees are unregulated, and according to some parents interviewed by the CASS in Goma in December 2020, many **schools increased fees at the start of the new school year in October to make up for the lost revenue** from the extended period during which the schools were closed. This resulted in many parents being obliged to move their children to cheaper public schools. Several private school teachers reported **a reduction in their income at the beginning of the school year as parents were unable to pay school fees, and removed their children from classes**.

During CASS interviews, several parents reported a **desire to move their children to different schools due to overcrowding in public schools, and an associated perceived reduction in quality of teaching**. This situation is exacerbated in communities hosting displaced children³. A [multisectoral assessment carried out by humanitarian actors in August 2020](#) reported areas of Ituri province with student-teacher ratios of 92 to 1, severely restricting capacity to provide children with a quality education. Families with reduced income due to COVID-19 response measures may have limited option but to remove their children from school when private schools are the sole, prohibitively expensive alternative.

² Sample non-representative (n=70)

³ Primary schools across the country noted an increase in class size since the introduction of the free primary school policy

Public schools in the DRC are generally less expensive for students to attend, but they also offer more reliable employment for teachers, many of whom continued to be paid by the state during the closure period. However, when schools reopened in October 2020, nationwide strikes were organised by teachers at many schools to demand improved salaries. According to students and teachers interviewed by the CASS in December 2020, **this encouraged some parents to move their children to other public schools unaffected by strikes to avoid the disruption of classes.**

The Humanitarian Situation Monitoring project (a series of monthly analyses) conducted by REACH in South Kivu and Tanganyika in October 2020 found similar trends. **67% (66/99) of teachers and principals surveyed in South Kivu reported a reduction in school attendance, and 39% (30/76) in Tanganyika** (figures from primary and secondary schools).

Although this analyses showed reductions in attendance for both girls and boys, **the impact on girls was more pronounced, notably in Tanganyika.** In this province, **75% (18/24) of primary school teachers and principals** (whose schools were back in session at the time of data collection) **reported that the number of girls aged 6 to 11 attending school had decreased**, compared to 8% (2/24) who reported that the number of boys attending primary school was lower than it was before the schools closed. The attendance data for private secondary schools collected in November 2020 in Goma showed that 7.5% more girls than boys had dropped out of school (fig. 1). **Some secondary school teachers stated during interviews conducted by the CASS in Masisi in December 2020 that parents may prioritise their sons over their daughters when choosing who to send to school.** However, teachers in Masisi also more frequently reported a reduction in the number of boys enrolled in school than those in Goma, since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak.



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Reasons why children and adolescents have not returned to school



1.1 Financial cost of COVID-19 on families

► The impact of education

In September 2019, the DRC implemented a [free basic education policy](#). This policy aimed to strengthen the national education systems by improving access to primary school and the first two years of secondary school, while reducing household expenses for the poorest families.

However, despite free primary education, data from the REACH project Monitoring the Humanitarian Situation in South Kivu and Tanganyika showed a decline in school attendance in both provinces for primary school-age children when schools reopened in October 2020. The main reason for this decline, cited by the primary school teachers and principals interviewed, was the lack of resources and money available to families, exacerbated by COVID-19 response measures (e.g. border and market closures, localised lockdowns, nightly curfew). Costs limiting children's access to education included money for school supplies, transport, and uniforms. While basic primary education is free, fees apply in public secondary schools, and appear to restrict access to education for secondary students. CASS interviews and discussions with parents and secondary school teachers in Goma and Masisi in December 2020, and in rural Ituri in April 2021 highlighted a lack of financial means as the main factor limiting a child's return to school.

CASS interviews with primary and secondary school teachers in April 2021 in rural areas of Ituri province highlighted a **reduction in the number of children attending school once they reopened, both following**

the first and second prolonged closure period. Amongst the key reasons cited was a lack of motivation of children to return after becoming habituated to a lifestyle where they felt more free. This was coupled with a reduced capacity or willingness of parents to push their children to attend school when they lack the means to do so. During group discussions in the same areas, **men and women were consistently only able to place education for their children as a third or fourth priority when** allocating finances, after food, clothing and agricultural materials (to prepare for the next harvest).

