

COVID-19

Impact of the Pandemic and its Consequences for Education

Executive Summary





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For more information about the issues mentioned in this document, please get in touch with:
educos@educos.org or media@educos.org

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Introduction

COVID-19 has impacted us all. In one way or another we have seen how in a year, our lives have completely

changed, in some cases, too much. It has affected us as people, as families, as communities, as societies and as a planet. It has changed our relationships, how we relate to each other and to nature, and of course it has also attacked our projects, our educational projects in particular, in the world.

Experiences from the past have shown us that emergency and crisis situations have a more profound and lasting effect on the most vulnerable people and this pandemic is no exception. Its impact, either from infection or as a result of the crisis it brings, is profoundly uneven.

COVID-19 has accentuated and deepened inequalities which already existed, exacerbating the poverty pandemic and increasing the number of children and adolescents who find themselves in a socially disadvantaged situation.

From Bangladesh to El Salvador, from Niger to India, and of course in Spain, we can see how this virus threatens all the efforts that have been made to support the most vulnerable communities. The pandemic forces us to be more flexible and innovative in order to have more of an impact, but also to double efforts in the field, because the exceptional situation experienced in recent months has exacerbated pre-existing threats, problems and situations, such as child marriage, gang recruitment, child labour, trafficking and increased child poverty and exclusion, among others. The virus has destroyed the social ladder offered by education and has accelerated inequalities and the lack of opportunities that threaten the future of children and adolescents who already had everything against them before the pandemic.



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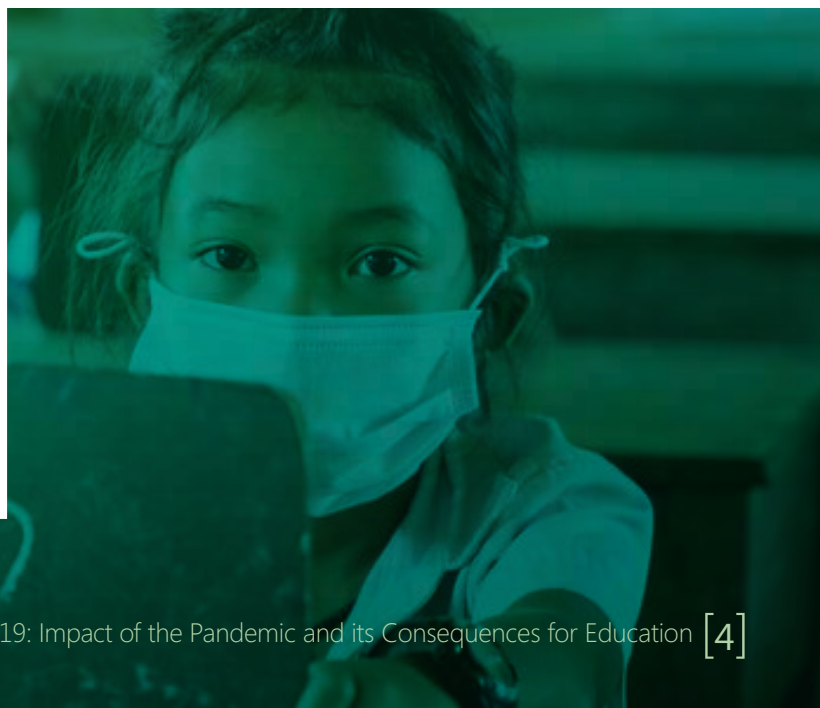
Impact on Education

Education is much more than acquiring academic content, it is a fundamental tool for teaching values, generating committed, supportive and productive citizens who contribute to their societies and, additionally, it is considered a catalyst for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), for social cohesion and for better economic performance in societies.

In all the countries Educo works in, schools and the right to education are linked to the fulfilment of other rights, like protection or nutrition, and to a qualitative increase in the wellbeing of children and adolescents. This is one of the reasons why **we defend and promote in-person education.**

Education is a tool, or should be, for breaking the cycle of poverty, an essential mechanism for facilitating social mobility between generations and reducing inequality, but to make this a reality it is essential to re-think educational models based on **equity, quality, free education and inclusion.** **If urgent measures are not taken to re-think these models based on these four pillars, the number of children and adolescents excluded from education will increase. The consequence will be a deepening of inequalities regarding access to and the quality of learning that already existed before the pandemic, more segregation, a significant increase in failure and dropout rates and an irreversible increase in poverty, especially child and youth poverty, and social inequality.**

The latest available data show that globally, 85% of students complete their primary education, but this percentage falls rapidly when we focus on countries with low per capita GDP, with an average of 56% of students completing primary education, only 28% completing secondary education and 15% completing post-compulsory education.





