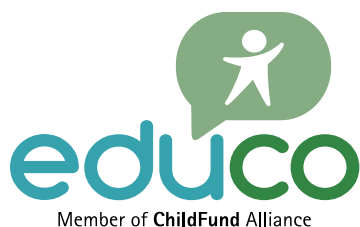


COVID-19

Impact of the Pandemic and its Consequences for Education

Full Report





COVID-19: Impact of the Pandemic and its Consequences for Education. Diagnosis after a year of the pandemic

May 2021 - Second edition

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Content

Presentation	5
Acknowledgements	8
Introduction	9
COVID-19: an illness and multiple crises	10
Dropping out of school: a multidimensional process	14
An interval in child protection	27
An emergency cure to save education	28
Remote learning: an obstacle course	31
Diverse realities	37
What have we learned?	56
Looking to the future	58
List of people interviewed	62
Consulted sources	63



Presentation



Pilar Orenes

Educo Executive Director

The COVID-19 pandemic is proving to be a traumatic experience in all countries. The global population feels threatened by COVID-19, an illness which makes no distinctions as to nationality, sex, age, ethnic origin or socio-economic status. However, people's capacity to withstand its impact is not the same. 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.

A year has passed since the first wave of the pandemic happened and more than 1600 million students had to simultaneously abandon their classrooms and continue their education remotely. The **unexpected change to the educational model** had an immediate effect on the learning of millions of students, increasing **the risk of academic failure and early dropout**. Even more important than the short-term effect on the current education cycle is the long-term impact of the crisis, given that education is a fundamental pillar for the development of individuals and democratic societies.

In the last year, it has become clear that education is still far from being the ladder that enables social mobility and reduces inequalities. During the large-scale closure of schools, 433 million students were unable to benefit from remote learning due to a lack of necessary tools. Many others did not have the necessary personal and family conditions to pursue their studies on an equal footing. These **newly excluded children** joined the 250 million out-of-school children who were already out of school before this crisis.

Beyond the direct impact on learning, the social distancing measures have affected other aspects fundamental to development, such as nutrition, health, safety and living conditions for children. Children stopped benefitting from the protective space that schools offer against violations of their rights. Phenomena like **child labour, forced marriage, social and domestic violence and exclusion** have increased as a consequence of confinement and other measures, inevitable from a health perspective, but nonetheless damaging from a human development perspective.

The pandemic has highlighted, once again, **the limited participation of children and adolescents in the decision-making processes that affect their lives**. It is necessary to give children more attention, listen to them, take their opinions into account in the decisions that affect them and place them at the centre of public policies.

In this crisis context, and one year after the large-scale closure of schools, Educo wants to offer an **x-ray of the impact the pandemic is having on education, protection and the general wellbeing of children**, because the first step to achieving change is making society aware of the problem. Our analysis proposes a holistic view because we understand education as a basic right that enables other rights.

The contents of this publication are mainly based on the accumulated experience of Educo over the years and the experience of almost one thousand people who work for the organisation in the field and try to improve the situation of the most vulnerable children, as well as interviews with experts in education and social work, who have shared their views about the challenges we face in the post-COVID era.

In this document Educo invites those who are responsible for child protection and wellbeing to make the most of the lessons learned during the pandemic and the experiences of the last year in order to **guarantee a free, inclusive and equitable quality education, so that no one is left behind**.

The social, economic, health and educational crisis resulting from COVID-19 has put at risk many of the enormous achievements made since the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* was adopted 30 years ago. It has also reduced the possibilities of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. **It is a global crisis that needs a global solution** because the future of Humanity is at stake.



Acknowledgements

The data and information presented in this document have been taken from databases and **publications by Educo NGO, international organisations, academic research, surveys and studies by public and private institutions.**

It has also drawn on information gathered by Educo in the different countries it operates in and valuable comments and analysis from the **experts in the 14 countries** the NGO is present in.

Lastly, it has benefitted from the knowledge and experience of people who specialise in the issues featured in this document, among them, **representatives from the education sector, academia and associations.**

Educo would like to thank all the people whose names appear in the annex for participating in the series of interviews that have made the writing of this publication possible.



Introduction



The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as having a high human cost, has plunged all countries into a **socio-economic crisis that may be felt for generations to come**. It is a crisis that affects the learning, social abilities and physical and mental health of millions of children and adolescents (C&A). **The pandemic is exacerbating the inequalities that already existed and threatens to destroy the progress achieved** for fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) which all countries were committed to for 2030.

The measures for limiting the pandemic have forced radical changes in education models all over the world. The situation has had a direct negative impact on the academic performance of children and adolescents. It also led to the **exclusion of vulnerable groups of children** who, because they live in conditions of poverty, are migrants, belong to ethnic minorities, have a disability or need special attention, have been unable to benefit from the solutions adopted by governments and institutions to give continuity to their learning.

The risk in the short and medium term is **an increase in the educational gap and in failure rates and early school dropouts**. The adverse effects of this crisis will also be seen in the long term, because education is considered a catalyst for achieving other sustainable development goals. Among them are reducing poverty and inequality, improving health, economic growth and job opportunities or peacekeeping.

Education is much more than acquiring certain academic content at school. **School is a space for learning and protection** in a broad sense, where children and adolescents are trained in values that are fundamental for social cohesion, such as equality and coexistence. Therefore, its role is fundamental for developing as people and contributing to democratic societies in the future.

COVID-19: an illness and multiple crises



COVID-19 affects children and adolescents in at least three ways: **infection and the possible effects on their physical and mental health; worsening of the socio-economic conditions of their families; and the interruption of essential services** that protect children's rights.

While we will need time to find out the exact magnitude and impact of the pandemic, there is a consensus that it has caused a health crisis, which has overwhelmed the capacity of health systems around the world to cope; an economic recession, which will have dire effects on public

and private sector financing and threatens to impoverish millions of families; and a global economic downturn, which will have dire effects on the financing of the public and private sectors and threatens to impoverish millions of families, and finally, **an educational crisis, which has made education systems more fragile and has exacerbated inequalities in learning.** The effects of these three crises are particularly harmful for the most vulnerable groups of the population as well as the repercussions on the socio-emotional health of children and adolescents.

The health crisis

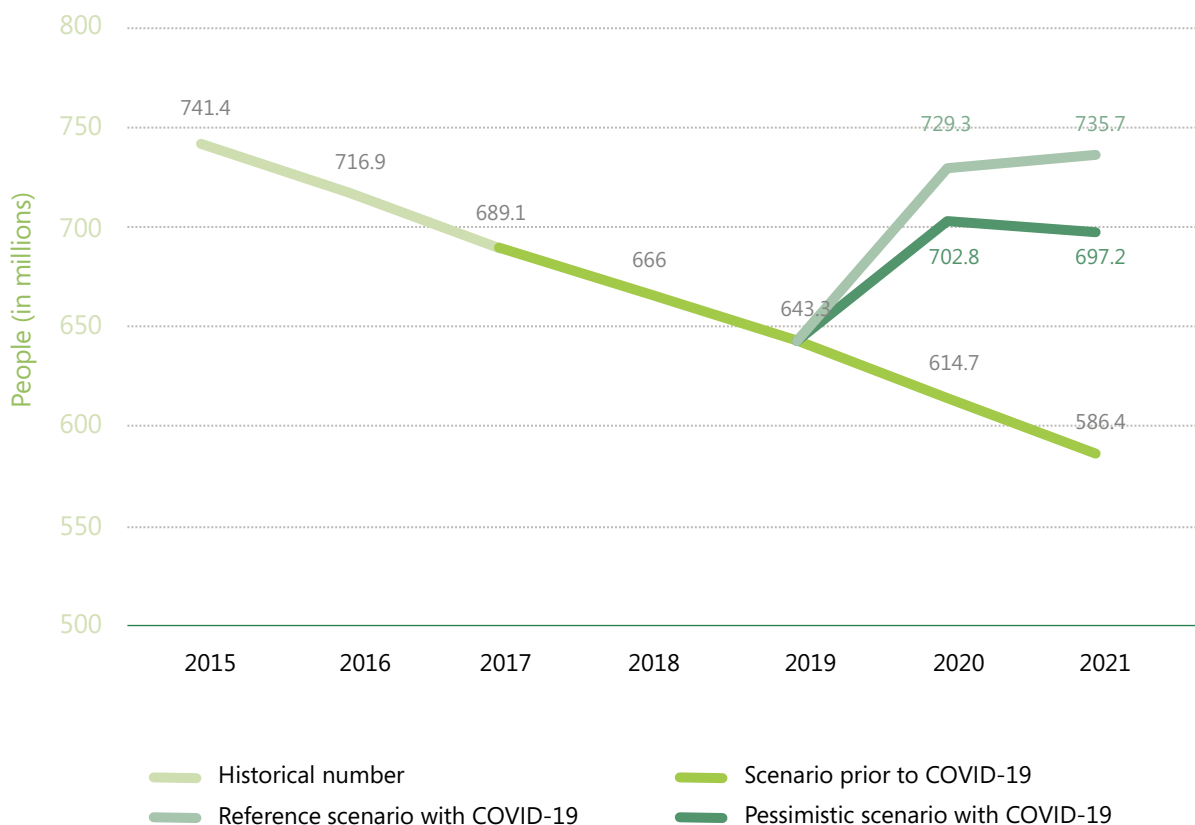
One year after the start of the pandemic, the number of people infected with COVID-19 worldwide already exceeded 100 million, of whom more than two million had died as a result of this type of coronavirus. Children and young people under 20 represented 11% of confirmed cases, according to an analysis carried out by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF in November 2020 with data from 87 countries).

Vaccine development efforts have yielded results in a timeframe never seen before. However, the immunisation of the world's population poses major challenges, including the need to produce the vaccine in large quantities in a short time frame, the availability of vaccines

for developing countries, the logistics of inoculation and the emergence of new, more contagious variants of the virus.

The health emergency and the **social distancing measures adopted to contain the pandemic have influenced the deterioration of other indicators**. These include vaccination rates against preventable diseases, whose decline is expected to have other effects, such as an increase in child mortality. UNICEF for example, calculates that malnutrition could cause the death of two million under five year olds in a period of 12 months.

Projected increase in extreme poverty as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic



Source: Blake and Wadhwa (2020).

The socioeconomic crisis

In addition to its high social and health costs, confinement and other measures imposed to limit the spread of COVID-19 have led to a global recession, the interruption of business activities, and the closure of many companies with a consequent increase in unemployment and loss of household income.

After decades of progress in the fight against poverty all over the world, COVID-19 has reversed this trend for the first time. The World Bank estimates that between 88 and 115 million people, depending on the scenarios, were added in 2020 to those already in extreme poverty, i.e. living on less than \$1.9 a day. For its part, the United Nations (UN) has warned that in 2020, between 42 and 66 million children could join the 386 million already in this critical situation.

Social disengagement measures have affected the provision of essential services, such as food distribution, and exacerbated many of the problems faced by large sections of the vulnerable population. Before the

pandemic, 690 million people (almost 9% of the global population) suffered from malnutrition and 2 billion did not have regular access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food. The COVID-19 crisis is exacerbating these scarcities, so that **by the end of 2020, the number of people affected by food insecurity had increased by 121 million.**

An effect of the school closures, related to the above, is the **suspension of the supply of school meals.** This service is part of one of the interventions that has helped improve the health and nutrition of children, alongside handwashing and access to safe health facilities. It has also served as **an incentive for children to attend and stay in school.**

A report published in May 2020 by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) alerted that there were already reversals in basic elements of human development, calculated as a combination of factors related to education, health and living conditions.

