



## SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee

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

March 2021

This paper is submitted by the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee<sup>1</sup> as an input to the 2021 HLPF, dedicated to the theme: *Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.*

The 2021 HLPF will also discuss the following Sustainable Development Goals: Goals 1 on no poverty, 2 on zero hunger, 3 on good health and well-being, 8 on decent work and economic growth, 10 on reduced inequalities, 12 on responsible consumption and production, 13 on climate action, 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, and 17 on partnerships in depth. In doing so, the Forum will consider the integrated, indivisible and interlinked nature of the SDGs.

#### 1. Introduction

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 warned of a “generational catastrophe” that could undermine decades of progress and deepen entrenched inequalities, calling upon national authorities and the international community to come together to place education at the forefront of recovery agendas and protect investment in education.<sup>2</sup>

One year after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the third International Day of Education was celebrated on 24 January 2021, under the theme “Recover and Revitalize Education for the COVID-19 Generation”, highlighting the commitments, initiatives and good practices to promote education with quality, equity and relevance in the face of a future marked by an economic recession and climate change.<sup>3</sup> The dramatic spill-over effects of what started as a public health emergency forcefully underlined the integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda, as well as the urgency to protect and promote education as a catalytic force for resilience building and the acceleration of progress across all 17 SDGs more broadly.

#### 2. Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and the SDGs under review

Starting as a public health emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented social and economic disruptions and uncertainties, affecting every sphere of human activity. It has exposed the world’s fragility and interdependence, imperilling fundamental human rights, including the right to education. The educational crisis surfaced early as most governments around the world decided to close schools and other educational institutions in

<sup>1</sup> The [SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee](#) is the global multi-stakeholder consultation and coordination mechanism for education in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Its primary objective is to harmonize and strengthen support to countries and their partners for the realization of the global education goal and targets. The Steering Committee is composed of members representing a majority from countries, the World Education Forum 2015 convening agencies (UNESCO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UN Women, ILO, the World Bank), the Global Partnership for Education, the OECD, regional organizations, teacher organizations, civil society networks, the private sector, foundations and youth organizations.

<sup>2</sup> [UN Secretary-General’s Policy Brief on Education and COVID-19](#), August 2020.

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO. 2021. [International Day of Education](#). Accessed March 2021.

an attempt to contain the spread of the virus. The unprecedented school closures, nationwide or local, affected more than 1.6 billion learners across over 190 countries at the peak of the pandemic in April 2020 according to UNESCO, which has been monitoring school closures and reopenings since the onset of the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

As of March 15 2021, close to 1 billion students from pre-primary to secondary level are still affected by full or partial school closures in 100 countries according to [UNESCO's global monitoring of school closures caused by COVID-19](#). The duration of closures varies greatly, from as many as 5 months (20 weeks) on average of complete nation-wide closures in Latin America and the Caribbean countries, to 2.5 months (10 weeks) in Europe, and just one month in Oceania. When including localized closures, the duration of complete and localized closures exceeded seven months (29 weeks) on average in Latin America and the Caribbean compared to the global average of 5.5 months (22 weeks). At the time of the writing, schools for more than 168 million schoolchildren globally have been closed for almost a year from March 2020 to February 2021. Two thirds of countries that experienced full or partial year-long closures are in Latin America and the Caribbean<sup>5</sup>.

With the almost overnight switch to remote learning, the creation, maintenance and improvement of distance learning opportunities at scale presented enormous challenges, both human and technical. In particular, teachers and other education personnel have been put under significant pressure to switch to teaching and supporting children remotely. Income and job security concerns have increased, especially private sector and contract teachers, and in many contexts, school closures have led to furloughs or separations.<sup>6</sup>

School closures also carried high social and economic costs for people across communities, while affecting particularly severely the most vulnerable and marginalized in other aspects of life. These included **poor nutrition** due to the disruption of school meals, on which many children and youth rely on for healthy food and nutrition. WFP estimates that up to 370 million children missed out on school meals due to COVID-19-related school closures (SDG 2).<sup>7</sup> 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). The impact on **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).

