Education

UNICEF warns of deepened unequal access to remote schooling

Education Desk Report

THE UNICEF is warning of inherent inequalities in access to tools and technology for remote learning in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It said the situation was threatening to deepen the global learning crisis, adding, "Access to the technology and materials needed to continue learning while schools are closed is desperately unequal."

The organisation said in the same vein, children with limited learning support at home had almost no means to support their education.

"Providing a range of learning tools and accelerating access to the internet for every school and every child is critical.

"A learning crisis already existed before COVID-19 hit. We are now looking at an even more divisive and deepening education crisis," the UNICEF Chief of Education, Mr Robert Jenkins, said in a report on the impact of the pandemic on education.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic hit, educational systems in many countries have rapidly transformed to support children with remote learning.

Internet

The report said latest data on access to remote learning indicated that in 71 countries worldwide, less than half their population had access to the internet.

"Despite this disparity, 73 per cent of governments out of 127 reporting countries are using online platforms to deliver education while schools remain closed.

"In reporting countries across Latin America and the Caribbean region, 90 per cent of governments' continuity learning responses include online platforms," the report observed, adding that in the majority of countries across Africa, less than a quarter of the population had internet access.

"UNICEF data from 14 African countries revealed that schoolchildren with internet access at home have higher foundational reading skills than children who do not have access," it stated.

Television

On the use of television, the report said despite disparities in ownership, television was the main channel used by governments to deliver remote learning, with three in four governments out of 127 reporting countries using television as a source of education for children.

It stated that in 40 out of 88 countries with data, children living in urban households were at least twice as likely to have a TV than children in rural households.

"The largest disparities are in sub-Saharan Africa," the report said, adding that in rural Chad for instance, only one in 100 households had a television, compared to one in three households in urban areas.

Radio

Radio is the third most-used platform by governments to deliver education while most schools are closed, with 60 per cent of 127 reporting countries using this method.

"Radio ownership across and within regions varies widely. Only one in five households in South Asia own a radio, compared to three in four households in Latin America and the Caribbean," it said.

Social media

The report said more than half of the reporting countries were using SMS, mobile or social media as an alternate education delivery system, with 74 per cent of reporting countries in Europe and Central Asia using those methods.

"Around half of 127 reporting countries are offering printed, take-home resources; and only 11 per cent are offering home visits," the report stated.

Electricity

The report identified vast inequities between the richest and the poorest households, with almost all technologies used to deliver education while schools remain closed requiring electricity.

"Yet, in the 28 countries with data, only 65 per cent of households from the poorest quintile have electricity, compared to 98 per cent of households from the wealthiest quintile.

"In seven countries - Côte d'Ivoire, Lesotho, Kiribati, Sudan, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and Mauritania, less than 10 per cent of the poorest households have electricity," the report indicated.