The education crisis

When the pandemic first reached a peak in March and April 2020, school closures were the emergency measure adopted to maintain the social distancing that was expected to limit the spread of infection. **The closure simultaneously removed almost 1.6 billion students out of classrooms** and forced an abrupt change from a face-to-face to a remote or partially remote model of education, adopted **without the proper tools, methodologies and preparation to implement it, or the opinion of the students about it.**

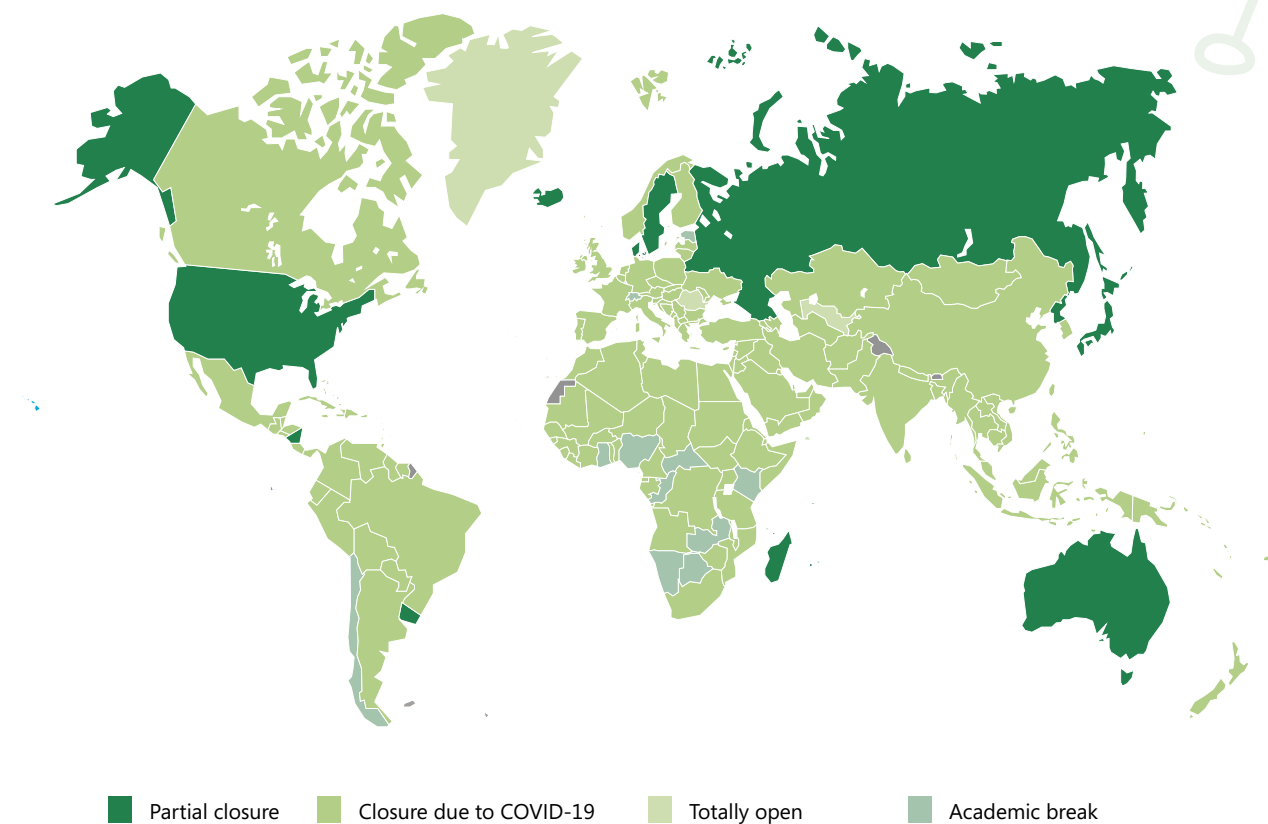
One year after the start of the pandemic, more than 800 million students were still subject to measures that have radically altered their education, either by the total closure of schools (in 31 countries) or by schools opting for a reduced, part-time timetable (in 48 countries). It is estimated that in 2020 schools were closed for an average

of 3.5 months, but in some cases students have been out of the classroom for a year.

One of the concerns in the education sector is that the economic crisis and loss of tax revenues will lead to the prioritisation of economic recovery and health in government budgets, to the detriment of child protection and education, where resources were already insufficient. This would not only mean that spending to meet the Sustainable Development Goals for education will not increase, but it could even go down. UNESCO estimates that the sector's budgets will go down by at least 21 billion dollars as a result of the decline in countries' gross domestic products (GDP).

The impact of the pandemic has reopened the debate on **the role of education as a driver of both individual**

Schools closed at the peak of the pandemic



Source: (UNESCO, 2021a).

1631 million students
affected

1478 million students
affected by total closures

84.5% of the total
number of enrolled students

More than 150,000 students
in partial closure situation

165 countries
with schools closed nationally

and socio-economic development, and reducing existing inequalities. This debate **questions the ability of education systems to reach all children** around the world and to build more cohesive and equitable societies.

Dropping out of school: a multidimensional process



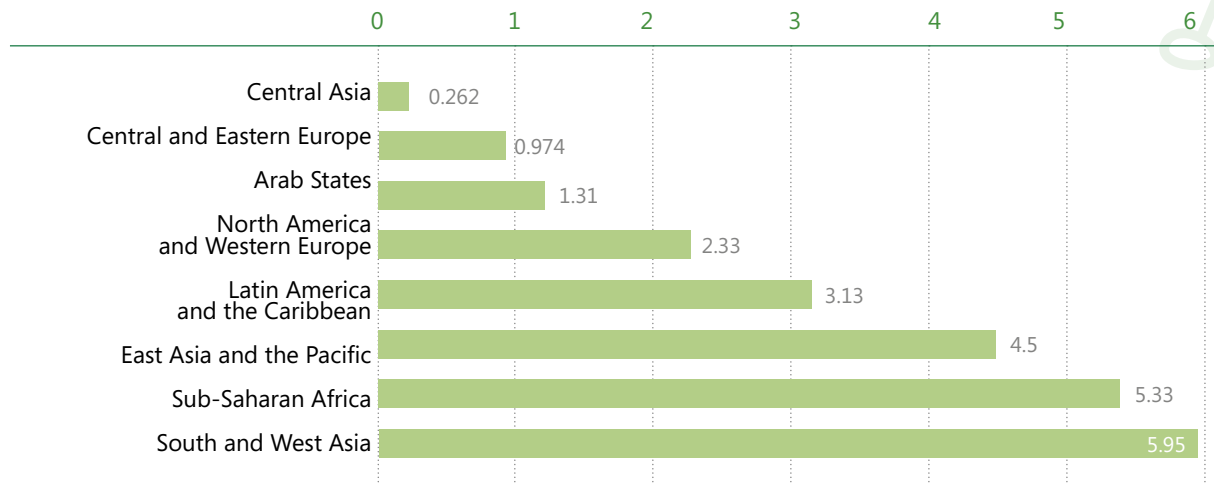
Dropping out of school is a multidimensional process in which, often, it is difficult to distinguish between the causes and the consequences. The former traditionally include academic performance itself, child labour and forced displacement of families. The latter include learning deficits, nutritional deficits and missed opportunities. But there are factors, like **violence, early pregnancy and child marriage**, that lead to dropping out of school as well as often appearing as a consequence of dropping out of school.

Past experience has shown that, after a health emergency, not all students return to school when the situation returns to normal and many simply drop out for good. In a context of an economic crisis, **the risk of an increase in the number of young people neither studying nor working (NEET) is considerable**, as is the risk of a reversal of progress in terms of equality and inclusion in education.

And although the idea has taken hold that NEETs do not study or work by choice, they are a population group that has been hit particularly hard by this pandemic and find themselves in an undesirable situation.

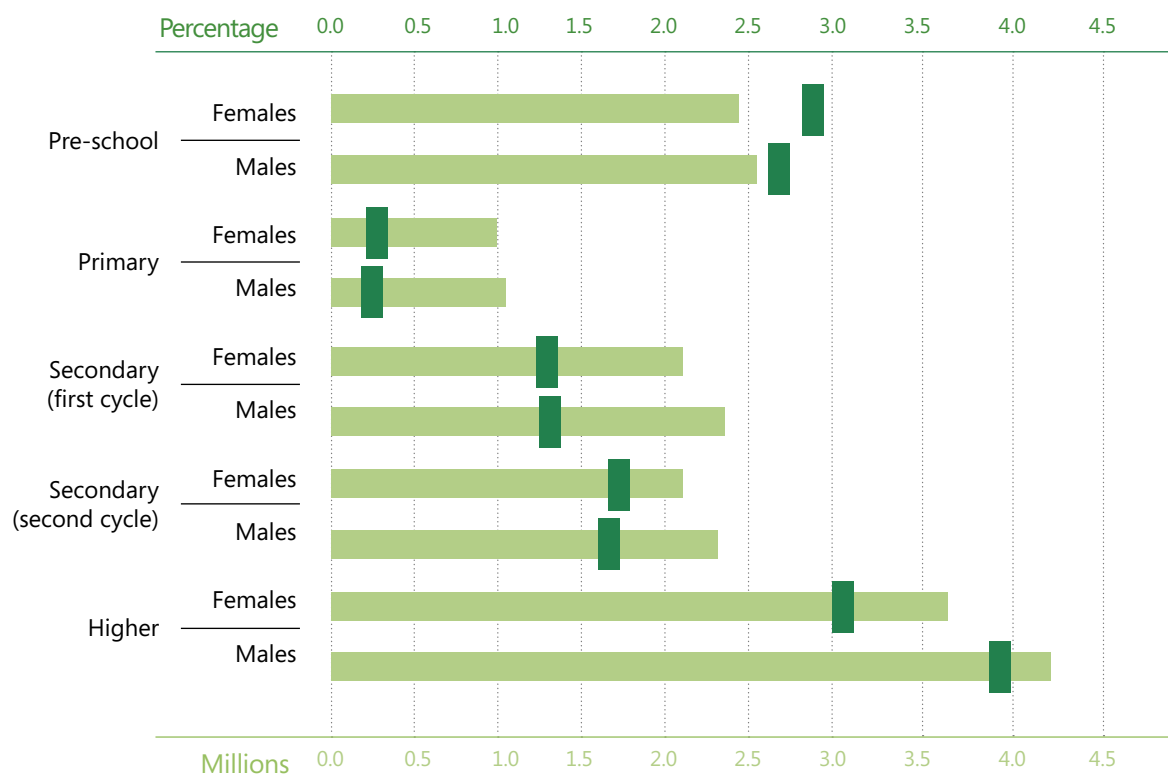
Before the pandemic, more than 250 million school-age children and adolescents did not attend school. According to estimates by UNESCO, around 24 million students at all levels, from preschool to university, ran the risk of not returning to their studies. Of those, 10.9 million were studying at primary and secondary level and of those, 5.2 million were girls. The largest proportion of possible dropouts (almost half) referred to countries in south and west Asia (5.9 million) and Sub-Saharan Africa (5.3 million).

Distribution of school dropouts by region



Source: (UNESCO, 2020a)

Students at risk from school dropout



Source: (UNESCO, 2020a).

Academic performance



Low academic grades, which may lead to having to repeat a school year, motivation, attitude and parents', teachers'

and pupils' expectations of education are often factors in **dropping out of school**. Academic performance and outcomes are influenced by the **economic, social and family circumstances of children and adolescents**, as well as by the child's own **physical, nutritional, health, cognitive, psychological and emotional state**.

The latest available data show that globally 85% of pupils complete their primary education, but this figure falls with higher levels of education, with 73% at lower secondary level and only 49% at upper secondary level. Rates are particularly reduced in low per capita GDP countries, with averages of 56%, 28% and 15% respectively.