In a CASS study exploring the [broader impacts of COVID-19 in the DRC](#), in December 2020, **parents of secondary school students in Kinshasa also reported difficulties paying for transportation, uniforms and school supplies** in addition to school fees, as a result of financial challenges faced since the beginning of the epidemic (e.g. loss of income; increased food prices; increased exchange rate). In a survey conducted by [Performance Monitoring for Action \(PMA\)](#) in June 2020 in Kinshasa, **60% of women reported a total loss of income due to restrictions imposed by COVID-19** (n=1280) (only women were included in the survey).

"...parents have become much poorer than before COVID-19...the response measures have had a serious financial impact on the lives of children and their families..."

Father, Goma, CASS Dec. 2020



During CASS interviews in Goma in December 2020, many secondary school teachers reported occasions during the previous two months **where children who could not pay their fees were forced to leave school premises**. Others recalled **situations where parents had asked for a delay in paying school fees** until January 2021 (after the Christmas holiday), by which time they hoped to have the money available.

► Parents rely on children to help provide for the family

CASS qualitative data from Masisi and Goma in December 2020 suggest that since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, **parents became increasingly dependent on their children to financially support the family (children of primary and secondary school age)**.

"...the boys were used for forced physical labour... I have a neighbour who used his child who is still in elementary school to transport stones or rocks so that they would have money to buy food."

Teacher, Goma Dec. 2020



52% of parents surveyed in a [Save the Children study exploring the impacts of COVID-19 on children](#) (n=120) in six DRC provinces in August 2020 said that **the existing socioeconomic crisis had prompted them to send their children to work to support household needs**. Some students participating in CASS focus groups in Masisi and Goma in December 2020 said **they would prefer to continue to work and earn money for themselves and their families than return to school**.

Whilst parents reportedly relied more heavily on boys during the school closures for physical labour and commercial activities, CASS interviews highlighted that girls were more frequently required to support their families through mainly unpaid household chores (cooking, cleaning, water collection) in addition to caring for siblings.





1.2. Increase in teenage pregnancy

CASS interview and focus group participants in Goma and Masisi in December 2020 generally **considered girls to be more severely affected by school closures than boys, given the risks associated with early pregnancy**. The testimonies of teachers, parents, and students highlight numerous examples of girls who became pregnant during the initial school closure period, resulting in many who did not return to school once their pregnancy began to show. During interviews in April 2021 in rural areas of Ituri Province, several primary and secondary school teachers reported instances where girls who had initially returned to school once they opened in October 2020, dropped out in the following months once they became visibly pregnant.

"...we had noticed that for girls, the impact was greater than for boys, given [that we saw] more than six pregnancies in one school year. It's complicated because boys can get a girl pregnant and still study, but girls, once they get pregnant, that's the end for them."

Teacher, Masisi, CASS Dec. 2020



72% of respondents (parents and children (11-17 years)) in the [Save the Children study](#) reported an **increase in teenage pregnancies in their neighborhoods (n=400) since the schools were forced to close**. [GHOVODI](#) (Groupe des Hommes Voués au Développement), an NGO operating in North and South Kivu, reported **that 73 girls from the 20 secondary schools they support in Goma and Nyiragongo did not return to school after the initial reopening due to pregnancy**.

Healthcare workers in Kinshasa and Goma interviewed during ongoing CASS research on the [impacts of COVID-19 on women and girls in the DRC](#) also reported receiving an increased number of pregnant teenagers in their health facilities during the school closure period. Health personnel at mobile clinics supported by [Marie Stopes International](#) in Kinshasa and Tshopo province in November 2020 reported observing **more teenage pregnancies in the neighborhoods where they provide services, as well as an increase in visits by adolescents seeking emergency contraception**. Interviews with midwives from six health facilities in Rethy, rural Ituri, highlighted increases in the numbers of teenage girls attending CPN, delivering normally, and being referred to larger facilities for cesarean sections due to complications.