UNESCO projected in July 2020 that some 23.8 million additional 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 alone.<sup>8</sup> In low- and middle-income countries, budgetary constraints are particularly severe and expected to increase the funding gap for the implementation of SDG 4

---

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO. 2020. [Education: From disruption to recovery](#). Paris: UNESCO.

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF. [COVID-19: Schools for more than 168 million children globally have been completely closed for almost a full year, says UNICEF](#). Press release of 2 March 2021. New York: UNICEF.

<sup>6</sup> Teacher Task Force. 2020. [How the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting contract teachers in sub-Saharan Africa](#). Paris: UNESCO.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations World Food Programme. "[School Feeding](#)." Accessed March 2021.

<sup>8</sup> [UNESCO. 2020. UNESCO COVID-19 education response: how many students are at risk of not returning to school? Advocacy paper.](#)

UNESCO will update this figure at the end of March 2021.

by one third, from the already staggering shortfall of USD 148 billion. The World Bank estimates that 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).<sup>9</sup>

The emerging evidence points to the significant impact of school closures on learning, indicating that learning losses are likely to be larger than what might be expected from the length of schooling disruptions. A forthcoming report of UNESCO Institute for Statistics<sup>10</sup> uses a factor of two: for every month of contact schooling lost, about two months of learning have been lost. The learning losses in 2020 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, this means that around 100 million children moved below the minimum proficiency threshold as a result of the pandemic. This number translates approximately to the loss of the proficiency gain made over the last twenty years.

The pandemic has amplified pre-existing social, economic and digital inequalities between and among countries. The pandemic has also highlighted the centrality of education for every society and community, as a public good and the bedrock of social cohesion, well-being, and inclusive and sustainable growth. With access to education disrupted and the right to quality education jeopardized, the international community is facing considerable threats to the acquisition of essential skills for decent work and employment, but also for global citizenship and sustainable development, climate action, peace, non-violence, social justice and democracy, putting at risk hard-gained progress made towards the SDGs, including SDG 4 and the SDGs under review by the 2021 HLPF.

### **3. Actions, policy guidance, progress, challenges and areas requiring urgent attention**

In face of such wide-ranging impacts of educational disruptions, action to respond to the crisis has unlocked an unprecedented spirit of solidarity and cooperation, inspiring new initiatives and partnerships.

This series of collaborative actions, which will be further outlined in Section 5, culminated with the extraordinary session of the Global Education Meeting (2020 GEM) convened by UNESCO, Ghana, Norway and the United Kingdom on 20 and 22 October 2020.<sup>11</sup> On this occasion, heads of state and government and ministers from over 70 countries, as well as a broader international education community, endorsed the 2020 GEM Declaration, expressing their commitment to protect education finance, throughout the crisis and beyond, and outlining the following priority actions and measures to be adopted up to the end of 2021.<sup>12</sup>

#### *1) Protect domestic and international financing of education*

The Education Finance Watch 2021<sup>13</sup> estimated that annual spending on education was at US\$5 trillion worldwide in 2019. Governments account for 82% of total spending,

---

<sup>9</sup> World Bank. 2020. [COVID-19 Could Lead to Permanent Loss in Learning and Trillions of Dollars in Lost Earnings](#). Washington: 2020.

<sup>10</sup> UIS (2021). *Pandemic-related disruptions to schooling and impacts on learning proficiency indicators: A focus on the early grades*. Montreal. [Forthcoming]

<sup>11</sup> UNESCO. [Education post-COVID-19: Extraordinary session of the Global Education Meeting \(2020 GEM\)](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Extraordinary Session of the Global Education Meeting, Education post-COVID-19: 2020 Global Education Meeting Declaration. 2020.](#)

<sup>13</sup> World Bank and UNESCO. 2021. [Education Finance Watch 2021](#).

households for 17% and donors for 0.3% globally (although donors account for 18% of expenditure in low-income countries). Government capacity to raise revenues will be seriously tested and the education sector is expected to face stiff competition from other sectors even though its COVID-19 response and recovery require additional investments to ensure safe learning environments through refurbished infrastructure, equipment and additional personnel; implement re-enrolment strategies to bring marginalized learners back to school; and offer catch-up classes to compensate learning losses or provide second-chance education for those that did not return.