Repeating school years, which is practised worldwide, is more common in low-income countries and more frequent in lower secondary than in primary school. Learning assessments through testing at the end of a cycle, which is also an entry requirement for many schools, and the need to repeat a school year due to poor performance, has raised questions about whether this is leading to the exclusion of less successful pupils and has highlighted the need to **review systems to cater for pupils with different backgrounds, circumstances and aptitudes**.

Child labour

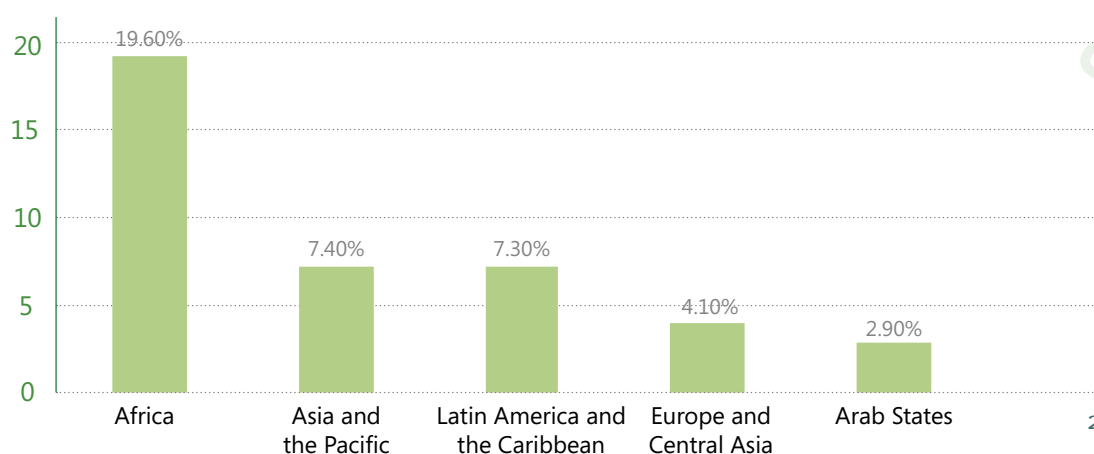
Child labour is often caused by a combination of factors: **poverty, lack of employment opportunities** for parents, **social marginalisation** and even **social norms** that tolerate this practice. Not only is it a violation of children's rights, but it also drastically reduces the chances for new generations to break out of the **vicious circle of poverty** in which millions of vulnerable families live.

A major global achievement in the last two decades was the reduction of child labour for 94 million children, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO). However, given the critical situation in which an

increasing number of households find themselves as a result of COVID-19, **many students are being forced to drop out of school to take up domestic work or contribute to the family income**.

Before the pandemic, **a total of 152 million children** (88 million boys and 64 million girls) **worked**, often putting their **physical integrity** at risk. Almost half of them carried out the **worst forms of child labour, being victims of modern slavery, trafficking, forced labour, military recruitment and other abuses**. Before the pandemic, 1.2 million children were trafficked; at least 1 million were

Child and adolescent labour by age, activity and region



Source: (OIT, 2017)

sexually exploited, most of them girls; 5.7 million were trafficked into debt bondage or other forms of slavery; and some 300,000 had been recruited by armed groups, according to UNICEF and ILO data.

At present, there are no global projections of the evolution of child labour, but there are indications of **an increase in several countries**, including Mali, Guatemala and India. Experts in child labour have calculated that a 1% increase in poverty leads to a 0.7% increase in child labour.

Social and domestic violence

Forms of violence against children are multiple, occurring in all socio-economic groups and ranging from violence outside the home, at the hands of criminal gangs and their own peers, to violence by older caregivers. Physical, sexual, emotional abuse and neglect cause lifelong damage to health and wellbeing, and can lead to associated difficulties such as behavioural problems, violence, drug and alcohol use or high-risk sexual behaviour.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that every year, one in two children between the ages of two and 17 experience some form of violence. UNICEF estimates that approximately three out of four children aged two to four years old receive violent disciplinary punishments from the people who should be taking care of them; half of all students aged 13 to 15 experience violence in and around school; and one in three

adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 have been victims of violence by an intimate partner.

While there is not yet a large-scale picture of domestic violence, “the COVID-19 epidemic has followed a similar pattern to previous health crises in that there has been a rise in gender-based violence and domestic violence” in East Asia and the Pacific, says Jenelle Babb, UNESCO’s regional advisor for Health and Welfare. Organisations in other regions, such as Latin America, point to the same. In a recent report on preventing violence against children, the WHO indicated that loss of income, social distancing measures and overcrowding have led to higher levels of stress and anxiety in households, which can be triggers for aggressive behaviour. Other international agencies and child protection institutions have warned of the risk of **an increase in domestic violence at a time when home visits and other prevention and care services for victims are disrupted by the pandemic.**



Education threatened by violence

Fatoumata's family settled in Soufroulaye, in the Mopti region of Mali, after fleeing inter-community armed conflicts that threatened their safety in Bankass, a town about 100 km away. Before migrating, violence had forced the 13-year-old to stay at home and do domestic chores instead of going to school.

In addition to insecurity in some areas of Mali, COVID-19 led to the closure of all schools in the country in May 2020.

During the closure period, Fatoumata was able to continue her studies thanks to teaching materials and a solar-powered radio obtained through an education support project. This Educo project supported by UNICEF, Education Cannot Wait (ECW), benefits 50 schools and communities in Ségou and Mopti. As well as the distribution of radios to children whose education has been affected by the pandemic, it also offers, among other things, educational and awareness-raising programs.

"The remote-learning lessons have helped me continue my studies until schools are reopened at the beginning of January 2021. I now have a solar radio which allows me to listen to the lessons on the frequencies of the free community radios even at the weekend. My school has also supplied materials for handwashing and we all respect the social distancing rules", she explains.

Like Fatoumata, many people have had to leave their home villages in the north and central parts of Mali due to violence by armed groups. Numerous schools have been targets of attacks and threats in recent years by terrorist groups, which have systematically closed schools. In February 2021, 2200 schools, which were attended by more than 300,000 children, remained closed due to insecurity problems.

Migration and forced displacement

Migration, even when voluntary, in search of better employment opportunities and living conditions, can pose a challenge to the full integration of migrant children into the education systems in the host countries. The challenge can become overwhelming when one leaves one's place of residence because it is the only alternative, as is the case for the children of people who have been forced to seek refuge in another country or to move to escape some kind of threat or conflict, devastation from natural disasters or other causes.

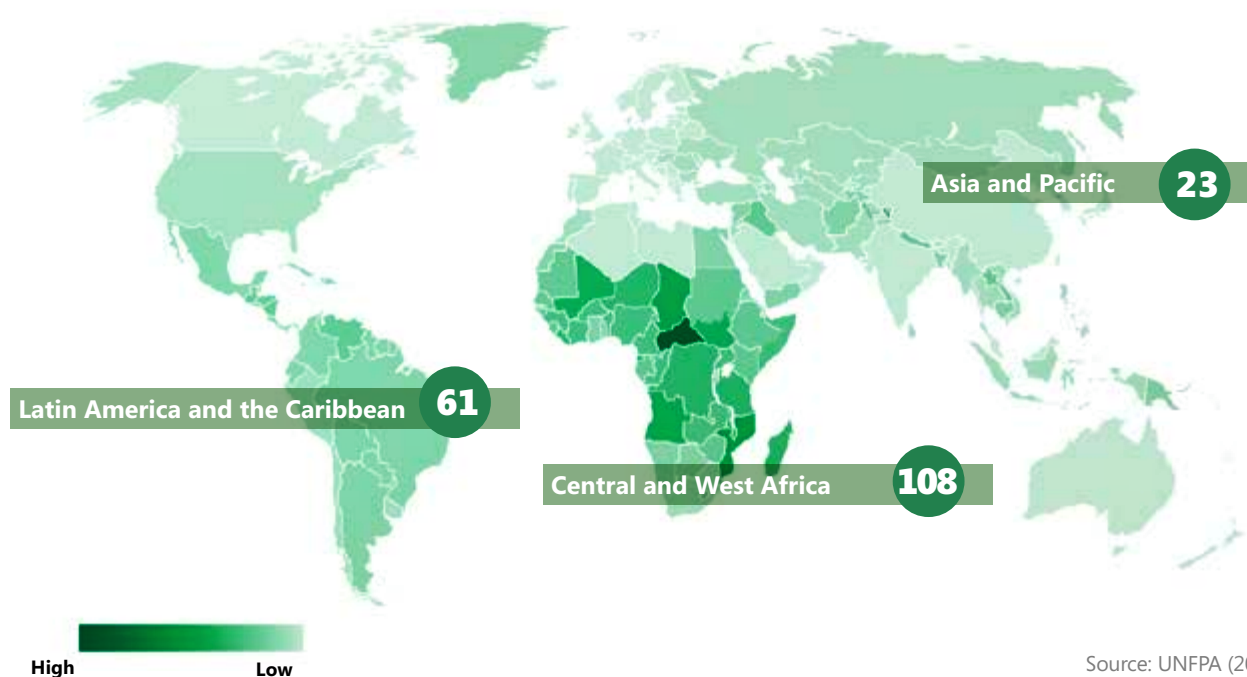
Reliable statistics on education, migration or forced displacement are difficult to obtain because of the circumstances in which the people affected by the phenomenon live. However, the Right to Education Initiative estimates that **of the total number of displaced people in the world, 30 million are school-age**

children. For its part, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) states that half of the nearly 20 million refugees at the end of 2017 were under the age of 18. According to this organisation, **some 6.4 million refugees aged 5-17 were not attending school**; 61% were enrolled in primary school and only 23% in secondary school.

The large-scale arrival of undocumented school-age migrants, refugees and displaced persons can put pressure on educational resources in host territories where they are already inadequate. Alternative programmes exist to help provide some continuity in the education of migrant and displaced children, but it is widely felt that they should not be stuck in a parallel education circuit, with **uncertain funding, inadequately trained staff and no recognised assessment tests.**

Child marriage

Adolescent birth rate per 1000 girls aged 15-19, 2020



Source: UNFPA (2020a)

Child marriage is a phenomenon related to a number of factors, including **poverty, gender inequalities, violence, early pregnancy and dropping out of school**. In many cases **marriage is perceived as the best or only option** for a variety of reasons. For example, in some communities it is thought that marriage ensures the future of the girl by “passing” the responsibility for her care to her husband. In humanitarian situations, some families resort to the marriage of girls **as a form of protection against sexual violence**. However, it can also arise as a result of adolescents’ own decisions, for example, when they believe that it is the quickest way to become independent or to get out of situations of family violence.

While child marriage has declined over the past decade, no region will meet the SDG target at the pre-pandemic

rate of decline. Moreover, numerous organisations warn that **COVID-19 has affected efforts to reduce child marriage**, to the extent that the United Nations Population Fund estimated in April 2020 that between then and 2030, 13 million early marriages will occur that could have been avoided. Girls in South Asia will be most affected, followed by girls in West and Central Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Guruprasad Rao, the director of Educo in India, explains that “the deepening crisis caused by the pandemic is putting incredible pressure on families who were already struggling to survive. It is heart-breaking. Some parents and community members saw this pandemic situation as an opportunity, as there were fewer people monitoring and the government system was focused on managing the COVID-19 pandemic situation”.

Early pregnancy

Pregnancy among girls and adolescents aged 10-19 is often associated with **lower educational attainment, lower income and less participation in the labour force**. In developing countries, **90% of births to mothers aged 15-19 are to married adolescents**, meaning that marriage is often a precursor to early pregnancy, according to UNFPA.

Early pregnancy is one of the causes of **school dropouts**, and, at the same time, it can also be a consequence. Studies in Africa have shown that teenage pregnancies account for 5-10% of school dropouts and that the relationship is also reversed: **pregnancy is more frequent in girls with lower educational levels**.