Patient health registry data (DHIS2) from three health zones in Kinshasa (Maluku, Kisangani, Kimbanseke) show a **sharp increase in the number of adolescents under 20 accessing public health facilities for delivery**⁴ in January 2021⁵ compared to January 2020 and since the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic (e.g. fig. 2). It is not possible to further disaggregate these data by age to highlight the proportion of deliveries by school-aged adolescents, nor to directly correlate these trends with school closures. However, these data serve as an **early indication of a situation that could lead to more girls and adolescents being excluded or dropping out of school in the coming months, thus one that should be monitored**.

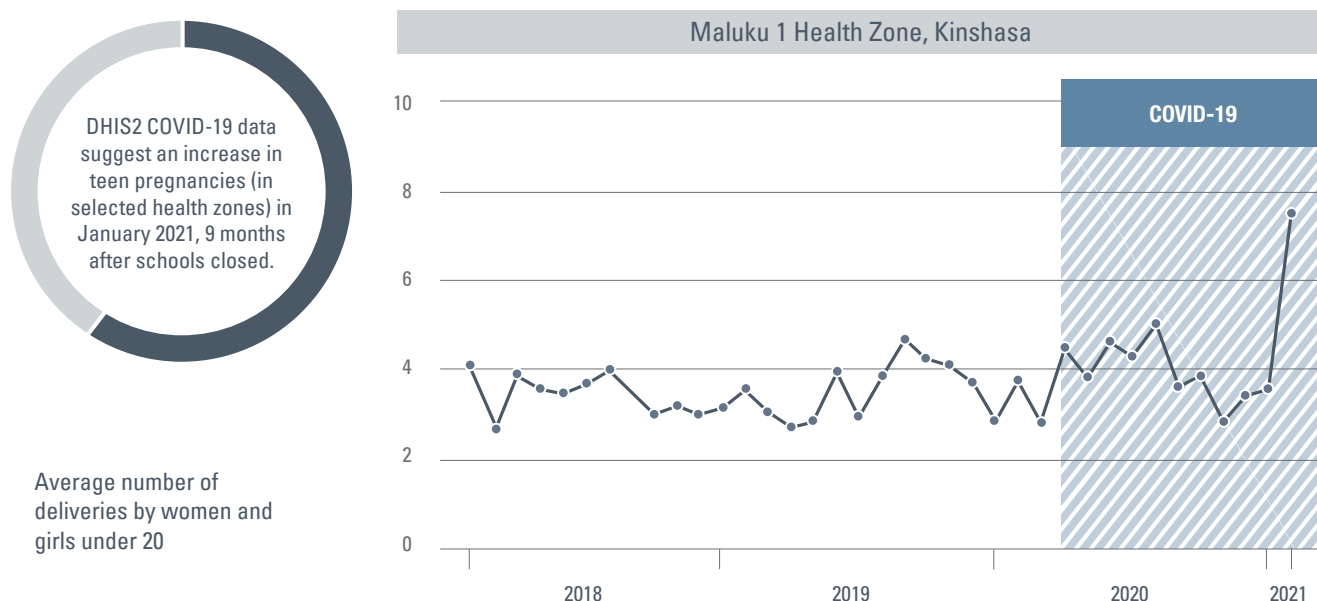


Fig. 2

⁴DHIS2 data are not systematically collected with more specific age disaggregation.

⁵Nine months since the initial closure of schools in the DRC



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1.3. Child marriage

CASS interviews with teachers, students, and parents in Goma and Masisi in December 2020 highlighted an **increase in the number of children and adolescents forced to marry during the initial school closure period**. Upon discovery of a pregnancy, parents would reportedly **force teenaged couples to marry and start a home together, regardless of maturity levels and preparation for family life**.

"...we have recorded cases of early pregnancies that have led to child marriages...in our community, once you get pregnant, the parents deliver you straight to the boy's house for marriage, whether you want it or not, you have to go..."

Teacher, Masisi, CASS Dec. 2020



In the October 2020 Humanitarian Situation Monitoring by REACH, 5/8 secondary school teachers and principals in [Tanganyika](#) and 12/14 in [South Kivu](#) who reported a decrease in attendance indicated that **the main reason adolescent girls did not return to school was that they were married during the closure period**.