Education budgets declined after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 65% of low- and lower-middle-income countries compared to only 33% of high- and upper-middle-income countries. Despite more low- and lower-middle-income countries decreasing their budget, however, the average reductions were smaller post-COVID than pre-COVID (-9.1% vs. -3.6%). On the other hand, education has received a very low share of national stimulus packages. According to IMF's policy tracker<sup>14</sup>, government massive fiscal responses amounted in mid-September 2020 to US\$ 11.8 trillion in total (or 12% of GDP), mostly in high-income countries (84%). According to UNESCO estimates, the share of this fiscal response allocated to education represented a mere 0.78 percent, or US\$ 91 billion, out of which US\$ 73 billion was spent in high-income countries.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore urgent and imperative for governments to secure additional investments for safe school reopening and improved training and skills development.

With the current financial crisis also severely effecting on donor countries, development programmes in education may be affected in two ways: first, the recession reducing total aid allocations and second, donors prioritizing other sectors in response to the pandemic. Even if the second risk is ignored, the aid to education is projected to fall by 12% or by up to US\$ 2 billion by 2022<sup>16</sup>.

Increasing financing needs and declining domestic budgets are expected to increase the annual financial gap in low- and lower-middle-income countries to achieve SDG 4 from US\$148 billion pre-COVID figure to nearly US\$200 billion. Investing now in remedial and re-enrolment programmes could reduce this additional cost by as much as 75%<sup>17</sup>.

Given this evidence, the 2020 GEM Declaration calls governments to: a) increase or maintain the share of expenditure on education towards the international benchmarks of a least 4-6% of GDP and/or 15-20% of public expenditure; b) ensure that national recovery stimulus packages include allocation to education, specifically for supporting marginalized students' learning recovery and socio-emotional support, (re-)enrolment campaigns and targeted support of at-risk learners, and training and skills development to increase employability, and c) increase the volume, predictability and effectiveness of international aid to education.

## 2) *Reopen schools safely and inclusively*

Education systems around the world continue to grapple with the complex decisions of when and how to reopen schools for in-person learning. While most countries took the

---

<sup>14</sup> International Monetary Fund. [Policy Responses to Covid-19, Policy Tracker](#) (updated on 9 October 2020).

<sup>15</sup> UNESCO. 2020. [Fiscal responses to education and training in the context of COVID-19](#).

UNESCO will update this figure at the end of March 2021.

<sup>16</sup> GEM Report. Policy Paper 41. ["COVID-19 is a serious threat to aid to education recovery"](#). July 2020.

<sup>17</sup> GEM Report. Policy Paper 42. ["Act now: Reduce the Impact of COVID-19 on the cost of achieving SDG 4"](#). September 2020.

measure to temporarily close schools and other educational institutions as an immediate response to the threat of COVID-19 in early 2020, it has become clear, as illustrated in Section 2, that school closures have negative impacts not only on students' learning and development but also on their health and wellbeing, family incomes and the overall economy. As the pandemic entered the second and third COVID-19 waves, forcing countries into new lockdowns, many governments decided to keep schools open, testifying to the unique importance of their role in society.