Every year, 16 million adolescent girls aged 15-19 and 2 million girls aged 14 and under become mothers in low- and middle-income countries, many of them victims of sexual violence. In countries like Mali and Niger, the birth rate exceeds 150 births per 1000 girls.

With the **COVID-19 health emergency, reproductive health and family planning services have reduced the number of appointments**. At the same time, the

closure of schools left **many girls and adolescents without a key space for protection from violence** and other violations of their rights, such as forced marriage and early pregnancy. Different institutions have warned of the risk of a significant increase in early pregnancies, which organisations such as Save the Children estimate at one million more than expected before the pandemic, an annual increase of 3%.

What changes do we need to make to significantly reduce child marriage in India?

Make sure the policies work for children and families

Keep children in school: guarantee that all children are in school and guarantee them the necessary support. We recommend extending free and compulsory education from the age of 14 to the age of 18. Currently, children can only access education until they are 14 years old, putting them at risk from early marriages because most of them do not have the resources to continue studying.

We also need to offer training in life skills for children

Support to avoid families from falling through the cracks: linking mothers and fathers, especially the most disadvantaged, to social protection systems, including the employment guarantee scheme. Currently, many parents in poor areas do not take part in social safety net programmes due to lack of information and guidance on how to qualify for the schemes or lack of proof of identity in migrant families.



Implement and act: implement policies that prohibit child marriage. Although it is against the law to marry under the age of 18, there are still many cases in which the perpetrators who make these marriages possible have not been held responsible by the law.

Guarantee that communities are informed and that the systems work well

Strengthen communities to be guardians of children: strengthen village child protection committees, as set out in the Integrated Child Protection Plan (ICPP), which acts as a watchdog committee. Training committee members to identify cases and making it easier for community members to report cases could prevent or stop child marriages quickly.

A village-level child tracking system will be put in place to monitor the movement and progress of children. Currently, there is no systematic data collection on children, especially girls or children not attending formal education. When community leaders know the profile of their people, they can track children's progress and anticipate risks such as child marriage (for those under 18).

Involving religious leaders, community leaders and members that are trusted and respected. Since the majority of India's population strongly believes in their religious leaders, they can also be called upon to help influence and change the mindset on child marriages.

Training children to help them know their legal rights

Starting with the curriculum: children's rights should not only be discussed in adolescent groups. We call for topics on the negative impact of child marriage to be integrated into the school curriculum from Year 6 or even earlier, when children start to be at risk of being forced into marriage.

Awareness campaigns in the villages led by children to raise awareness among the adults.

Train a peer group (adolescents) to act as guardians and whistle-blowers. Children open up to their peers more than to anyone else in the community and therefore children can also avoid marriages like the ones we have seen in our project areas.

When marriage seems like the only option

Deepika is 17 years old and lives in a poor village in one of the districts of Maharashtra state. Her mother, Sania, works on an agricultural farm, where she earns 1500 rupees a month. Her father left them after her two older siblings died, when Sania was still pregnant with Deepika, and does not support them in any way.

Mother and daughter live in a mud house of less than 20 square metres, where there is a room that serves as a dining room, bedroom and kitchen, and a small space to store their belongings.

Sania planned to marry off her daughter thinking that it would ensure she had a good future, despite her very good academic results.

"I have two siblings who live nearby in their own homes. The government has assigned me some money to build my own house because I live below the poverty line. But my siblings do not agree to register the house in my name", explains Sania.

Deepika is part of a group of adolescents created as part of an Educo project in India and implemented by the local partner organisation Kalapandri, where topics of interest for adolescents are discussed. Educo works with 74 of the almost 300 homes in this area, chosen because they are single-parent families, under great economic stress and prone to emigrate.

"I told my mother that if I marry she will not have anyone to look after her. I have good results at school and if I study I can earn money and look after her" explains the teenager, who aspires to pursue higher education. She says that in the adolescent group meetings, she learned four important things: self-confidence, the benefits of an education, health and hygiene issues and children's rights.

A Kalapandri leader found out about Deepika's situation during a home visit and started to advise her and presented the case to a local Child Protection Committee. Pending a more definitive solution to her financial



situation, Kalapandri has been able to waive her school fees and has provided accommodation in the city where she will be able to continue her studies.

Food deficit

Adequate nutrition is essential for the health, wellbeing and social and cognitive development of children. Before the crisis, at least one in every three children under five years old suffered from malnutrition or obesity and one in two did not consume the micronutrients needed for adequate growth and development. Projections published in The Lancet indicate that, as a result of the pandemic and its economic impact, 6.7 million children under five years of age will be added to the 47 million already suffering from emaciation (life-threatening malnutrition) by 2020.

The nutritional situation of those over five years of age, especially adolescents, is less well known. However, the results of surveys carried out before the pandemic (one in 17 countries and another in 68 countries) reported in a paper by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, showed that two out of three adolescents aged 15-19

are underweight by nutritional standards and about half of the population aged 13-17 say they are hungry.

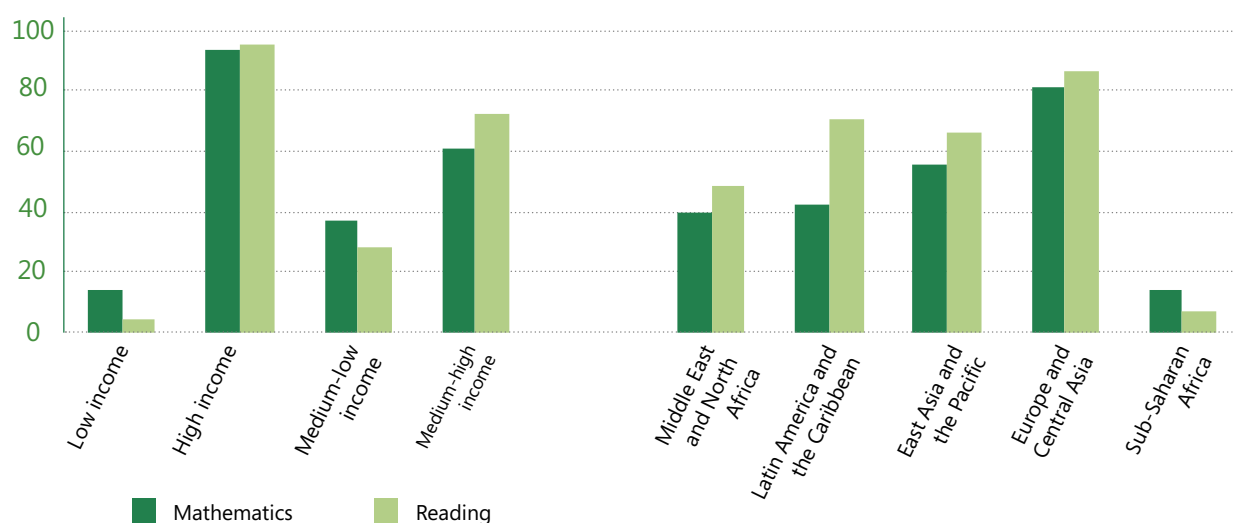
At the peak of the pandemic, 370 million children in 143 countries missed out on school meal programs, a benefit that also acts as an incentive to send children to school. According to UNICEF and the World Food Programme (WFP), the pandemic meant that more than 39 billion meals were not distributed in 2020, and while many countries have tried to compensate with home deliveries, cash transfers and food vouchers, these are temporary solutions that cost more. As part of these efforts, Educo launched an initiative that, between March and December 2020, resulted in the distribution of some 600,000 meals. 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.

Learning deficit

Schooling does not always result in effective learning. **Millions of children do not know how to read, write**

or do basic mathematical operations despite having attended school for years. This is the case of 53% of the

Learning deficits and divides by region and income level



Source: World Bank (2018).

Learning deficits and divides by income level in selected countries



Source: World Bank (2018).

child population in low- and middle-income countries who have finished primary school, a figure that could increase to 63% due to the pandemic (another 72 million children), according to the World Bank.

As in other areas, there are cross-country differentials reflected in international assessments in reading, writing and arithmetic, which show that the average student in low-income countries performs worse than 95% of students in high-income countries. This means that **a student in a low-income country who ranks among the best in his or her class would be among the worst in a high-income country**. At the same time, there are also gaps between students in the same country. For example, in Senegal, around 75% of students from poor families (the lowest income quintile) fail to obtain the necessary skills to continue studying, while among students from better-off families the figure is 20%.

The possibilities of benefiting from education have a lot to do with the individual circumstances of the learners (family income level, ethnicity, disability and gender, among others), **inequalities regarding the quality of the teaching and the access to educational resources, and the inexistence or insufficient implementation of equitable or inclusive policies**. The learning deficit is detected **most of all among students who are already in a disadvantaged situation** and they are precisely those who need it most. During the pandemic, **an increase in learning gaps and inequalities related to fewer and poorer quality years of education** is being observed. "The storm is the same, but we are not all in the same boat" summarises Juan Martín Pérez, coordinator at Tejiendo Redes, a project that strengthens civil society networks and organisations that defend children's rights.

Loss of opportunities

Experts stress that, in addition to being a fundamental right, education is an essential tool for developing human capital and a fundamental pillar for the growth and prosperity of society as a whole. **A higher level of education broadens the possibilities for participating actively in economic and social life.** OECD economists have estimated that for each additional year of schooling, a person's income increases by 7-10%.

More school dropouts due to the pandemic could increase the already high number of young people (18-24 years old) who are neither studying nor working, the so-called "NEETs", which is still on the rise. The latest statistics from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) show that the number of young people aged 15-24 in this situation rose from 259 million in 2016 to 267 million in 2019, two-thirds of whom are women, and may reach 273 million by 2021.

The loss of learning leads to a loss of productivity-related skills in adulthood, which ultimately **affects the growth and development of countries.** According to the OECD, countries' average GDP could be 1.5% lower in the remainder of the 21st century as a result of the learning and skills losses of current generations of students, or even higher if the next generations do not achieve a similar educational performance to the one before the pandemic.



Vulnerability and rights violations

The same measures aimed at protecting the health of children and adolescents can lead, involuntarily and directly, to the violation of their rights, including those related to nutrition, health, education, security and their wellbeing and development in general.

The general secretary of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, has continued to insist that **the impact of COVID-19 is not the same for everyone**. Some communities and people will suffer the negative effects of the pandemic more intensely and for longer if no measures are taken to mitigate them.

This vulnerable population includes not only children from families living below the poverty line, households with

poor water or sanitation services, isolated communities or urban areas where it is impossible to maintain the social distancing advocated by experts. It should also include those who were already discriminated against because of their identity, social background and physical or psychological disabilities, conditions which, according to UNESCO's annual World Education Report, determine their educational opportunities.

In 25% of countries, laws define separate places of education for people with disabilities, a percentage that goes up 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.

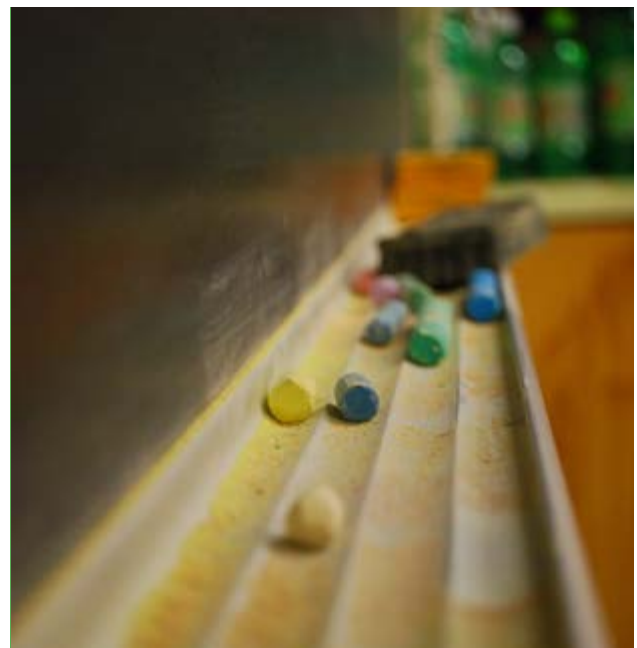
Exclusion and social cohesion

The current crisis has once again opened the debate about **education as an essential mechanism for facilitating social mobility between generations** and reducing inequality. Education is a right, the exercising of which enables people to develop their skills and competencies, helping to reduce socio-economic disparities. At the same time, it enables the transmission of values, the development of a sense of belonging and the promotion of active citizenship.