In CASS focus group discussions conducted with men and women in rural Ituri in April 2021, the typical age of marriage was frequently cited as 12 or 13 years. All participants noted an increase in the number of girls under 18 marrying, following a pregnancy, during the periods when schools were closed. They considered the main reason for this to be increased exposure to alcohol and drugs (during "marchés nocturnes"), coupled with decreased motivation or willingness of children and adolescents to study or respect their parents.



1.4. Armed groups and street children

Schools provide a safe and supportive environment for children and adolescents, where they can be supervised by teachers when they are away from their parents. In February 2021, 87% (186) of respondents during the REACH Humanitarian Situation Monitoring in [South Kivu](#) reported that **child protection problems had worsened during the school closure period**.

CASS data from interviews conducted in Masisi and Nyiragongo (Goma peri-urban area) in December 2020 indicate a **perceived increase in the number of boys being recruited by local armed groups**, attracted by the source of income, structure and distraction provided. **Lack of access to school and education has extensively been identified as a factor influencing the recruitment of children into armed groups**, affecting both boys and girls (an estimated 30-40% of children recruited into armed groups in the DRC are girls). A [2016 study by Child Soldiers International](#) in South Kivu, North Kivu, and Haut-Uélé provinces identified 150 girls aged 12-19 who had been recruited by armed groups as children. **Nearly 50 percent of these girls had joined these groups because they could not afford school fees and felt additional pressure to support their families**. A [2018 study by War Child](#) similarly highlighted a lack of schooling as a factor encouraging children to join armed groups.

Parents interviewed during CASS research in eastern Ituri in April 2021 reported an increase in the number of boys joining armed groups during the school closure period. According to respondents, these were primarily boys who once getting a girl pregnant, would flee to seek protection from her parents. They would otherwise be forced to marry, and take on family and financial responsibilities for which they may not feel prepared.

"...even before the COVID-19 lockdown, teenaged girls and boys were misbehaving, but when the schools were closed, the boys became kidnappers, thieves; they joined armed groups. There have been more children here kidnapped by these groups..."

Student, Mweso, CASS Dec. 2020



In Goma, CASS analysis found a higher incidence of boys turning to crime and banditry, in addition to an increase in the number of children observed living on the streets.

AJVDC (Association de Jeunes Visionnaires pour le Développement du Congo), a civil society organisation operating in Goma, **reported in November 2020 a 5% increase in the number of children living on the streets since the start of the COVID-19 epidemic** (an increase of 1272 children (70% boys, 30% girls), a total of 27,852). These included children from displaced families from rural areas, forced to leave their homes due to conflict or food insecurity; and other children from the city, out of school during the prolonged closure period, from families whose financial situations were increasingly precarious, many of whom were unable to feed their children.

Contextual factors: conflict and insecurity

The consequences of COVID-19-related school closures in the DRC as highlighted in this report cannot be considered the only factors influencing the decision or ability of children and adolescents to return to school. [The intensification of conflict](#) in some parts of the country, notably in North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri provinces, has led to an increase in internal displacement, putting a strain on host communities.

Children living in these contexts may have been unable to return to school regardless of the health situation with regards to COVID-19 or may not have attended school in the first place. A multisectoral assessment conducted in Ituri in August 2020 identified over 50,000 school age children displaced by conflict after the previous school year who had not gained access to schools in host communities before closures in March 2020.

In 2020, there were several reports of [targeted attacks on schools](#). Multisectoral [assessments by multiple humanitarian organisations](#) in June 2020 in the Ngombe Mwana and Lengwe areas of Nyunzu territory, Tanganyika province, revealed that schools had been directly damaged by violent attacks and, in many cases, occupied by armed militias. In Ngombe Mwana, 43 of 91 schools were damaged, and 12 continue to be occupied by combatants, affecting 9,907 pupils, including 3,657 girls and 6,250 boys. A [teacher, and two primary school students sitting exams in Masisi in August 2020](#) were reportedly killed in a clash between security forces and an armed group near an exam centre. [Street Child](#), operating in the Hauts Plateaux regions of Uvira, Mwenga and Fizi in South Kivu, in March 2021 reported a **considerable number of schools unable to operate due to destruction of buildings and materials**.