In this context, governments, in collaboration with their development partners and other stakeholders, including teachers and education support personnel, have explored and designed the most appropriate approaches to implement health protocols and physical distancing measures, based on available evidence on safety and disease control, while ensuring smooth curriculum transition to meet learning objectives. The Framework for Reopening Schools, published in June 2020 jointly by UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Bank, WFP and UNHCR, provided practical, high-level guidance on when, where and how to reopen school.<sup>18</sup> In addition, as more countries reopen schools, lessons are beginning to emerge and being shared among Member States through virtual meetings, webinars and publications.<sup>19</sup>

When it comes to reopening schools, the “consult, coordinate and communicate” approach is key. School leaders should consult and communicate with the community actively, transparently and widely, in order to ensure a smooth transition back to schools, where no one is left behind. Key steps education systems have been taking to ensure safe school reopening include the following<sup>20</sup>:

- Safe school reopening and protection from infection by implementing context-appropriate health and hygiene protocols, including symptom screening, handwashing, use of protective equipment, and cleaning procedures for facilities; reducing physical contact and limiting transmission through improved indoor ventilation, using outdoor space and building additional classrooms, staggering start/end times, alternating shifts/days or isolating class groupings to create “class bubbles”, hiring additional teachers to reduce class size, and blending distance and in-person learning.
- Care for physical, mental and psycho-social well-being through early and regular communication and support to teachers, parents and students, including through Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions; (re-)establishing regular and safe delivery of services such as school feeding and vaccines can help bring children back to school and limit secondary impacts of pandemic.
- Support and focus on learning by prioritizing early grades and exam-preparatory classes for in-person learning to help mitigate impacts on student educational trajectories; simplifying the curriculum and adapting the academic calendar; adjusting learning objectives and priorities, implementing remedial and/or accelerated learning programmes; supporting teachers, principals and school staff to implement targeted support measures and manage students' new psychosocial needs. One key challenge

---

<sup>18</sup> UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, WFP and UNHCR. 2020. [Framework for reopening schools](#).

<sup>19</sup> UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, WFP and UNHCR. 2020. [Supplement to Framework for reopening schools: emerging lessons from country experiences in managing the process of reopening schools](#). Accessed on 3 March 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Based on the [2020 GEM Background Document](#) and the aforementioned Supplement to Framework for reopening schools.

and priority is organizing examinations and assuring certification of qualifications, especially for graduating students or students transitioning to higher levels of education: less important examinations may be cancelled, while examinations at critical decision points are being modified to reflect school closure periods and to reduce physical contact.

- Reaching the most marginalised by targeting additional education funding to schools and communities hit hardest; providing specific measures to support girls, learners with disabilities and other vulnerable groups' in enrolling in or returning to school; and ensuring critical communications and outreach materials are available in relevant languages and accessible formats.
- Prepare for resurgence and future crises: Proactive planning and clear protocols for re-closings coupled with flexibility in local decision-making can help limit outbreaks, as well as disruptions to teaching-learning processes. From a health perspective, protocols need to be in place to prevent, detect as early as possible and control virus spread in schools while public health information and communications should be offered in multiple, accessible formats and necessary services and facilities (particularly WASH) should be accessible to all learners and education personnel. From the pedagogical perspective, countries need to consider blending school-based and distance learning education delivery modalities, to ensure a smooth transition between the two (or to use them in combination) if and when the necessity arises.

### 3) *Supporting all teachers as frontline workers and prioritizing their safety, wellbeing and professional development*

The global health crisis underscored that teachers are the backbone of every education system and frontline workers in ensuring learners' safety, wellbeing and learning continuity. Despite the challenges of having to adapt to the remote learning modalities, the crisis allowed for creativity and innovation in teaching and learning that must be capitalized upon. As schools reopen, it will be critical to provide stronger support to teachers, including through continuing professional development, in particular in the area of information and communication technologies; to place more attention on their social and emotional wellbeing, mainstream social and emotional learning for teachers and students; and ensure social dialogue to protect their rights and to engage them in shaping the educational recovery.