Experts in poverty, equality and education in the different regions highlight that the 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.

If more effective measures are not taken, the number of children excluded from education due to the changes in their personal and family situations **will increase**, because the educational models are not adapted to their needs. The consequence will be a deepening of the inequalities in the access and quality of learning that already existed before the pandemic.

In the long run, the current educational crisis, academic failure and school dropout may translate into **more socio-economic inequalities, a reduction in social cohesion, the weakening of democracies** and a longer process for achieving the sustainable development goals that countries aspire to.



An interval in child protection



The risk of greater exposure to violence and the violation of children's rights occurs **at a time of weakness for victim protection systems.**

A UNICEF survey carried out during the pandemic revealed that more than 100 countries, with a child population of more than 1.8 billion, experienced disruptions or needed to make adjustments to their social services as a result of the pandemic, especially violence management and home-based care services. Of these, approximately 70% said that they had taken measures to reduce risks and mitigate the effects of this situation. However, the projected fall in tax revenue raises fears of further underfunding of children's services.

Government budgets for child protection departments, "which were already meagre to begin with, are being depleted or redirected, so that some of the funding for

these services has been directed to the humanitarian response related to COVID-19," says Meg Gardinier, secretary-general of ChildFund Alliance, a global network of development organisations Educo is a member of.

On the other hand, teachers and students themselves can perform an important role in detecting and reporting cases of abuse involving children and adolescents. However, **with distance and part-time learning, a protective space has been lost and the social and emotional support** that victims and at-risk students find in schools has diminished.

An emergency cure to save education

The pandemic led to a variety of responses by governments in the area of education. In Latin America for example, there were those who kept the school year in public education unchanged (Nicaragua) and those who closed it without offering alternatives (Bolivia). In the middle ground are those which, with varying degrees of creativity, sometimes with the collaboration of the private sector, have adopted one or more strategies to continue distance learning (90% of states). Some countries, such as Ecuador, made regulatory adjustments to recognise a modality that is already practised in the United States: home schooling.

The solution in each country “has depended a lot on the **political will** of whoever is in charge of the education system and how much they prioritised children or prioritised the health and epidemiological vision,” says Tejiendo Redes coordinator Juan Martín Pérez.

The measures involved moving from an in-person education model to remote learning models - with printed materials and using one or more communication channels - for which **no one was prepared: not the teaching staff, nor the pupils, nor the parents.**

The predominant solution was the television, which was used by three out of four governments (out of 127 countries), mainly in Europe, Central and South Asia. Television has been used as an educational resource since the 1950s in low- and medium-income countries.

The second alternative, which offers more relational possibilities, was **digital platforms, used in 42% of countries for pre-school education, 74% for primary and 77% for secondary.**

Lastly, **many low-income countries used the radio** (80% of low-income countries). In Burkina Faso, for example, three out of four primary school children have access to this resource, while mobile phones and digital data, when available, are prohibitively expensive, says Séni Ouedraogo, head of Quality of Education and Training at the Burkina Faso Ministry of Education.

A fundamental problem is that **the fact that a family has radio, television, computer and the internet does not guarantee that the pupil will follow the lessons or that the learning will be of high quality.** Remote learning requires more interest and involvement on behalf of all the actors, which is not always the case. It also requires each child to have a device within reach, which may **not be possible when parents work at home or there are siblings and they must share.**

Educo: work methods can change, but priorities cannot

The health emergency has forced all non-governmental organisations (NGO) to review their action plans and adapt them to the new reality, marked by the travel restrictions, social distancing, remote working and the limitations of access to remote education.

The pandemic “has drastically affected” Educo’s work in all countries. The organisation has had to “reconsider all the internal work and how to implement the projects, using a work from home approach, more or less easy to implement, depending on the contexts” explains Rosaria Arbore, director of Program Development for Educo, who highlights that COVID-19 “has exacerbated problems of rights violations that already existed”.

Educo refocused some projects to meet immediate needs arising from the impact of the pandemic. To do so, it carried out interventions to support the most vulnerable children that went beyond its usual work, for example, the distribution of food parcels or hygiene products to families. In the 2021 planning, Educo has included flexible strategies to allow for rapid adaptation of projects if necessary.

Although the work methods have changed, the priorities are the same: ensure child wellbeing, social transformation and an inclusive, quality education. In education, **the challenges are to keep schools open with the necessary biosecurity measures, reduce school failure and dropout, ensure quality learning, provide socio-emotional support for children in the educational environment and close the inequity gap in education** so that all children and adolescents enjoy equal opportunities now and in the future.



Educo actions related to COVID-19 in 2020



12 countries

923,474 children

282,066 adults

Total: 1,205,540
beneficiaries



840,358 people informed

3968 online awareness-
raising campaigns on
radio, TV and social
media

38,185 informative
leaflets for children
distributed



27,453 children have
received learning materials

27,034 have received
access to online learning
services

8000 radios distributed in
Burkina Faso



30 projects
(10 funded by donors)

Ongoing monitoring



Income 16,748,493€

Main donors: Educo, ECW,
CF Korea, PMA, DEVCO,
UNICEF, Swiss Agency
for Development and
Cooperation, PepsiCo



65,111 hygiene packs
distributed to families

1137 soap dispensers for
handwashing installed in
schools

87 disinfections and
hygiene packs distributed
to health centres



1514 play packs
for children

36 games on the radio in
regions of Burkina Faso



37,515 food parcels
distributed

26,458 families
supported through
emergency cash
transfers

1251 inputs for
recovering livelihoods
(seeds, tools, etc.)



Systematisation and
dissemination of
evidence and learning

Internal
DistributionPartners,
ChildFund



3973 children have
received psychological
support

27,506 caregivers have
received information
about protection and
childcare

Remote learning: an obstacle course

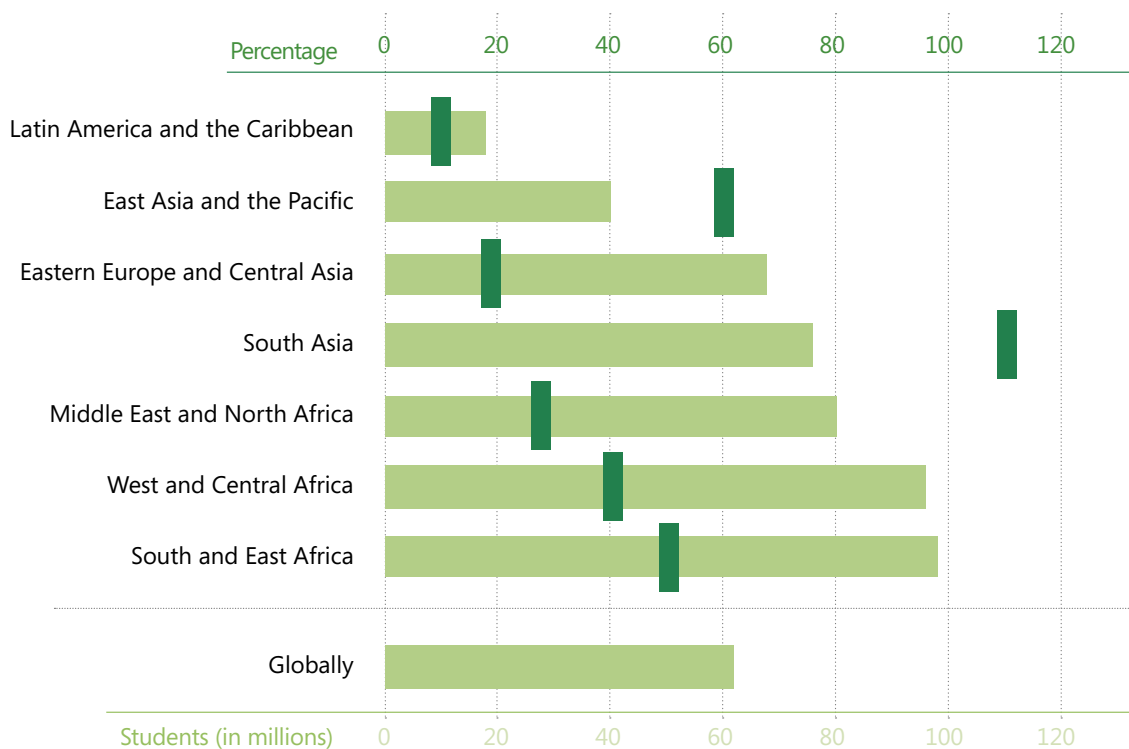
The continuity of education has come up against multiple challenges, ranging from a **lack of access to basic infrastructure to a lack of the technological, curricular, pedagogical and relational tools necessary** for its implementation.

Remote learning for millions of children has been an insurmountable obstacle course, especially for those who due to their socio-economic origin, geographical location or other factors have been **excluded from the educational solutions that have emerged during the pandemic**. Among them are the students who live in marginalised urban areas, rural areas and isolated

communities, with severe shortages of basic services, including electricity, or in conflictive family situations.

UNICEF estimates that, globally, at least 31% of children and adolescents (463 million) were unable to receive remote education because they did not have the necessary tools at home or because **they did not benefit from the public policies needed to respond to their educational needs**. If children and adolescents who were out of school are also counted, 75% of those excluded live in the poorest areas and the vast majority are in rural areas. In Spain, almost 700,000 students in 2020 did not have

Children without access to remote teaching



Source: Elaborated with data from UNICEF

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 the education sector has had for decades have intensified, not only because of a lack of access to technology, which has effectively been a barrier for the most disadvantaged people where this solution prevailed, but also because of student motivation, the quality of education they receive and the equality of opportunities.

An additional problem is the effectiveness of remote education. Experts in this sector highlight that, although children and adolescents must know about and use digital

technology, **online education using digital platforms cannot substitute in-person education.** “It is not just a technical issue. Even in a scenario of super-training of teachers to handle all possible tools, virtual education does not replace in-person education in many respects. One of them is that, in our countries, the educational and school sector is tied to the fulfilment of other rights, for example, the right to food or to healthy nutrition. But, in addition, online there is no way to establish the same socio-emotional bonds and socialisation processes, or learn about affection, and trust and non-violent relationships” explains Nelsy Lizarazo, general coordinator of the Latin American Campaign for the Right to Education (CLADE in Spanish).



463 million students
excluded from remote learning,
half in primary education

3 out of 4 students
excluded live in rural areas
or poor households

Radio,
the most popular channel
in low income countries

Television, the channel
with highest potential for
reaching the most students,
despite not being the best

Digital media,
used the most in high
income countries

Remote learning without a television and with hardly any internet connection



In Guatemala, the in-person classes have been suspended for almost a year. Juanita studies at a secondary school in Chichicastenango, but since March 2020, continuing her studies online has been complicated.

“When they reported the first case of coronavirus in Guatemala I felt very bad. Ever since things have not been the same in my family and in my studies. Because of government regulations, my father, who works as an extra-urban transport operator, has no longer been able to go to work and so far, it has been difficult for him to provide for the needs of the household” she explains.

