



SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee

Contribution to the Thematic Review of the 2021 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (2021 HLPF)

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has created the most severe disruption in education systems in history. In his Policy Brief released on 4 August 2020, the UN Secretary-General urged the world to take urgent action to prevent “a learning crisis from becoming a generational catastrophe”. In this submission to the thematic review of the 2021 HLPF, the Steering Committee joins his call to Member States and the international community to place education at the centre of recovery and sustainable development.

The pandemic caused unprecedented social and economic disruptions and uncertainties, exposing the world’s fragility and interdependence, imperilling fundamental human rights, including the right to education. At the peak of the pandemic in April 2020, 1.6 billion learners across 190 countries have been affected by school closures. One year into the global health crisis, nearly 1 billion students are still affected by full or partial school closures in 100 countries (as of 15 March 2021).¹

In addition to learning disruptions, school closures carried high social and economic costs for people across communities, while affecting disproportionately the most vulnerable and marginalized. These included **poor nutrition** due to the disruption of school meals, on which up to 370 million children and youth rely on for healthy food and nutrition.² In the absence of childcare options, working parents may have suffered **economic costs** of missing work or reduced productivity (SDG 8) or had to leave children unattended and exposed to safety risks. In addition, **increased exposure to violence and exploitation** during prolonged school closures and lockdowns threatens hard-earned progress in the field of gender equality and women’s empowerment (SDG 5). **Social and emotional wellbeing, as well as mental health** of both learners and educational personnel has also been identified as an area of concern due to social isolation and reduced social activities, resulting in important setbacks in the advancement of SDG 4 on healthy lives and well-being (SDG 3).

Learning losses in 2020 as a result of the pandemic are projected to reduce the number of children proficient in reading by 13 million per age cohort; if we consider eight grades of primary and lower secondary school, around 100 million children moved below the minimum proficiency threshold³. In the absence of effective compensatory measures, school closures lasting 5 months and the unfolding economic shock could result, on average, in a reduction of approximately \$16,000 of lost earnings over the lifetime of today’s cohort of primary and secondary school students, or \$10 trillion dollars of lost earnings for the global economy because of lower levels of learning (SDG 8).⁴ Furthermore, some 24 million children and youth from pre-primary to tertiary education may drop out or not have access to school due to the pandemic’s economic impact alone⁵, putting the most marginalized at greatest risk of being left behind. This is in addition to 258 million children, adolescents and youth who were out of school prior to the pandemic.

¹ UNESCO’s [global monitoring of school closures caused by COVID-19](#).

² United Nations World Food Programme. “[School Feeding](#).” Accessed March 2021.

³ UIS (2021). *Pandemic-related disruptions to schooling and impacts on learning proficiency indicators: A focus on the early grades*. Montreal. [Forthcoming]

⁴ World Bank. 2020. [COVID-19 Could Lead to Permanent Loss in Learning and Trillions of Dollars in Lost Earnings](#). Washington: 2020.

⁵ [UNESCO. 2020. UNESCO COVID-19 education response: how many students are at risk of not returning to school? Advocacy paper.](#)

Recognizing that without targeted remedial action, the COVID-19 pandemic may reverse decades of progress made in inclusion and equity, the international community joined forces to protect and promote education through a series of initiatives. The launch of the Global Education Coalition (GEC) to support countries' efforts to ensure learning continuity and safe re-opening of schools, the UN Secretary-General's Policy Brief, and the #SaveOurFuture Campaign testified to the commitment to strengthen multilateral cooperation and multi-stakeholder partnerships to prevent a generational catastrophe.

This series of collaborative actions culminated at the extraordinary session of the Global Education Meeting (2020 GEM) convened by UNESCO, Ghana, Norway and the United Kingdom in October 2020. The adoption of the 2020 GEM Declaration provided a new impetus to reaffirm the international community's commitment to equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities (SDG 4); to build more resilient, flexible, inclusive and gender-responsive societies and education systems that address the holistic needs of all learners from early childhood to adulthood; and to accelerate progress across the 17 SDGs.

With the global health crisis still unfolding, the Steering Committee's submission calls on governments and stakeholders to fulfil the commitments across the five priority actions identified in the 2020 GEM Declaration:

- 1) **Protect education finance by increasing the share of public expenditure on education** towards at least 4-6% of GDP and/or 15-20% of public expenditure; ensuring that national recovery stimulus packages include allocations for equity-focused support measures and for skills development to increase employment opportunities; and increasing the volume, predictability and effectiveness of international aid to education.
- 2) **Safely reopen educational institutions through closer inter-sectoral collaboration**, strengthening and restoring access to services (e.g. school meals, health, WASH, social protection) and ensuring that reopening plans are equity-oriented, gender-responsive, inclusive, targeted and adequately funded.
- 3) **Support all teachers and education personnel as frontline workers**, ensuring their safety, well-being and decent working conditions; consulting their representatives in decision making; and providing them with urgency professional development, including digital and pedagogical skills for learner-centred quality education.
- 4) **Invest in skills development**, including social and emotional learning and well-being, for inclusive recovery, decent work and enhanced employability and sustainable development through re-skilling and up-skilling opportunities for all young people and adults who have lost or are at risk of losing their jobs.
- 5) **Narrow the digital divide in education, develop quality open educational resources** and build digital commons as a complement to face-to-face learning, with a view to enabling inclusive and equitable technology-supported learning.

The 2020 GEM also kicked off a reform of the global education cooperation mechanism as a key pillar in the education community's efforts to build an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. UNESCO launched an inclusive consultation process and a dedicated multi-stakeholder Working Group was established to envision improved arrangements for coordination of partners and elaborate a concrete proposal to be submitted for adoption at the 2021 Global Education Meeting planned for July 2021. This reform marks the beginning of a new area in international cooperation in the field of education and beyond, and towards the 2030 Agenda in its entirety.