The International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, a global network of over 90 governments and some 50 international and regional organisations, issued a Call for Action on Teachers in March 2020 to call on governments, education providers and funders – public and private – to recognize the critical role of teachers in the COVID-19 response and recovery, by prioritizing their health, safety and decent working conditions; including them in developing COVID-19 education responses and providing adequate professional support and training.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in December 2020, as countries begin to administer COVID-19 vaccines, UNESCO and Education International, the global

---

<sup>21</sup> International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030. 2020. [Response to the COVID 19 Outbreak Call for Action on Teachers](#).

federation of teacher unions, followed by UNICEF, called on governments to consider teachers and school personnel as a priority group in vaccination efforts.<sup>22,23</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to better prepare teachers for implementing remote teaching and new pedagogies for hybrid learning with digital technologies. While much teacher capacity-building was rushed in to mitigate knowledge and skills gaps, there is a need to rebalance this approach and aim for a lifelong model of teacher development, building a new cadre of talented and professional teaching teams with a collaborative mind-set. At policy level, collecting timely and valid data on teachers and teaching can result in measures to drive more equitable policies and ensure that marginalized communities are better served by well-qualified teachers in this time of crisis and beyond.

#### 4) *Investing in skills development for inclusive recovery*

To drive a resilient recovery, combat poverty, ensure access to decent work, contribute to economic growth, promote climate action, and strengthen peace, justice and democracy, upscaling investment in skills development has never been more critical to meeting the global challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The radically new educational reality and the ongoing digital revolution requires all students to acquire digital skills, not only for learning, but to access vital information, enhance their job readiness and participate in society. Beyond digital skills, however, the COVID-19 pandemic illustrated once more how quickly the skills in demand on the labour market can change. According to ILO, there were unprecedented global employment losses in 2020 of 114 million jobs relative to 2019, and these losses were higher for women (5.0 percent) than for men, and for young workers (8.7 percent).<sup>24</sup> Skills development in the COVID-19 context and beyond is thus emerging as a priority. Prioritizing and adapting education, training and skills development programmes to respond to continuous technological transformation, overall shifts in the labour market and new skill demands is essential in ensuring that youth and adults receive the support they need to thrive and are protected from the risk of job loss<sup>25</sup>.

Investment in skills development cannot be reduced to skills for the world of work alone. The COVID-19 pandemic, marked by rising intolerance, discrimination and hate speech, is a reminder that not only the delivery of learning but also its content and overall approaches must be transformed to foster civic participation, critical thinking and intercultural understanding both in local and global contexts. Furthermore, the pandemic warns us that unregulated and unsustainable human activities and disregard for the environment that are partially blamed for the current crisis, could open the way for other natural disasters that could be even more disruptive. In recovering from the COVID-19 crisis, therefore, the knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviours and values needed to strengthen global peace, non-violence and justice and support human rights and well-being for people and the planet must move to the centre of learning (SDG 13 and 16). This implies

---

<sup>22</sup> UNESCO. 2020. [UNESCO and Education International call on governments to consider teachers and school personnel as a priority group in COVID-19 vaccination efforts.](#)

<sup>23</sup> UNICEF. 2020. [Teachers should be prioritized for vaccination against COVID-19 - Statement by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore.](#)

<sup>24</sup> ILO. 2021. [ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Seventh edition: Updated estimates and analysis.](#)

<sup>25</sup> [UN Secretary-General's Policy Brief on Education in the time of COVID-19 and beyond.](#) 2020.

integrating sustainable development and global citizenship into initial teacher training, as well as continuous professional development and equipping them with pedagogical skills.

#### 5) *Narrowing the digital divide and develop quality open educational resources*

While the COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented challenge for educational systems worldwide, it also brought much needed attention to the importance of connectivity with the digital divide having detrimental effects on access to education and learning outcomes, exacerbating existing equity gaps in education<sup>26</sup>. Few teachers have received the necessary training or professional development to support the shift to online teaching and learning, while a majority of students lack appropriate hardware, software, connectivity and digital skills required to find and use educational content dependent on technology. According to UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank survey data, two-thirds of the surveyed low-income countries used radio and one-third used TV programmes to provide primary education remotely, whereas most high-income countries offered synchronous and asynchronous online learning platforms as a primary option and broadcast technologies as a secondary or ‘backup’ option. Even when distance learning opportunities were offered, their reach was hugely variable. In high-income countries, offerings sometimes reached over 80% of the population, but this fell to less than 50% in low-income countries.<sup>27</sup> In sub-Saharan Africa, 89% of learners do not have access to household computers and 82% lack internet access.<sup>28</sup>