The teenager has been doing the tasks that her teachers send her by email and she sends them back using the same method. As well as having difficulties with the exchanging

of files, she regrets not having the opportunity to clarify doubts when she does not understand something, which makes her feel insecure. Another problem is that she doesn't know if her answers to the tasks are correct or not, and she has particular difficulties with the accountancy course.

“In addition, searching for information on the internet is another difficulty. We can only top up data in the town because here in the village where I live we have run out of phone top-ups, both for calls and for browsing the internet. Luckily at the start of the quarantine my father and I decided to buy some supplies that would help with my tasks. It was a good decision because now the bookshops are all closed” she explains.

Juanita studies thanks to a *She* grant which Educo Guatemala has given her through the Asociación Verde y Azul. According to her, “the scholarship has been a blessing for me, without this support I might not have enrolled in my school because it would represent a very high cost for my parents, especially at this time” and that is what motivates her.

Her younger siblings are at primary school via the Education Ministry program #AprendoEnCasa (I learn at home). The lessons are broadcast on a television channel, so they have to go to an aunt's house because, like many children in the village, they don't have a television.

Digital divide

In the last decade, huge steps have been taken globally to adopt new technologies and broaden connectivity. Digitalisation is enabling changes never imagined before, even in the least advanced countries. The delivery of medicines or food by drone to isolated areas in Sierra

Leone and Rwanda are examples of this. **Despite these major advances, there are still huge gaps that have become apparent during the pandemic in the education sector.**

Without internet connection at home

2200 million

children and young people under 25 years old

1300 million

aged between 3 and 17 years old

More than 1 billion

children and adolescents aged 3 to 17
without access live in

Asia and Africa

2 in every 3 children

are aged between 3 and 17

Internet access gaps (under 25 year olds)

6%

in low income countries

25%

in rural areas

87%

in high income countries

41%

in urban areas



Source: Elaborated with data from UNICEF and UIT (2020)

A study by the UNESCO Statistics Institute and the Teacher Task Force showed that 826 million students affected by school closures 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 three to 17 have access to the internet at home.

Inequalities between countries and, within countries, between households according to their level of economic development and income **are glaring**. The most critical case is in Africa, where a mere 5% of children and adolescents aged 3-17 have an internet connection at home. There is also a gap between "rich" and "poor" homes, which is higher in high-medium income countries than in those with lower incomes (in the former, the gap is almost 60 percentage points).

Governments have to "invest in the development of their own technological tools, (because) we cannot always be at the mercy of what is offered by the corporations that have sustained a large part of education throughout this period," says sociologist and researcher Judith Jacovkis. In the long term, it is essential to ensure that all schools are equivalent in terms of quality. In the case of Spain, for example, "this does not mean that they have the same pedagogical project, but that all students receive the same quality education, and for this investment is needed, but also redistribution of students, combating school segregation in a decisive way and giving a curricular shake-up to compulsory secondary education and the Bachillerato (the post-16 stage of education in Spain), because we know that much of the disengagement comes from a lack of interest and recognition of the contents," he says.

Inadequate adaptation of the model and insufficient training

The measures taken in the educational sector in 2020 forced around **63 million teachers at primary and secondary to change the way they taught overnight**. After the closure of schools, various countries activated platforms with contents, activities, lesson plans and multimedia resources for teachers. Some teachers started to receive educational guidance on how to transition to digital-based education. However, the pandemic took by surprise a sector without contingency plans to deal with situations such as the one caused by COVID-19 and **improvisation has prevailed**.

One of the obstacles for the implementation of remote education has been the **almost non-existence of adapted educational content** for this teaching model. Also, the training of teachers in the use of methodologies and their interaction with students is key for achieving positive results and **many of them acknowledge that they do not have the necessary knowledge for transitioning from in-person to online teaching**.

Education International, a global federation of teachers' organisations in 172 countries, conducted a survey in

March and April in which two-thirds of its members said they were continuing their classes digitally, half of them said they had not been consulted about the change and only one-third were supported in accessing appropriate resources for online teaching.

The new challenges for teachers were added to a situation that was already precarious. Globally, teachers are not only in short supply, but also under-trained, according to the Teachers Task Force, a global partnership of governments, governmental and non-governmental organisations and the private sector focused on teaching. UNESCO estimated in 2016 that, in addition to recruiting 48.6 million teachers to replace those leaving the workforce, an additional 3.4 million professionals would be needed in primary and 16.7 million in secondary education to achieve universal quality education at these levels.

Experts in education commend the dedication and efforts made by most teachers to ensure educational continuity during the pandemic. At the same time, they highlight **a very wide generation gap in the area of technology and teachers**. Along the same lines, Mikel Egibar, expert

in Educo at Educo says: “Teachers are responsible for education, but they are not the only ones. Guaranteeing the right to education is a responsibility of **governments** and they **must train, accompany and support teaching staff with the necessary resources** so that they can carry out their work in any circumstances. If not, the exercising of this right is at risk, especially for children in vulnerable situations”.

Limitations in the family context

Even when the children and adolescents have the necessary materials for continuing their classes remotely, they still have obstacles for doing so. Among them is the need to work or carry out domestic tasks to help families, the lack of space for studying and the **inability of those around them to provide the support they need**.



Researchers like Lucía Martínez Virto from the Universidad Pública de Navarra also highlight the need to strengthen the knowledge that teachers have about students in order **to cope with socio-economic and emotional situations, such as poverty or domestic violence**, that put children and adolescents in vulnerable situations and at a higher risk of academic failure and dropouts.

The pandemic has highlighted a reality which those who worked in the sector were already aware of, but which went unnoticed by the middle sectors of the population. “Families were forced to accompany learning, help with homework, explain content, and today they value the role of teachers as never before,” says CLADE’s general coordinator.

The commitment of parents to education is essential at all times, but even more so with remote learning. However, many parents are absent most of the time, because often **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.

On the other hand, financial insecurity in the home and domestic violence have left some children in a situation of uncertainty and distress because for months they were without the protective, secure space that, in normal circumstances, schools offer.

Diverse realities



Spain

The COVID-19 pandemic follows a decade in which early school dropout rates in Spain have been falling, slowly but steadily. However, the closure of schools for months and the fragile situation in which the 2020-2021 school year is developing raises concerns about the negative impact that it could have on **the learning and inequalities that already existed in education.**

The educational crisis has emerged in a context of economic recession and a drop in income for many families. **Before the pandemic, one in three minors** (approximately 2.5 million children and adolescents) **were in a situation of poverty and social exclusion;** 4.5% of the population under the age of 16 was unable to enjoy a meal containing protein every other day, according to the latest Living Conditions Survey. These indicators show a decline in relation to the previous survey and the economic effects of **COVID-19 may lead to further declines.**

Child rights organisations have expressed concern about the deterioration of other indicators, such as those relating to domestic violence. The 2020 Violence Against Women Macro-Survey showed that 1.68 million children live in households where the mother suffers some form of violence (physical, sexual, emotional or economic) from

an intimate partner and they witnessed or heard the abuse in almost nine out of ten cases. During the state of emergency, requests for assistance from domestic violence services increased by 62%. On the other hand, 10.7% of the population aged between 11 and 18 years of age had been physically abused by students from their school in the last year.

Both the economic and employment situation at home, and **the existence of domestic violence, have an impact on children and adolescents' emotional state, their ability to study and their academic performance.**

Academic failure and early school dropouts

In Spain, it is important to distinguish between failing at school and dropping out of school early. The first is a phenomenon which may start in primary school and tends to intensify at secondary school, characterised by students dropping out of school without obtaining the compulsory qualification. The second refers to the decision to not continue with any kind of training after the compulsory secondary studies (ESO in Spain), despite having successfully completing, and includes adolescents who may have been disengaged or may have repeated grades before completing the cycle. Dropping out of school can be a consequence of insufficient academic performance and a progressive disengagement from school or a conscious decision that the investment (in time, money or effort) is not worth the benefits.

Absenteeism and grade repetition are situations common to academic failure and early dropout. Absenteeism tends to lead to failure and vice versa, failure can lead to absenteeism and dropping out. PISA data show that the

More than 30% of children in Spain live in poverty

4.5% do not benefit from an adequate diet

One in every four children have suffered abuse

Adaptation to the new reality from a teachers' perspective

The Vilafranca Manyanet school in Catalonia has had to adapt to the new reality of teaching in the 2020-2021 school year in the middle of the pandemic in Spain. "After hours of work, a lot of coordination and a lot of will, we were able to open the school in the safest possible way. All the staff at the centre, but especially the teachers, had received training and several meetings to establish the protocols to be followed", explains Fina Loscos, the head teacher.



"We are applying all the security measures, supervising that students enter separately, taking their temperature or insisting on handwashing, among other things. We have to acknowledge that they have been very cooperative and have taken these measures on board in a very normal way. The awareness of pupils at all levels is excellent and we value this aspect very highly", affirms Loscos.

"The second challenge we had this year, just as important as security, was maintaining educational quality and we have achieved that. This has meant a huge effort on behalf of the teachers. Little by little, we established habits and routines to maintain normal educational activity. Right now, we can say that we are working as if it were a normal school year".

One of the main concerns of the school were the students from vulnerable situations, "especially those families that had lost their jobs, that had difficulties accessing public benefits, etc. Concern about the virus is combined with not knowing how to cover basic needs, and this creates anxiety, fear and uncertainty for the children and adolescents who study here and experience this reality" Loscos comments. "So the first thing we worked on as teachers was the students' emotions, to understand what they were feeling, to see what their fears were and to help them deal with their insecurities.", she adds.

The Vilafranca Manyanet is one of the schools that benefits from the Educo School Meal Grants project in Spain. As the head teacher explains, it is important to understand that

these grants do not only help provide children with a healthy diet, they also favour the emotional stability of the students who would experience a difficult situation at home during lunchtime.

During this school year, new technologies have acquired special relevance due to COVID-19. At the school, they explain that they have been able to connect with children who have had to stay home because they have tested positive or had to be quarantined. "They have made it easier for us to deal personally with tutors and teachers, and to keep teaching activities at a more than acceptable level. A sense of normality has been achieved, which helps with emotional stability" says Loscos.

Although there are positive results, there have also been **concerns about the fact that some of the families in vulnerable situations do not have the technology needed** to follow classes from home. "Public institutions agreed to provide technological supplies to these families. However, public benefits have been very scarce, both in state-subsidised schools and in our own, which means that these families have been discriminated against. Internet connections have been provided to those students that did not have one, but they have not been given computers and some families only have a mobile phone. The school has addressed this need and has provided them with computers so that they can follow the classes. The experience during confinement has enabled us to act quickly and efficiently in each case".

percentage of Spanish students repeating at least once at age 15 has fallen from 34% in 2012 to 28.7%, but that figure is more than double the OECD average of 11.4.

The Professor of Sociology Mariano Fernández Enguita explains that **part of the early dropout rate in Spain is due to the push factor of academic failure**; the other comes from the pull of the labour market, although, in the context of the current economic crisis and taking into account that it is the tourism and construction sectors that most attract school leavers, it seems unlikely that this will happen. He also warns that it is still early to say what the impact of the pandemic will be on phenomena such as disaffection, repetition, school failure or dropout, but it will not be a homogeneous effect even within the same school.

In his opinion, regardless of any possible effects, what the pandemic has shown is that “schools are tied to a model focused on the classroom”, which is rigid and anchored in the past, that treats students like a homogenous group when this is not the case, and with teachers who are very unprepared for working in a digital ecosystem.

According to the Labour Force Survey, the percentage of 18-24 year olds who have not completed the second stage of secondary education (Intermediate Vocational Training, Basic Vocational Training or Bachillerato) and did not follow any other training has been falling until it reached 16% in 2020. This means that 530,000 adolescents (343,000 men and 186,500 women) left school. The decline over the last decade has been greater among men than among women, but it is important to bear in mind that men started with higher dropout rates.