The measures taken to limit the spread of COVID-19 - the closure of schools, remote learning, etc. - have forced radical changes in educational models all over the world, and have also exacerbated the situation of vulnerable groups of children who have found it more difficult to benefit from the solutions adopted by governments to provide continuity in learning.

At Educo we have seen how teaching conditions during the pandemic have made it more difficult to overcome socio-economic, gender, geographic, linguistic and other barriers already suffered by many groups. Segregation and discrimination are frequent problems in schools all over the world. In 25% of countries, laws define separate places of education for people with disabilities,

a percentage that rises to 40% in Asia and Latin America. In OECD countries, more than two thirds of immigrant students study in schools where at least half of the students come from other countries. Spain is at the head of European countries, in fifth place, with the highest level educational segregation on socio-economic grounds.

On the other hand, we cannot forget the role played by teachers. Despite the pressure they have endured, we must recognise the immense effort they have made to continue teaching in this extraordinarily difficult situation, but we must also admit that the success of any educational model will depend on pedagogical innovation, digitalisation and, indispensably, more and better training for teachers.

During most of 2020, education has not been a priority. Governments in many countries have not known how to put the essential resources and tools for guaranteeing this fundamental right, necessary for the development of any society, any country. The risk in the short and medium term is an increase in the educational divide and in failure rates and early school dropouts, and in the long term it will have an impact on the model of society we are building.

Remote Education and the Digital Divide

The continuity of education has come up against multiple challenges, ranging from the lack of access to basic infrastructure to the lack of technological, curricular, pedagogical and relational tools necessary for its implementation.

UNICEF estimates that, worldwide, at least 31% of children and adolescents (463 million) were unable to receive remote education. Of those, 72% live in the poorest households in their countries and most of them live in rural areas. A study by the UNESCO Statistics Institute and the Teacher Task Force showed that 826 million students do not have a computer at home and 56 million live in areas that are not covered by mobile networks. On average, only 33% of children aged 3 to 17 have access to the internet at home. In Spain, almost 700,000 students in 2020 did not have a computer and 9.2% of low-income

households with dependent children did not have access to the internet.

As a result, many of the problems and inequalities that have existed for decades have intensified, not only because of the lack of access to technology, but also because of the motivation of students, the quality of the education they receive and the inequality of opportunities.

The digital divide is also the educational and social divide. Bridging the digital divide in education goes beyond introducing educational technologies. It is important to take into account that technology should not take precedence over pedagogy. **In-person education must always take precedence.** It is important to understand that the digitalisation of education does not mean a remote learning model, but getting to know and acknowledging the opportunities that the virtual tools offer the educational model.

To achieve this, schools must be equipped with the necessary infrastructure and technology, teachers must be trained and taught, and access to these resources must be universal and guaranteed for all students. But in order to bridge the digital divide, it is necessary to bridge other divides, not only the access divide



(having or not having an internet connection and technological devices), or the divide in the preparation of teachers and schools.

The usage divide (time spent and the quality of that time) indicates the inequality between those who take the most qualitative advantage and those who only know how to make easy use of technology and content, closely linked to the divide in family attitudes towards accompanying their children's learning. The commitment of families to education is essential at all times, but even more so with remote learning. However, many parents are absent most

of the time, often because the priority is ensuring the necessary income for maintaining the family, or they do not have a high enough level of education or technological knowledge to teach them how to use the educational platforms, help them adapt to the new model and understand the educational content.

It is necessary to provide children and families with digital literacy tools and ensure a protective and caring environment where critical thinking can be developed in order to use the internet safely, responsibly and with an impact on student learning.

Education Beyond Schools

There has also been an impact on non-formal education, which is so important for children's development. The closure of schools has made more visible their educational role in relation to emotional accompaniment, school support and the bond between children, their families and the schools themselves. As one of the Educo partner organisations in Spain told us, the "loss of routines, timetables and the relaxing of the rules and lack of adequate spaces for studying, the lack of motivation for learning and the low capacity of parents for supporting the educational process will have a strong impact on the academic success of our children".

We have seen, in the 14 countries where we are present, that educational inequality has grown over the last year. But not only in the formal sector, the most vulnerable students had fewer learning opportunities in non-formal and informal settings, increasing the education divide compared to students from more economically advantaged families.

The closure of schools was combined with the difficulty of participating in other non-formal educational spaces where children learn by playing, exploring, interacting and relating with their peers and other adults. Guaranteeing this is essential for improving the wellbeing of children through socio-emotional education, the importance of which



has emerged strongly during the periods of strict confinement around the world.