As [War Child](#) and [Child Soldiers International](#) highlight in their respective 2018 and 2016 research reports, **insecurity may be an additional factor influencing children's decision to join armed groups, as they seek an environment where they feel protected.**

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2. School closures were seen as unnecessary and detrimental

Students, teachers, and parents interviewed during CASS research in Goma and Masisi in December 2020 considered the closure of schools to be damaging, in terms of a lack of education, safety, and a structured environment for children. 74% of respondents aged 15-19 in a [U-REPORT](#) mobile survey conducted across all provinces in February 2021 said the closure of schools had a negative impact on them. 67% highlighted delays in learning as the primary impact. Teachers who were unable to work also reported suffering from reduced income, and a subsequent inability to provide for their own families.

*"If the school had stayed open...I would have gone there to earn money to feed my family. The students would have completed the curriculum and would not have had unwanted pregnancies and early marriages... **the closure has hurt us and negatively affected the lives of the students.**"*

Teacher, Masisi, Dec. 2020



Despite a perceived risk of transmission between children, respondents felt that given that the prevalence of COVID-19 in the area was low, the [risk could be managed through the implementation of prevention and control measures](#), such as physical distancing and hygiene practices.

*"...In my opinion, **it would be better to keep the schools open and be strict on the respect of the prevention measures.** Why are the schools closed while the markets remain open? If we respect the measures, we can keep the schools open..."*

Teacher, Goma, CASS Dec. 2020



3. Home schooling is not a viable option for the majority of families in the DRC

In April 2020, the Ministry of Education in the DRC launched its first [radio-based learning programme, broadcast with the support of UNICEF](#). The initiative was complemented by the development and publication of seven workbooks for distribution to pre-school, primary and secondary school students throughout the country, including those living in remote areas, to provide them with alternative distance learning methods. **The Ministry of Education also set up a digital learning platform, "Ma Classe", based on the national primary school curriculum.** Despite these efforts, during an SMS survey conducted via the [U-REPORT platform](#) in late January 2021 to explore the scope and effectiveness of distance learning across the DRC, **64% of participants aged 15-19 stated that their school did not have access to a distance learning programme** whilst the schools were closed (n=1673).

Distance learning opportunities for children in North Kivu were deemed insufficient by respondents during CASS interviews in Goma and Masisi, **and inappropriate in a context where few households have regular access to the internet, a reliable source of electricity or a television** to view available educational programmes. During the [Save the Children study](#), 85% of 11-17 year olds reported not having access to distance learning during the period when schools were closed (n=280). Similarly, in **January 2021, 99% of respondents in REACH key informant interviews** (including teachers, health staff and communities) in [South Kivu](#) (321/323) and [Tanganyika](#) (288/291) said that, to their knowledge, **no school-age children had benefited from distance learning during the period when schools were closed**⁶.

CASS interviews with teachers in Goma provided more positive examples of effective distance learning methods than those in rural Masisi (a relatively resource-poor area). This data suggest that **the effectiveness of distance learning depends largely on the motivation of individual teachers and the capacity of the school to support the process, in addition to a willingness of children to engage**. Several teachers in Goma reported that they hand-delivered homework to children at home or made materials available for their

⁶The same pattern was observed in interviews in Tanganyika and South Kivu in February 2021, although with smaller sample sizes.

students to pick up. Those teachers who persevered in this way indicated that **boys were typically more responsive in maintaining a connection with their schoolwork, citing additional household responsibilities required of girls**, which were increasingly encouraged to take precedence within families.

Evidence from previous public health emergencies highlight further gender-specific burdens and household responsibilities for girls out of school, restricting their capacity to study (for example, [increased unpaid housework and caring for siblings](#)). The additional support that girls provide may encourage parents, especially those who place less emphasis on the importance of girls' education, to keep their daughters at home even after schools have reopened.