Despite this improvement, the rate continues to be **one of the highest in the European Union**. It also presents significant differences by territory. Therefore, while it is less than 7% in the Basque Country and 10% in Asturias, Cantabria and Madrid, it is above 20% in Ceuta, Melilla, Andalusia and the Balearic Islands.



Spain, a country of divides and inequalities

The educational divides in Spain are not just territorial. Sociological research has revealed the influence of students' socio-economic background on their academic performance. One in every two students at secondary whose family is from a “low” socio-economic background has repeated a year, while this only occurs in one case out of nine students when the socio-economic background is “high”. The educational level of the parents is also an influence. The dropout rate is 10 times higher among adolescents whose mother has completed no more than primary education (41.8%) compared to those whose mother has higher education (4%).

As a result of remote learning, the digital divide that existed before the pandemic has deepened. Children's and adolescents' learning became dependent on the

availability of electronic devices and their connectivity, on the possibilities of timely and quality use of online content, and on the preparation of schools and teachers for the transition to the new educational model. **This gap in access, use and preparation is combined with the heterogeneous ability of parents to provide educational support**, who are often absent or have low levels of education, making it impossible for them to accompany their children in their studies.

According to a study by the Fundación COTEC, 91% of students have a computer at home, 98% have an internet connection and 93% have a calm place to study in. However, this does not mean that the child has the device all the time (it is often shared with other family members) or a sufficient, reliable connection at a cost that is affordable for the family economy (the capacity to download or view content may be limited by the connection plans contracted by families depending on the cost).

The study also showed that, while there are few differences according to geographical location, **the gaps according to socio-economic status are significant**. The number of computers at home increases depending on the family income: 66% of students with a "high" economic status have at least three computers at home, while the "low" status families tend to have only one computer (45%) or none (15%). The socio-economic level also determines how long they spend online.

In terms of the ability of schools and colleges to teach via digital platforms, the 2020 PISA report indicated that **the availability of appropriate software is insufficient in almost half of Spanish schools**. Also, almost **half the teachers do not have the technical and educational skills necessary for integrating training with digital devices**. The Fundación COTEC analysis pointed out that there are also significant territorial differences in these areas.

An additional problem is high educational segregation. Shortly before the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Spain, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme

poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, warned of "real problems with the cost and quality of education, as well as segregation by socio-economic and ethnic status" in the country. "An alarming 44% of students and 72% of children and adolescents in vulnerable situations study in de facto segregated schools which have a high concentration of students from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, Roma and migrant children", he stated.

Lucía Martínez Virto, who holds a PhD in Social Work and is an expert in Gender, stresses that there is evidence of the generational transmission of poverty: 8 out of 10 children whose parents do not go beyond primary school do not complete it either, and a similar ratio reproduces the economic problems experienced in childhood in adulthood.

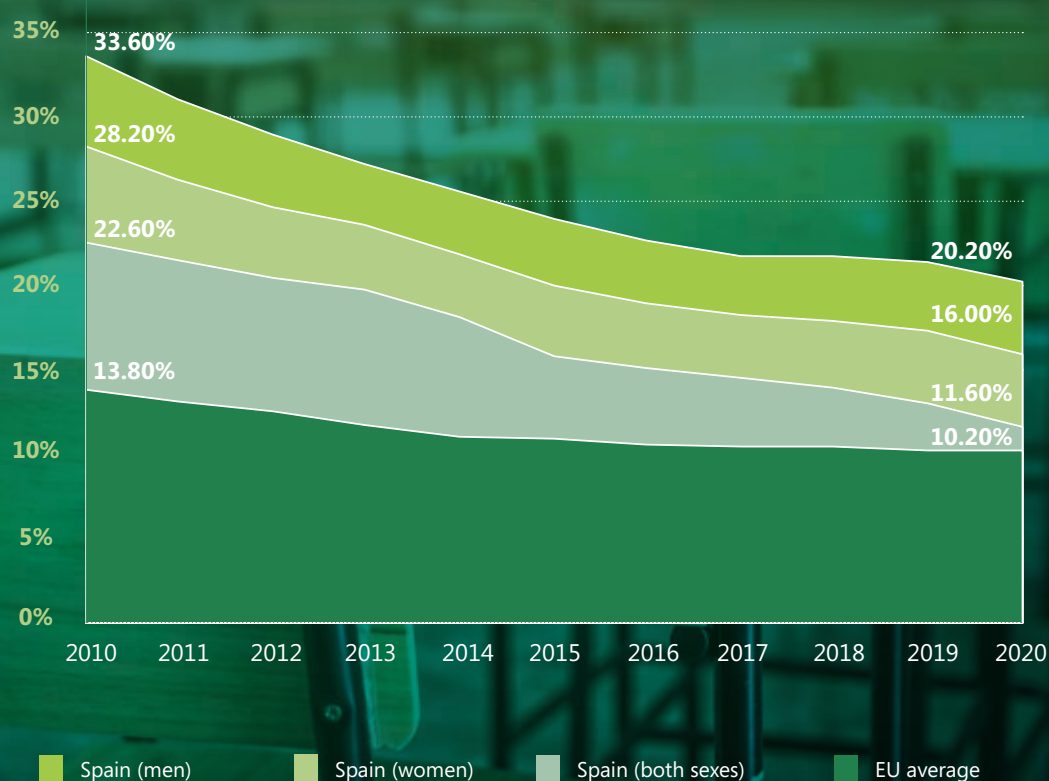
"In order to reduce inequality it is important to work with an inclusive and equitable approach that recognises the diversity in the classroom", because "equal treatment does not reduce inequality" emphasizes Martínez Virto. She says **it is necessary to be aware of and attend to the particular situations of students**, offering them the necessary resources and support **to compensate for unfavourable conditions linked to personal and family situations, because otherwise they will be left behind**.

Inclusion in times of pandemic

Spain is one of the countries in the European Union that kept schools closed for the longest, a total of 16 weeks without in-person classes. Although remote learning was offered, mainly over the internet, not all students were able to continue with their studies.

The Education minister, Isabel Celaá, indicated in a radio interview in March 2020 that **between 10 and 12% of students were not connected to the remote teaching platforms or their teachers**. The consequences could be increased disengagement and disconnection with studies and falling behind in learning content.

Evolution of early school leavers by sex in Spain and in the EU



Source: Elaborated using data from the Education and Professional Training Ministry

Spanish researchers have highlighted that studies in different countries show that direct intervention to support students who are lagging behind, for example through small group tutoring, can reduce dropout rates by 25 to 40%.

One group that has suffered the obstacles of remote learning is that of people with intellectual and development disabilities, which includes those with learning difficulties. According to Amalia San Román, Head of Inclusive Education at Plena Inclusión España, **80% of the more than 720,000 students with special educational needs (NEE in Spanish) attend ordinary schools and most of them were totally “disconnected” during the school closures. The classes followed a pace online that did not take into account the limitations these students faced**

in an educational environment that was unfamiliar and difficult to understand, where they no longer had the personalised support they received in the classroom, but relied on non-professional support provided by parents. San Román highlights that it is not enough to provide these students with computers, it is essential to address their specific needs, including the improvement of their digital skills.

An adolescence with stress, uncertainty and a lack of human contact

Lucia is 16 and is studying her first year of Bachillerato in the arts and she participated in the Educo Advisory Council for the project "Once upon a voice", an investigation into violence against children. Last year, her life was turned upside down with the arrival of the pandemic. "For me it was really negative. During confinement, I was really stressed and worried. Not just me, my friends too. We asked ourselves: what is going to happen next? How are we going to go out once confinement is over? How are we going to go back to school?" she explains. **"I think I speak for all young people when I say that because of COVID-19 we are more stressed, we have more uncertainty, we feel sadder and everything is more confusing. We are not so happy anymore".**

The teenager thinks that her studies are one of the aspects of her life that has been affected the most by the pandemic. "Although I am passionate about it and I am enjoying it, I know that this year is different to other years. We can't do a lot of cool things that have been done in previous years because of COVID-19 security measures".

Lucia is also **worried about her classmates who have financial and social difficulties.** "I know that many of us will be able to make up for lost time in terms of schooling and catching up, learning all the things we can't learn now because of the pandemic. However, there is a minority who will not be able to and it is important we don't forget about them".

Adolescence is a very important period in people's development. The health crisis is causing many young people to experience this time in their lives very differently to how they imagined. "Before the pandemic, we kissed and hugged our friends to comfort each other or show our feelings. Now we can't. At 16 years old, contact is something fundamental, especially at this stage of my life, which I cannot experience now. I also don't have contact with part of my family. My uncles and aunts and cousins



live outside my city and now I can hardly see them, let alone hug them and say hello with a kiss" she explains.

She demands that children and adolescents be heard, and that their opinions be taken into account. Not only in taking action against COVID-19, but in many other aspects that directly affect their existence. **"We are not a nuisance. Our opinion counts. We are citizens just like any adult** and sometimes we are even better at reasoning. We are not the problem, although sometimes a very bad image has been given of young people, as if we were truly brainless people who don't care about the lives of others, who only go out drinking. I'm not saying that young people like that do not exist, but there are plenty of others like me, who are young, who care about people's lives. If they would ask us what we prefer, if they would try to understand our situation, if they would stop seeing us as monsters and start seeing us as people, which is what we are, everything would be better".

Actions by Educo to support vulnerable C&A during the pandemic in Spain

Although Spain does not have the food shortages or the many deprivations found in low-income countries, the health and economic crisis has aggravated the situation of families already living in precarious situations. **The closure of schools left children from vulnerable families without a complete daily meal**, with little or no possibilities to care for their children during confinement and **without the necessary resources for remote education via digital platforms**.

In 2020 Educo set up various initiatives to mitigate the impact of the crisis on families, strengthening coordination with schools, locally rooted social organisations and community social services with which it works on a regular basis. The objectives were:

- **To offer a healthy and adequate diet** to children and adolescents who stopped benefitting from the school meal grants when schools closed.
- **Provide school supplies** to those who needed them the most.
- **Provide academic and emotional support** to children and adolescents.

In order to achieve these objectives, **alternatives to the traditional meal grants** were sought, which benefited almost 5810 children, such as bank transfers, the distribution of food parcels, the provision of shopping vouchers and rechargeable cards with the amount of the meal grant, and the implementation of the initiative was rigorously monitored.

In addition, further actions were launched to facilitate access to new technologies, thanks to donations from companies. This enabled **mobile telephones and SIM cards to be supplied to 778 children from vulnerable households**, so that they could connect with their schools.

Lastly, free activities with organisations and families were carried out to improve emotional education within the

framework of the **programme for emotional support and prevention of domestic violence**.

Educo intensified its communication activities - the awareness raising campaigns in particular -, its networking and its collaborations with organisations that work in the field.

With the new school year, the organisation has continued its strategy with the necessary adaptations due to the limits caused by the pandemic. "We continue to work for schools to be in-person, without ignoring the reality, and this reality tells us that there must be hybrid systems, but that they must be for everyone", explains the head of Advocacy and Social Mobilisation Macarena Céspedes.

Educo's priorities "have not changed entirely" but now the organisation places more of an emphasis on digitalisation and support for emotional education, because both aspects are especially important in a context of uncertainty such as the one the education sector is going through, she explains.

Another concern is the transition between educational cycles that, according to Céspedes, even before COVID-19, had been identified as "key moments for failure and early dropouts, especially when going from primary to secondary school. If left unattended, it can have a detrimental effect on the child's educational continuity". **These transitions can be more difficult for children with learning difficulties and in vulnerable situations** who have spent months partially or totally disconnected from their classmates, their teachers and their school due to a lack of resources, **and need extra support in order to not fall through the cracks of the education system**.