The summer period is a time of relaxation, leisure and free time for children, but it is also a time for learning and development. Research shows that the educational delay that occurs in pupils during the summer holidays corresponds to one month's

learning during the school year. In Spain, for example, the 2020 summer holidays have been yet another cause of deepening inequalities. Children and adolescents in vulnerable situations have seen their only possibility of “getting out of the house in

summer” disappear because of the pandemic, finding themselves in a situation similar to a confinement after confinement, with a lack of relationships, without quality time for leisure, and without learning and living alongside their peers.

Impact on the Wellbeing and Participation of Children

During the past 12 months, there have been many debates involving the rights and wellbeing of children. How can we close schools? How do we continue with remote learning? How do we go back to school? Are children major spreaders of the virus? Do we close parks and limit their leisure activities?

We have all expressed our opinions, the educational community, teachers, trade unions, parents, political representatives, scientists and doctors, but where are the children and adolescents? Put simply, they weren't involved. Despite being one of the main collateral victims of COVID-19, children and adolescents have been made invisible.

Listening to children and providing them with the necessary and appropriate spaces for participation is not an act of condescension; it is an obligation for all countries and their governments and a duty for all societies. We cannot protect children and adolescents without changing the way we see them. We must recognise them as rights holders and as people who can contribute huge social value, be change agents

with ideas and who know better than anyone the problems that affect them.

Active listening and child participation are key tools for discovering the emotional state of children and therefore guaranteeing their wellbeing. If this pandemic has shown anything, it is that mental health will be another major casualty, and children are not left out of that impact.



3 Multidimensional Impact on Education

A quality education does not just mean access to more

opportunities, it also helps to guarantee the fulfilment of other rights:

Nutrition

Last year 370 million children from 143 countries stopped benefitting from school meal programmes, school canteens that helped them to have a healthy and balanced diet. Guaranteeing the balanced diet needed for children's development and learning is essential. Which is why Educo, during confinement, set up emergency programs to distribute food parcels and cash transfer programs for families.

In Spain for example, Educo adapted its School Meal Grants Program, reaching almost 6000 children and their families with the emergency program Meal Grants at Home, which had the invaluable support of almost 200 schools and 45 social organisations throughout Spain.



Protection

Schools provide a safe space which protects children and adolescents from violence and other risks, especially in certain contexts. The current situation is depriving millions of children and young people of this protection, so they are now in a situation of increased vulnerability and at risk from different types of violence.

Social protection systems are failing and as a consequence we see worrying upward trends

with regard to **child labour, social and domestic violence, child marriage and child pregnancy**, among other violations of their rights. Situations that in most cases expel them from the education system, condemning them to poverty and exclusion.

At Educo we have seen how, for example, COVID-19 is having a devastating effect on young and teenage girls in India. Child marriages in Maharashtra state have increased by 78% and in Latur cases have doubled. Not only is it forcing them to drop out of school and work or marry, but it also makes it difficult for them to access reproductive health facilities and services, putting their health at risk by increasing the risk of early pregnancy.



Migration and Forced Displacement

The focus should also be on people on the move, displaced people and refugees, among whom children and adolescents are highly represented. An estimated 30 million are under the age of 18 and are undoubtedly among the populations most

affected by COVID-19. The health risk due to the conditions in which many of them live is enormous and the limitations on movement imposed in many countries make their situation extremely complicated.

Guaranteeing the right to education for these children becomes a complex and difficult mission to ensure.

Educo Mali has been working for a long time to guarantee education for children in the regions Ségou and Mopti, with many people displaced by

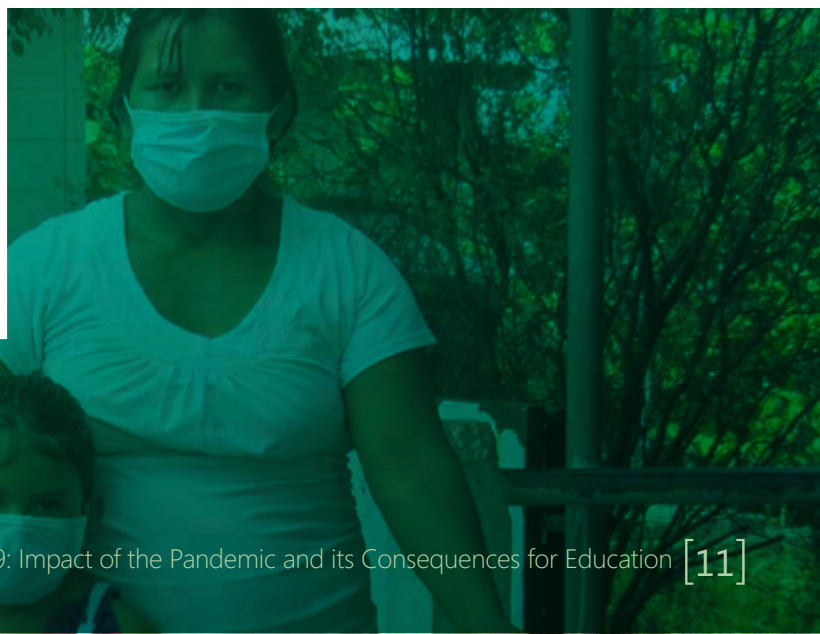
violence. In February 2021, 2200 schools, which were attended by more than 300,000 children, remained closed due to insecurity problems. The Educo remote learning program using the radio is helping to reduce the impact of a crisis which has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Care and Dignified Lives

