Ensuring all children are safe to learn in East Asia and Pacific

## *An imperative for the back to school and learning recovery agenda*

Outcome document

'Ending Violence Against Children and promoting mental health and well-being: An imperative for the back to school and learning recovery agenda in East Asia and Pacific'. Session co-hosted by SEAMEO, UNICEF EAPRO, UNESCO Bangkok and Safe to Learn at the Virtual Regional Conference to Strengthen Implementation of the INSPIRE Strategies in East Asia and the Pacific 'Ending Violence Against Children During COVID-19 and Beyond'.

Safe to Learn

unicef for every child

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Ending violence against children and supporting mental health and well-being is critical to achieving education goals in East Asia and the Pacific

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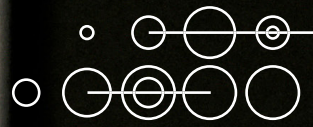
Globally, **up to 1 billion children** experience or witness some form of violence, in a variety of settings, including in, around and on the way to their schools, online, and in their homes and communities.[1]

732 million children aged 6-17 – half of all school-aged children – live in countries where corporal punishment at school is not fully prohibited.[2] Only 5 of the 11 Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) member states have prohibited corporal punishment in schools.[3] The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Children (VAC) requires all ASEAN member states to prohibit corporal punishment of children in all settings.

Physical and sexual violence, bullying and cyber-bullying are also widespread in, around, and on the way to schools, including school-related gender-based violence. Every month worldwide, one third of children are bullied at school. Some groups of children, such as children with disabilities, children from marginalized communities, and adolescent girls, may be more prone to violence than others in some countries. In the East Asia and Pacific region, as in some other regions, physical bullying is the most prevalent form of bullying in schools.[4]

"Violence is often a result of unequal gender and power dynamics. Girls and boys experience different forms of violence. Girls are more likely to experience psychological bullying, sexual violence, and harassment; boys more likely to experience corporal punishment and physical violence; children who do not conform to gender norms or stereotypes are particularly vulnerable to violence and bullying. Children with disabilities are more than three times as likely as their peers to suffer physical violence in schools, and girls with disabilities are at up to three times greater risk of rape. In fragile, conflict and crisis contexts, students and staff, face risks greater risks, such as targeted and indiscriminate attacks from the military or other groups."[5]

Violence is not only a violation of children's rights, it also has a significant negative impact on children's well-being and educational outcomes, with significant economic costs for wider society.[6] This undermines educational investments in the region as shown by recent global and regional evidence:[7]

- Violence negatively impacts school attendance and learning outcomes.[8] This includes lack of trust in school and teachers, lower attendance and school drop outs, resulting in less learning while in school and in lower educational outcomes. Analyses from the South East Asia Primary Learning Metrics SEA-PLM 2019 data confirms that learning outcomes are negatively associated with exposure to violence at school.[9]

- Violence, including sexual violence, has negative impact on children's health and well-being, including (but not limited to): injuries from fights, risky behaviours, lack of trust in others, hurting oneself, health problems and lower subjective well-being, higher tolerance towards violence and not feeling safe.[10] Violence and bullying of all types can have a devastating effect on children's mental health.

- Girls and young women and boys and young men face different forms of violence. In the Asia-Pacific region, girls are more likely to face social exclusion, sexual and psychological violence while boys are more likely to experience corporal punishment, bullying and other forms of physical violence. Violence experienced by transgender students is not well documented.[11]

- Adolescent girls face particular risks and in many places are not allowed to return to school if they become pregnant or married – this is often as a result of gender-based violence or rape. The East Asia and Pacific region is home to 75 million child brides.[12]