4. Risks of sexual and domestic violence against children and adolescents

Children and adolescents who cannot leave home to attend school are at [increased risk of exposure to domestic and sexual violence](#), as well as forced labour. **78% of calls received by a hotline** operated by the [Forum des Femmes Citoyennes et Engagées pour la Gouvernance la Démocratie et le Développement](#) in Kinshasa between April and July 2020 (the period of national emergency for COVID-19) **concerned cases of domestic and sexual violence against children under 14**. In January 2021, the [Child Protection Sub Cluster](#) (GTPE) reported an **increased risk and incidence of sexual and domestic violence against children out of school**, and without the support of teachers normally able to report cases, fewer opportunities to identify victims or those at risk. 48% of respondents in the [Save the Children study exploring the impacts of COVID-19 on children](#) highlighted an increase in cases of sexual violence amongst out-of-school children and adolescents whilst schools were closed (n=400).

An increase in recruitment of children and adolescents by armed groups during the extended school closure period (as perceived by teachers, parents and students and highlighted during CASS interviews in rural Masisi and eastern Ituri) **may put children at additional risk of sexual and gender-based violence**. According to [War Child's 2018 report](#), children, **especially girls, who join armed groups are at increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence**, as many of them are recruited specifically to sexually satisfy older men in the group.



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Transactional sex

Interviews with parents, teachers, and students in Goma and Masisi in December 2020 highlighted a **perceived increase in the number of girls exchanging sex for money during the period when schools were closed**. Teachers provided several examples of adolescent girls who were encouraged by their parents to have sex for money to support their families. These situations were considered to **considerably increase the risk of sexual and gender-based violence, pregnancy and HIV/ STI transmission** for girls. "Les Marches Nocturne" ⁷ were cited by parents in eastern Ituri during CASS focus group discussions as environments where girls would specifically go to meet men and exchange sex for money, or items and produce for sale at the market.

"...girls were really open to the world and had a lot of free time...[they] were willing to "give" themselves to the boys in exchange for phone credit, mobile data, money for transportation or food..."

Teenage girl, Goma, CASS Dec. 2020



⁷ Local markets in these areas frequently occur in the evenings, to provide largely agricultural communities with the flexibility to work during the day. These markets are characterised by music, alcohol and drugs, and attract young people, many of whom come from far away villages to experience the festival-like atmosphere.

MITIGATING THE EFFECTS OF SCHOOL CLOSURES :

Considerations for action

According to World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines, schools should be closed only in situations of high and uncontrolled disease transmission. A WHO/UNICEF workshop in October 2020 exploring the topic of [school-based transmission of COVID-19](#) advised that **schools should be the last to close and the first to re-open**. If schools are to close during a public health emergency, the decision to do so should be based on [updated WHO guidelines](#) for school-based public health, and the **potential impact on the health, safety, and education of children and adolescents should be minimised through concerted multi-sectoral programming**.

Although schools in the DRC are now open, as this report highlights, many impacts will continue to be felt by communities in the short and long term. In the months leading up to the summer school closures and beyond, these impacts must be monitored, and measures taken to mitigate them.

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Codeveloped considerations to mitigate long and short-term impacts on children and adolescents



Monitor school attendance for girls and boys

- **Identify children and adolescents who have not returned to school and understand the reasons why**, in order to develop programmes and strategies for their reintegration (support local NGOs and civil society groups that adopt community-based approaches (e.g. [GHOVODI](#))).
 - **Identify girls who have not returned to school due to pregnancy (ongoing or as a result of having given birth), and support their reintegration** through community engagement, including addressing stigmatisation by other students (and family members; teachers), and working with parents of pregnant girls/teenaged mothers.
 - Establish and support **programmes that help young mothers and fathers (and their families) care for newborns**, in order to make it easier for them to continue their education.
 - **Support advocacy efforts to pass legislation requiring schools to (re)admit pregnant girls** (at the local and national level).
 - **Support the provision of sustainable, skills-based technical and vocational training based on a realistic assessment of local market forces**, for adolescent girls and boys who will not return to school, to increase social and economic autonomy.
-