Many families in which adults continue to work are forced to leave the children in their care home alone, which, in addition to posing certain risks to their protection, has a direct impact on their wellbeing and education. Among the students who may be left behind during and after this pandemic are children from single-parent families, most of whom live with their mothers. According to the last Living Conditions Survey by the INE (Spanish National Statistics Institute) in 2019, 4 out of every 10 single parent families are at risk from poverty. The challenge of balancing work and childcare creates stress that has a direct impact on children's lives.

However, if members of these families (specifically single-parent families, but in general all families at risk of poverty or social exclusion) stop working to care for their children, this can lead to a reduction or loss of wages and income and lower productivity, resulting in financial losses for the families.

At Educo we have always defended that children are citizens of the present and not just the future, and we are concerned about what we will ask of them in the future, such as responsibility, productivity or solidarity, when in the present they are growing up alone and lacking in resources, relationships, care and quality time with their families.



Lessons Learned

The educational situation created by the pandemic has made clear the need to re-think EDUCATION as an instrument to reduce inequalities in access and quality of learning. It is not a new challenge, but it is more profound and urgent.

Education is fundamentally a relational process and schools represent spaces in which children are shaped, grow as people, and learn values which are the pillars of equity, democracy and justice. Remote learning and, in many cases, in-person education, need to consider how to address these pillars with certain assurances.

COVID-19 has reminded society of the central role that education has in the development of people and the building of more sustainable, democratic and fair societies, but it has also brought to the table the major weaknesses of education systems in guaranteeing equal access to education.

In order to guarantee the right to inclusive and quality education it is necessary to look for a



multi-dimensional response: it is not enough to take action in the field of education, but it is also necessary to ensure that needs are met in related areas such as employment, housing, social services or nutrition.

The educational crisis has opened a window of opportunity to re-think education: we need to reflect more deeply on the causes that lead to disengagement, failure and dropping out of school. This represents a failure not just for the students, but for the education system and societies themselves.

This pandemic must serve to design solutions that do not leave anyone behind, that reach people excluded from education even before the pandemic. It is an opportunity to progress towards more resilient education models and ones which are better adapted to the learning needs in each country and community.

As well as prioritising the health emergency, we **must give children the attention they deserve, make them visible and listen to them** because children have suffered the impact of the pandemic in a devastating way. **We need to see students as actors within education and take their opinions into account, because that is where the strategies will come from, the hows and the answers for the construction of educational spaces.**

In order to provide inclusive quality education for all, it is essential to intensify efforts to reduce child poverty and exclusion and to combat violations of children's rights, **eliminate practices like child labour, child marriages, and all types of violence and acts which put their security and wellbeing in danger**, and are often reasons for dropping out of school.

Educo Proposals for Re-thinking Education Post-COVID-19

We have to avoid the collapse of the public education system, prioritising a **quality, equitable and transforming education**. A review of each country's educational model is needed, taking into account the following:

- 1 Education is a right and must be a political and social priority.** States must guarantee it through adequate policies and budgets. Governments must mobilise resources and increase budgets for education in real terms and not relative ones, because maintaining spending rates will be insufficient given the fall in countries' GDP.
- 2 Priority must be given to the most vulnerable students,** with more inclusive and equitable education policies. Specific measures need to be taken to reintegrate into the education system those children who have been out of school for a long period of time and the promotion of educational alternatives for those who will not be able to reintegrate into the system.
- 3 Children and adolescents are rights holders and their interests must be more present and they must participate in deliberation and decision-making processes in the political agenda.** Their desires and opinions must be taken into account, by offering them safe and relevant participation spaces.
- 4 Face-to-face education must be prioritised,** making the necessary adjustments to maintain sanitary safety measures. Schools fulfil a socialising function that goes beyond the learning of content.
- 5 Bridging the digital divide in the education sector is not just introducing technologies, it also includes taking into account that technology must not take precedence over pedagogy and must not leave anyone behind. Bridging the digital divide must be seen as a long-term investment. Information and communication technology must be fully incorporated into educational practice, but ensuring equality of access, use and competencies.**