To successfully bridge the digital gap, governments and development partners have to further strengthen cooperation to remove technological barriers by investing in digital infrastructure, lowering connectivity costs, monitoring the affordability of education and protecting the privacy rights of learners and teachers.<sup>29</sup> Bridging the digital divide will also require enhanced investment in quality open educational resources and digital literacy for populations, which are at greatest risk of being left behind. On the other hand, the forced shift to distance learning has revealed that technology cannot easily replace in-person interactions in the physical and social space of schools or teachers who remain central to the educational process.

#### **4. Assessment of the situation regarding the principle of “ensuring no one is left behind”**

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 258 million children, adolescents and youth, or 17 percent of the global primary and secondary student population, were entirely excluded from school with this number growing in sub-Saharan Africa. In low- and middle-income countries, adolescents from the richest-quintile of households are three times more likely than those from the poorest quintile to complete lower secondary school; and of those who complete lower secondary school, learners from the richest households are twice as likely as those from the poorest households to reach minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics<sup>30</sup>. Learners with a disability also face challenges, with children with disabilities in 10 low- and middle-income countries were found to be 19% less likely to achieve minimum proficiency in reading

---

<sup>26</sup> Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development.2020.[The digital transformation of education: connecting schools, empowering learners.](#)

<sup>27</sup> UNESCO. 2020. [UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19 School Closures.](#)

<sup>28</sup> UNESCO. 2020. [Startling digital divides in distance learning emerge. UNESCO Press release.](#) Paris: UNESCO.

<sup>29</sup> [UN Secretary-General’s Policy Brief on Education in the time of COVID-19 and beyond.](#) 2020.

<sup>30</sup> GEMR.2020. [Global education monitoring report, 2020: Inclusion and education: all means all.](#)

than those without disabilities<sup>31</sup>. Reducing inequalities within and among countries in education and beyond consequently remains essential to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda's overarching mission of leaving no one behind (SDG 10).

As highlighted in the previous Section, the COVID-19 crisis glaringly exposed and further exacerbated pre-existing inequalities at the expense of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged populations, who were put at greatest risk of learning loss and drop out.<sup>32</sup> About 40% of low- and lower-middle-income countries have not supported learners at risk of exclusion during this crisis, such as the poor, linguistic minorities, refugees, migrants and learners with disabilities.<sup>33</sup> When schools had to be closed to prevent the spread of the virus, the coverage and effectiveness of remote educational responses has been challenging in all contexts, but students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, with disabilities, as well as indigenous learners and learners in emergencies lacked adequate support structures responding to their specific need for adaptation to a new educational reality. At least 467 million children worldwide –or 31 percent– could not be reached by digital or broadcast learning programmes, and over 70 percent of them lived in rural areas and over three-quarters came from the poorest 40 percent of households.<sup>34</sup>

Evidence from past health crisis, such as Ebola, suggests that in the face of prolonged school closures the risk for girls to be left behind is real, notably due to the increased burden on girls and women to carry out unpaid household and care work, limiting the time available to study at home.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception, having resulted in distinct gendered impacts, placing many girls at heightened exposure to physical, sexual and psychological violence, early and unintended pregnancies, as well as child marriage, by removing access to vital services for protection, nutrition, health and well-being provided in schools and educational institutions<sup>36</sup>. Of the 23.8 million additional children and youth that may drop out or not have access to schooling due to the pandemic's economic impact alone, the largest share of learners at risk of not returning to school are found in South and West Asia (5.9 million) and sub-Saharan Africa (5.3 million). In primary and secondary education, girls are more at risk than boys, resulting in important set back in the field of gender equality and women's empowerment (SDG 5): in South and West Asia, girls in pre-primary education (3.41%) are more likely than boys (3.15%) to be affected while in sub-Saharan Africa, a higher percentage of girls across all education levels is likely to be affected (1.99%), compared to boys (1.90%).