Assistance to children/adolescents and financial support to families and schools

- To mitigate the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19, where subsidising/removing high school tuition fees may be difficult, **identify mechanisms to reduce household costs, or support programmes that provide money for education to the most vulnerable families**.
 - **Support vulnerable families of primary and secondary school students for non-tuition related costs** that may restrict access to education (e.g., school uniforms and learning materials).
 - **Advocate for consistent pay for teaching staff to reduce the risk of strikes, improve the quality of education and ensure uninterrupted schooling**; support Results Based Financing approaches to improve working conditions and motivate teachers (e.g. [CORDAID](#)).
 - **Strengthen school and/ or socio-economic reintegration programmes for children who have been recruited by armed groups, child victims of sexual violence, and the most vulnerable children and adolescents**. Consider support to families in the form of small financial incentives for students, provision of food and school meals, or vocational training programmes to support reintegration efforts, and facilitate the re-enrollment of children/ adolescents in schools, especially for pregnant teenagers and those already mothers.
 - In addition to public schools, **support unregulated, informal private schools by providing materials and WASH infrastructure to meet minimum requirements and education quality standards**.
-



Control and prevention of COVID-19 in schools (applicable to other infectious diseases)

- **Ensure that schools are adequately equipped with WASH materials, and teachers trained in Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) measures** to reduce the risk of disease transmission and reinforce confidence of parents in the safety of children.
- **Support the training of staff in child and adolescent centers in infection prevention and control measures** specific to COVID-19 (e.g., [ICRC-supported programme in Goma](#)).



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Co-developed recommendations to consider in the event of future school closures



Alternative support structures for children and adolescents

- **Strengthen and support child and youth centres and clubs that provide a space for children and youth to socialise, learn new skills, and access targeted information** (e.g., on sexual and reproductive health) (e.g., centers supported by [UNICEF](#), World Vision)
- **Ensure that existing child protection structures, including child-friendly spaces and youth clubs, remain functional and fully supported** (the [Child Protection Sub Cluster](#) (GTPE) in the DRC documented a decrease in the number of children accessing these structures between March and August 2020).
- **Encourage programme continuity for organisations providing sexual and reproductive health services for adolescents**, including the provision of free contraceptives and comprehensive health information (e.g. [Marie Stopes International](#) mobile clinics), and support local community-based organisations in the continued implementation of SRH programmes (e.g. [YARH-DRC](#)).
- **Strengthen programmes to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence** (SGBV), particularly in conflict-affected areas.



Invest in contextually appropriate distance learning methods

- **Provide parents, teachers, and schools with the necessary materials, adapted to the different age groups**, to support children in the continuity of education (e.g. program supported by [Cordaid in Kinshasa](#)). Ensure educational needs of children in remote, rural communities are met, rather than just focussing on easier-to-reach areas.
- **Support a variety of options for distance learning to ensure that all children have access to some form, depending on context and availability of resources** (i.e., not relying solely on a radio or television programme when some families have access to neither television nor radio).
- **Initiate discussion on the need to bridge the digital gender gap to improve girls' access to online educational resources.**

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS :

Medium and long-term prospects

Whilst the role of school closures in controlling COVID-19 is uncertain, these measures have been documented to have a significant short- and long-term impact on the well-being and development of children and adolescents. Integrated data from the DRC presented in this metasynthesis highlights that school closures and the resulting drop in school attendance not only have serious consequences for education, but also carry considerable health and protection risks for children and adolescents. These effects can be mitigated in resource-rich settings where infrastructure and technology allow for alternative methods of continuing education, and different social or political systems may exist to provide a protective environment for children who lack the structure of school. But this is not the case in the DRC. School closure policies must be applied with objective evaluation of the context, and potential risks and benefits for children and adolescents. It is essential that, in the absence of a national policy requiring schools to remain open during epidemics and similar public health crises, multisectoral and governmental partners do not work in isolation, but address these multi-faceted secondary impacts through unified strategies and programmes.

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The Social Sciences Analytics Cell

The Social Sciences Analytics Cell (CASS) is an operational research unit in the DRC that supports UNICEF and other public health response actors by providing evidence to inform decision-making and improve interventions and strategies. The CASS applies an integrated analytics approach to explain issues and trends in epidemiological, programmatic, and other research data, bringing together different actors and data sources to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of epidemics and public health outcomes.

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If you or your organisation has analyses needs, or if you have data you would like to share with CASS, please contact us. The more data that can be included in these analyses, the stronger and more reliable the evidence will be to inform decision making.