- Violence against children results in large potential economic costs. A 2015 study revealed that violence against children is costing the Asia-Pacific region **$209 billion per year**.[4] The World Bank highlights that globally, violence in school reduces educational attainment and learning resulting in economic losses estimated at **$11 trillion l**ost in lifetime earnings.[13]
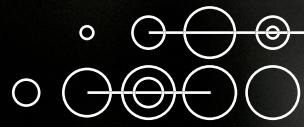
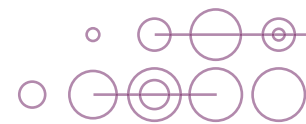COVID-19 has made addressing violence in and through schools and promoting mental health and well-being an even more urgent priority for East Asia and the Pacific
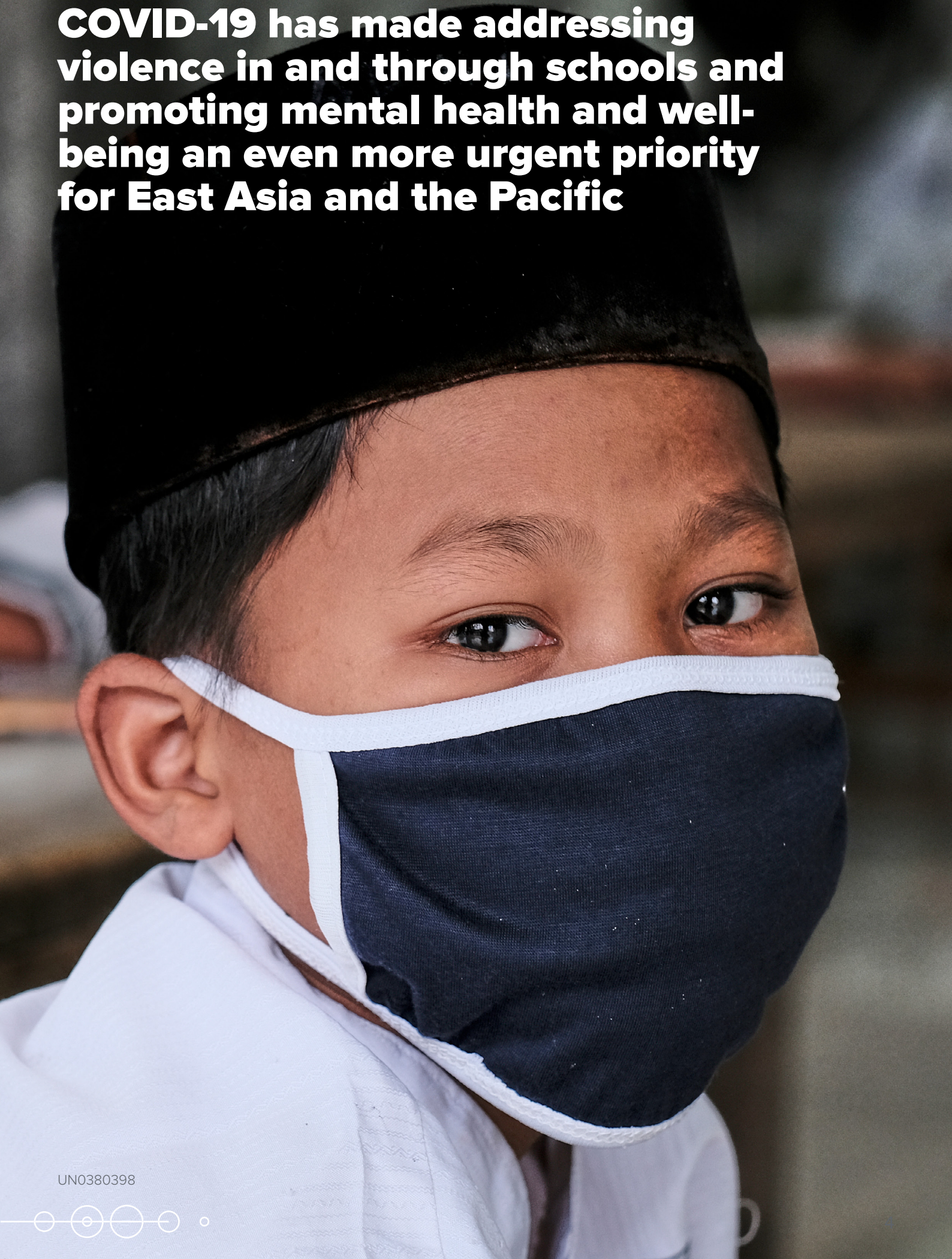
COVID-19 school closures across the region deepened the learning crisis and increased children's risk of experiencing violence, exploitation, and abuse. These problems are interlinked, overlap, and reinforce each other:

- About **300 million children**, many of whom were already struggling to learn before the pandemic, lost significant levels of learning. In some countries this amounts to **up to one year of lost learning**.[14] In addition to academic skills, students lost out on learning key transferable and psychosocial skills such as problem-solving and resiliency, as well as social skills.

- Gains made in the last two decades in school access stand to be reversed, with millions of the most marginalized girls and boys at risk of not returning to school. When children are not in school, many are at elevated risks of violence. A survey from Save the Children found that when schools were closed, children reported violence in the household at over double the rate from when schools were open, and the child attended in person.[15]

- COVID-19-related school closures have resulted in children's education increasingly moving online. While this presents opportunities, it may also put children at greater risk of online violence and elevated risk of sexual exploitation and to drops in reporting to child protection authorities.