These findings highlight that without targeted remedial action and policy responses, the COVID-19 pandemic may reverse decades of progress in the field of inclusion and equity in education. The pandemic has highlighted the need for an education system based on the fundamental principles of inclusion, equity and non-discrimination. It shows us that children and youth who are most vulnerable to exclusion from – or to marginalization within – education systems face complex and interconnected barriers that have an impact on enrolment, retention, learning and broader health, well-being and protection outcomes. Ensuring the international community meets its commitment of leaving no one behind, in the field of education and beyond, thus calls for up-scaled intersectorial cooperation and joint responses

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> UNICEF. [COVID-19: Are Children Able to Continue Learning during School Closures?](#) New York: UNICEF.

<sup>35</sup> UNFPA. 2020. [State of the World Population Report 2020](#). New York: UNFPA

<sup>36</sup> UNICEF.2020.[Gender equality and COVID-19](#). New York: 2020.

connecting the education, health and social sectors for the dismantling of interconnected patterns of exclusion, discrimination and marginalization.

## **5. Cooperation, measures and commitments in promoting sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic**

As mentioned in Section 3, the unprecedented global social and economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic brought the international education community together, mobilizing resources and expertise, to engage in a series of joint campaigns and initiatives.

UNESCO launched the **Global Education Coalition (GEC)** at the onset of the crisis in March 2020, to support countries in ensuring learning continuity for all during COVID-related school closures and to accompany the safe re-opening of schools. More than 160 members from the UN system, international organizations, civil society, academia and the private sector, rallied together to ensure that **#LearningNeverStops**, providing a unique platform for collaboration and exchange to protect the right to education throughout the crisis and beyond. By breaking down silos and encouraging collaboration beyond traditional education stakeholders, the GEC sent a strong signal on the centrality of multi-sector partnerships for an inclusive, sustainable recovery.

The development and subsequent launch in August 2020 of **the United Secretary-General's Policy Brief on "Education during COVID-19 and beyond"**, with UNESCO as the penholder and the active involvement of 15 sister organizations, further testified to the ambition of multilateral partners to speak with one voice. The Policy Brief puts forward a set of policy recommendations and calls on national authorities and the international community to come together to place education at the forefront of recovery agendas and protect investment in education. The Policy Brief was launched alongside **#SaveOurFuture**, a multi-partner campaign led by ten entities to raise awareness of the global education emergency and urge increased investment to build better, more inclusive and resilient education systems for the future.

Building on the joint multi-stakeholder mobilization brought to life since the outbreak of the global health crisis, UNESCO convened the **extraordinary session of the Global Education Meeting (2020 GEM)**.<sup>37</sup>, resulting in the adoption of the **2020 GEM Declaration** as detailed in Section 3. Beyond the commitment to protect education financing and advance the priority actions identified, the Declaration also recognizes that more resilient, flexible, inclusive and gender-responsive societies and education systems necessitate up-scaled cooperation, coherence and alignment among stakeholders and partners. As a result, the 2020 GEM Declaration also paved the way for **strengthening the global education cooperation mechanism**. UNESCO was entrusted to design and lead a collective reflection and consultation process to enhance the global education architecture and "develop a proposal to strengthen the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee to be able to effectively steer and coordinate the global education cooperation mechanism in line with the Education 2030 Framework for Action and in the post-COVID-19 context", to be adopted at the extraordinary session of the 2021 Global Education Meeting (2021 GEM)<sup>38</sup>.

