Guidance on the use of schools for Covid-19 related purposes

The third objective for NRC’s global response to Covid-19 entails continuing access to essential services, including education. As thousands of schools, learning centres and universities across the globe are closed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, some of these temporarily empty structures might be proposed for use as treatment centres, to provide housing for people affected by the virus, as distribution/storage centres etc. NRC will work with educational authorities and partners to minimise disruption to schooling.

The IASC-endorsed Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools is clear that the use of schools for Covid-19 related purposes should be avoided, in order to prevent the following:

- Delays in the clearing of classrooms, preventing children and young people from returning to school when they are scheduled to reopen.
- Damage to and theft of school property during occupation, causing significant monetary costs.
- Insufficient cleaning and disinfecting of school facilities before being handed back over to school officials, preventing schools from safely reopening.
- Creating negative associations for children (schools as treatment centres where people are very ill or die, instead of being a safe space), causing psychosocial distress when children return to school.

The IASC guidance requests all relevant actors “to ensure educational facilities are not used as health treatment or quarantine centres, as shelters or for any other non-educational purposes, even on a temporary basis.” When advocating for this, NRC should work closely with school officials and the Education Sector or EiE Working Group to collectively lobby local authorities, to create alternate plans with the MoE and other relevant government officials, and to bring attention to potential monetary costs to in-country donor groups. NRC’s position is that the use of schools for Covid-19 related purposes should be a ‘last resort’, and that the decision-making process in determining this should be reasonable and documented.

Both the right to health and to education enjoy equal standing in international law and NRC promotes both in its Covid-19 response. Yet, States are authorised to impose limitations on certain rights when strictly necessary to achieve a legitimate aim and in line with domestic and international law. Limitations need to be proportional, non-discriminatory and limited in time. This means that a decision to use schools as health facilities for example must be based in law, it must be time bound and cannot disproportionately affect certain communities or individuals. Furthermore, affected schools should be restored to their original function as soon as possible.

If a learning space is allocated for Covid-19 related purposes, NRC should plan for the following:

- Relevant actors/school officials should be given the time to move or store furniture and equipment in a room that is locked before occupation, so that only empty classrooms are used.
- Authorities, school officials and other relevant actors should draft a written agreement on how and when the school will return to its original function, e.g. when authorities announce that schools will reopen, what is the timeline to vacate, disinfect and repair, with clear deadlines and responsibilities for each party. NRC should support a regular review process of these agreements and timelines.
- If NRC is involved in adapting the school for a Covid-19 related purpose, this Technical Guidance should be followed.
• The school should be visibly marked as a temporary health structure or shelter to protect it and deter continued use by children. Instructions for the protection of school buildings and materials should be displayed (see below).
• If the school shares its water point with the local community, all or parts of the year, engage the relevant management committee at the school.
• The cleaning and disinfecting of school buildings, classrooms, kitchens, dining facilities, and WASH facilities should be budgeted for and completed by skilled professionals before reopening. Use sodium hypochlorite at 0.5% (equivalent 5000ppm) for disinfecting surfaces and 70% ethyl alcohol for disinfection of small items (or hypochlorite at 0.5% here as well if need be) and ensure appropriate equipment for cleaning staff. Leave buildings for 24 hours and open windows for ventilation before use.
• Repair/rehabilitation of the school infrastructure, including WASH facilities, should be budgeted for and completed before the school is reopened. Ideally, the disadvantages arising from the use of the school for other purposes should be offset by tangible benefits for the school community. NRC should support tracking damages caused by the use of schools for Covid-19 related purposes, and advocate for the mobilisation of sufficient resources ahead of the re-opening date.
• In collaboration with the community, relevant actors/school officials should identify measures to destigmatise the school when it reopens so children and young people feel safe, e.g. a community event, or the painting and refurbishing of the school to mitigate the psychosocial consequences.

Key message: Alternative sites should be identified for use for COVID-19 related purposes, even on a temporary basis. Schools should only be used as a last resort.

Key message: When authorities do designate a school for COVID-19 related purposes, the building and school materials should be protected.

• Motto: The school protects us, and we protect the school!
• Illustration: A positive picture of a child that is pleased to find her classroom intact.