- School closures and the tremendous stress created by confinements during the pandemic have negatively impacted the mental health of children, teachers, and caregivers.[16]

- Countries in East Asia and Pacific (EAP) need to increase the education budget by up to 20%, depending on the country, to respond to COVID-19's impact and to be on track to achieve SDG4 by 2030.[17]

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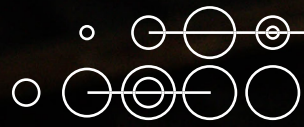
Education plays a critical role to prevent and respond to violence against children and ensure the mental health and well-being of school-going children and adolescents

COVID-19 highlighted the elevated risks of violence faced by children during the pandemic and the mental health challenges for them and adults, as well as the key protective and supportive role schools can play in mitigating these adversities. It is now clearer than ever that education has a key role to play to prevent and respond to violence against children. This is true no matter where this violence takes place: at school, in and on the way to school, at home, in communities, or online.

Schools must be a safe place to learn for all children. Education systems have an explicit role in ensuring the education workforce has the appropriate level of capacity to prevent and respond to cases of violence, children at risk and children struggling with mental health challenges and to refer children to specialized services as required.[18] Teachers and schools must be equipped to promote a violence-free school environment and promote positive social norms and mental well-being. Teachers must also be ready to identify and refer children who are experiencing violence or mental health issues and needing support.

The education sector, schools, teachers, communities, families, and young people all have a critical role to play in preventing and responding to mental health concerns in school-going children and adolescents.

Multi sectoral collaboration between education, social welfare, justice, and health sectors is critical to address violence and support mental health and well-being and ensure children who experience violence and mental health issues receive the help they need. Collaboration between education and water and sanitation sectors is critical to address menstruation stigmatization, a form of violence which affects girls' ability to attend school and their mental health and well-being.

Ending violence and promoting mental well-being is also critical to ensure investments in reopening schools and the recovery of learning 'post COVID-19' are not undermined. **Cost-benefit analyses by the World Bank show that investing to end violence against children in and around school is a smart investment to make**. This includes interventions to prevent violence in and through schools along the life cycle from early childhood to primary and secondary education. 'The benefits of investing in violence prevention are likely to far outweigh the costs'.[19]

Ending violence in and through schools is one of the seven INSPIRE strategies for ending violence against children.[20] There are five key areas where action must be accelerated to end violence in and through schools, outlined in the **Safe to Learn Call to Action**. To date, 15 countries have endorsed the Call to Action, including Cambodia in EAP, and taken concrete steps to prioritise violence prevention in and through schools as a fundamental pillar of their education systems. Safe to Learn is a global initiative uniting a coalition of partners that are available to support EAP to take tangible action in the following areas to end violence in and through schools:[21]

- Implement laws and policies

- Strengthen prevention and response at the school level

- Shifts social norms and behaviour change

- Invest resources effectively

- Generate and use evidence

Key actions for Ministries of Education in East Asia and Pacific to accelerate action to ensure all children are safe to learn

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- Ensure that violence prevention and response measures, including the removal of violence-related barriers to return to school post COVID-19, are part of school **reopening and learning recovery plans**, particularly for girls and those children most at-risk of not returning.

- Ensure laws and policies are in place and enforced for the **prohibition of violence in schools, including physical discipline.**

- **Promote mental health** among children and teachers as a critical strategy to reopen schools and recover learning.

- Strengthen the **education workforce** to enable it to better identify, prevent and respond to mental health concerns and cases of violence, however, being mindful of capacity without adding unecessary burden to an already overstretched workforce.

- **Join the global movement for ending violence in and through school** by **endorsing and implementing the Safe to Learn Call to Action** and joining the Safe to Learn initiative to unlock the multiple wins of ending violence in and through education.

- **Advocate with Ministries of Finance** to make the necessary budgetary allocation for the policies and programmes necessary to end violence in and through schools and recover learning.

- **Seek more donor support** to increase technical and financial resources to remove violence-related barriers to enable a safe return to school.

- Promote and enforce **positive learning environments** in schools through communications and behaviour change initaitives that reinforce nurturing social norms and positive role modeling and create safe spaces and extra-curricular opportunities for children to interact in a healthy and positive way.

- **Strengthen partnerships and collaborations** with young people, civil society, social welfare, health and justice institutions sectors in ending violence against children and promoting mental health and well-being.

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[20]The 7 INSPIRE represent a selected group of strategies based on the best available evidence to help countries and communities intensify their focus on the prevention programmes and services with the greatest potential to reduce violence against children.

[21]Safe to Learn includes the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (UK FCDO), the United Nations Girl's Education Initiative (UNGEI), the Civil Society Forum to End Violence against Children (CSO Forum), the World Bank, Education Cannot Wait (ECW), the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), the Global Business Coalition for Education (GBCE), Global Affairs Canada (GAC), the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children (SRSG/VAC), and the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children (GP EVAC).

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