---

<sup>37</sup> Convened online on 20 and 22 October 2020 (technical and high-level segment respectively)

<sup>38</sup> Paragraph 11 of the [2020 GEM Declaration](#)

## 6. Conclusions – building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development

*Preventing a learning crisis from becoming a generational catastrophe requires urgent action from all. Education is not only a fundamental human right. It is an enabling right with direct impact on the realization of all other human rights. It is a global common good and a primary driver of progress across all 17 Sustainable Development Goals as a bedrock of just, equal, inclusive peaceful societies. When education systems collapse, peace, prosperous and productive societies cannot be sustained (UN Secretary-General's Policy Brief, *Education in the time of COVID-19 and beyond*, p. 2)*

The COVID-19 pandemic was a wake-up call – that the world is fragile and interdependent. While it has affected every country, community, family and individual, the crisis has been affecting disproportionately the vulnerable and disadvantaged, thus exacerbating pre-existing inequalities. Facing the dire reality that has imperilled fundamental human rights, including the right to education, and the risks that hamper the progress made towards SDGs and efforts to leave no one behind, the international community unlocked innovations and inspired new inter-sectoral partnerships to place education and lifelong learning at the centre of the recovery and the transformation towards more inclusive, safe and sustainable societies.

Before the pandemic, 258 million children and youth of primary- and secondary-school age were out of school, and 53 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries could not read and understand a simple story by the end of primary school; the figure was as high as 80 percent in low-income countries. The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic may push an additional 24 million children and youth in pre-primary to tertiary education age out of school, while, without resolute and coordinated action to compensate learning loss due to school closures, the learning loss may become permanent and result in a loss of trillions of dollars in earnings over time for this generation of learners. The UN Secretary-General thus urged the world to take urgent action to prevent “a learning crisis from becoming a generational catastrophe” through the following policy measures:

- 1) Suppress transmission of the virus and plan thoroughly for school reopenings;
- 2) Protect education financing and coordinate for impact;
- 3) Build resilient education systems for equitable and sustainable development;
- 4) Reimagine education and accelerate change in teaching and learning.

The **extraordinary session of the Global Education Meeting** (2020 GEM) provided a new impetus to renew the international community's commitment to 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its SDG 4 “to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”, in order to transform education to drive sustainable development, leaving no one behind. In this spirit, world leaders agree that we need 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, with particular focus on the most vulnerable and marginalized<sup>39</sup>. In the 2020 GEM Declaration, the international community agreed on the following priority actions and to monitor the implementation of these commitments till the end of 2021:

- 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-

---

<sup>39</sup> [2020 GEM Declaration](#)

focussed 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.

UNESCO and its partners, together with the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee, will assess the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on progress towards the achievement of the SDG 4 and other education-related targets.

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 in the context of the decade of action. A dedicated multi-stakeholder Working Group was established and tasked to envision improved arrangements for global leadership and more efficient coordination of partners and elaborate a concrete proposal for a reformed global education cooperation mechanism to be adopted at the Global Education Meeting planned for July 2021. UNESCO launched an inclusive consultation process across regions and constituencies, allowing to identify key weaknesses of the current system, as well as concrete strategies for improvement. In the lead up to the 2021 GEM, regional and constituency consultations will take place to create linkages, rethink patterns of action and interaction, create a sense of ownership and foster a shared vision of a transformed global education architecture. The reform of the global education cooperation mechanism is driven by the following key principles:

- Universal and holistic nature of the SDG 4-Educaton 2030;
- country-centred cooperation while connecting country-regional-global levels;
- greater simplification, efficiency and coherence among actors and programmes;
- better policy steering for increased education financing and aligned resource allocation;
- greater accountability through more robust data and evidence, as well as the use of benchmark indicators and regional oversight; and
- stronger inter-sectoral collaboration and partnerships.

Leveraging the multilateral, cross-sectoral collaboration galvanized during the COVID-19 response, an improved, more efficient cooperation mechanism will ensure synergies, avoid

overlap and collectively advocate for the transformation of education systems and progress acceleration towards the SDG 4-Education 2030 Agenda in the COVID-19 context and beyond, and towards the 2030 Agenda in its entirety.