Africa

According to official data, the African continent has recorded a low number of COVID-19 cases compared to other regions (2.8 million confirmed after one year of the pandemic). Lessons from previous experiences, such as the Ebola virus, led African governments to react quickly, closing borders and deploying health contingency plans that may have helped to limit the spread of infections. However, the pandemic makes this region, which has severe deficiencies regarding access to services such as water and sanitation and very poor health systems, even more vulnerable.

Despite the reduced incidence of COVID-19, African countries have not been able to avoid an economic slowdown, which is expected to wipe out some of the progress made towards human development in a region where 60 % of the population is under 25 years of age.

The pandemic arrived in the countries in the West African countries at a time when they were already experiencing a **food and nutrition crisis**. In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, where 5.4 million people will face serious difficulties in meeting their food needs in the coming dry season, this was added to **armed conflicts, population displacement and climate shock**. According to UNICEF, the total number of children suffering from malnutrition in these countries could be close to 3 million. It should be noted that 1.5 million children benefit from school feeding programmes that were interrupted by the pandemic.

Radio and television have been in many countries the most viable alternative for continuing to teach, since the digital divide is huge. **Almost 90% of students do not have a computer at home and 82% cannot connect to the internet** in a region in which **56 million students live in areas without mobile phone coverage** and with unreliable electricity supply and internet connections, where accessible.

School or work

Africa has the lowest school enrolment rates, particularly in the sub-Saharan area. One in five children aged six to ten and a third of those who are aged between 12 and 14 are out of school. Only 65% of students in the sub region complete primary school, while the figures for secondary in the first and second years are 40% and 28% respectively. Information from UNESCO indicates that, **as a consequence of the pandemic, around 11 million primary and secondary school students may abandon their studies**.

Séni Ouedraogo, head of Quality of Education and Training at the Burkina Faso Ministry of Education, expresses a general feeling in the region that **“not being in school exposes children and adolescents to numerous risks, especially recruitment into armed groups, forced marriage and early pregnancy, and to involvement in dangerous child labour practices”**, as well as to sexual exploitation and violence. “Their inclusion in protective and inclusive spaces is an effective means of protecting them from these risks” he says.

The causes of school dropout are numerous, starting with child labour, which is, in relative terms, double or more than in other regions. **Two in every ten African children work and one in every ten do so in hazardous occupations**.

“We cannot say [that child labour has increased with the pandemic] because it has not been documented, but it is a visible phenomenon,” explains Edouard Junior Ndeye, strategic director of the Sahel region, who recalls, for example, that **many children work as labourers in the gold mines of Burkina Faso**.

Research into this issue has found **a high correlation between child labour and disaster and conflict situations**, such as those that can be found in many countries in the African continent.

The radio of hope in the midst of the pandemic

Latifatou lives in a village in the commune of Ouahigouya in Burkina Faso. She was preparing for her exams when the school administration board announced the temporary closure of schools due to the pandemic.

This news was no surprise, but both her and her parents worried about the consequences that it would have for her education. To start with she tried to keep studying at home, but she ended up accompanying her mother to the market to help sell clothes until, one day the school administration board announced that it was distributing radios on behalf of the NGO Educo so that students could continue with their lessons despite the pandemic via specific radio programs.

"After that, the way I organised my time at home changed. In the morning, I would take notes while I listened to the radio and then I would try and understand them" she says. Sometimes, she would go to school to study because it was the only place where she had access to chalk and a blackboard to do the exercises.

"Unfortunately, despite the classes, I haven't been able to understand the exercises as well as when I was going to school. I haven't been able to receive the explanations I needed either because we are not allowed to meet people. So, **I haven't passed my exam and that makes me sad**", she explains.



Latifatou is repeating the school year in a class with her younger siblings and other classmates who, like her, have not passed their exams. Despite everything, she said she was happy to be able to go back to school and see her friends again. "But, at the start of the year, we were told that we must maintain a one-metre distance and wear a mask in class and in all areas of the school. It has been a bit difficult, but at least, **with classes re-starting, I understand the lessons better**".

This year, she hopes to graduate from primary school, in order to go to the *lycée* (secondary school) and keep studying. She also hopes that the health crisis will end soon and everyone will be able to forget about the social distancing measures.

Attacks and threats by armed groups

A health crisis as well as the humanitarian and security crises in the region. In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger alone, there are 1.2 million internally displaced people and refugees, half of whom are children. Between April 2017 and December 2019, **more than 3,300 schools were closed in these countries due to attacks and threats from armed groups** - affecting

650,000 children and more than 16,000 teachers - and the pandemic has only worsened the situation.

The general secretary of ChildFund Alliance, Meg Gardinier, reminds us of a lesson learned from previous crises, especially in countries coming out of armed conflicts, which is that "**education** is, after food, clothes and shelter, the fourth pillar of humanitarian aid, because it establishes a sense of normality, it **makes people think**

of the future, it gives them something to concentrate on and minimises the possibilities" that young people fall into extremism.

Early pregnancy and child marriage

To the above we have to add the problems of teenage marriages, early pregnancy and pre-existing gender inequalities, which can get worse as a result of the closure of schools.

The countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are among the countries that **register the highest levels of early**

marriage. According to UNICEF data, the rate of women (from 20 to 24 years old) who were married before they were 18 is 76% in Niger, 54% in Mali, 52% in Burkina Faso, 31% in Benin and 29% in Senegal.

Before COVID-19, one in four women aged 20 to 24 from the region said they had become mothers for the first time before they were 18. According to calculations by World Vision International - based on what happened with Ebola, statistics and the school closure scenario -, **early marriage could increase by 65% which would keep a million children out of school.**

Latin America

Since the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Latin America and the Caribbean in January 2020, the region has accumulated more than 21.5 million confirmed cases and 665,000 deaths. Schools in this region were closed for an average of five months in 2020, a figure which hides some extremes. In Ecuador, Panama and Peru there have been no in-person classes for more than a year, whereas in Nicaragua there have been no interruptions because of the virus.

The schools closure affected the School Food Programs (PAE in Spanish) which 85 million students benefit from. School meals are a **source of food and nutritional security for 10 million children from vulnerable families**, a number which may increase as a result of the economic consequences of the pandemic.

Governments have set up mechanisms to ensure the continuity of services, for example, the distribution of food parcels, direct transfers to the families or vouchers that can be exchanged for food. They have also made efforts to offer classes via the television and the internet. However, the measures have been insufficient to reach large sections of the vulnerable population who, **in the absence of connectivity and adequate tools, have not benefited from remote learning**. According to UNICEF, only 1 in every 2 children from public schools in

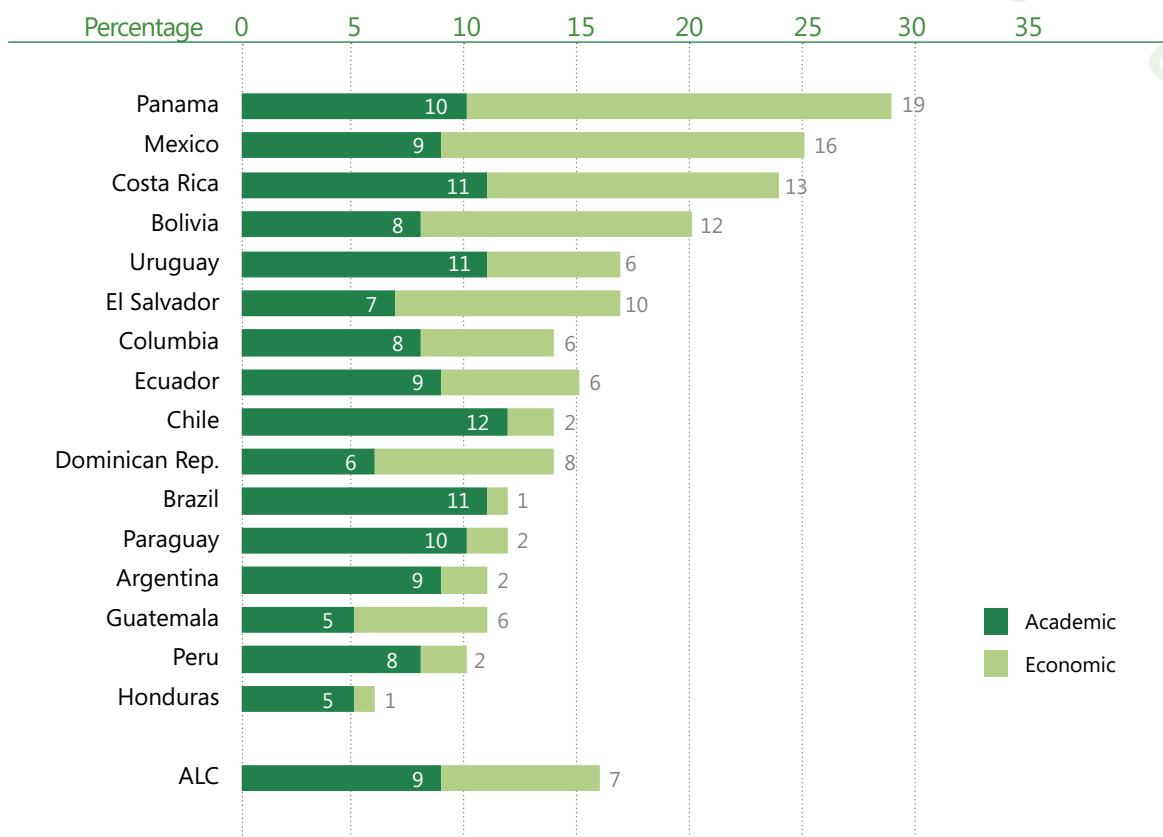
the region have access to remote education, compared to three in every four from private schools.

School dropouts

Projections by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) show that 1.2 million school-age people in the region may drop out of school because of the pandemic. This represents a 15% increase in school dropouts compared to pre-COVID-19 levels (9% for academic reasons and 7% for economic reasons).

The digital divide has been a determining factor in the exclusion of students with less resources. In this region, children and adolescents have limited access to electronic devices and, although internet connectivity has increased, there is high level of dependence on mobile telephones, with very limited data. **Half of students aged three to 17 do not have an internet connection at home and there are huge differences in access depending on social class.** For example, in El Salvador and Bolivia only 4% of families in conditions of poverty have an internet connection at home, whereas among the richest it is between 34 and 38%.

Increase in school dropouts due to academic and economic reasons



Source: Acevedo et al. (2020)

The dropout projection is a bitter pill to swallow for a region that before the pandemic was already struggling to retain students in secondary education (80% of students complete the first cycle, but only 60% complete the second cycle, despite it being compulsory) and particularly discouraging for countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, where educational exclusion before the pandemic was already 38%, 42% and 48%, respectively.

"In general terms, school dropout is a structural problem" in Latin America, where dropout rates "are closely associated with the quality of learning, the relevance of the content, the relevance to the lives of students and parents" points out Cefas Asensio, expert in education for human development. School dropouts increase "because no one addresses its causes" and these have got worse with the pandemic, he adds.

Nelsy Lizarazo expresses a similar opinion. She is the general coordinator for the Latin American Campaign for the Right to Education (Campaña Latinoamericana para el Derecho a la Educación), who speaks of systems that "expel" and recalls that this desertion "has to do with the need for adolescents to contribute financially to their families, but also with a certain idea that there is no point in dedicating so many years to studies, because, at the end of the day, they are not going to go on to university or become professionals" and with a sense of disenchantment with regard to the possibility of working if they have more studies.

The combination of dropping out of school and few employment opportunities translates into a high number of young people neither studying, nor working, nor in training, a situation that affects 23 million people, and is most prevalent among women.



Child labour

One achievement in the region has been a reduction in child labour. However, there are still **10.5 million children and adolescents** (7.3% of the population aged between seven and 17) **who work** without having reached the minimum legal working age and this figure may increase to up to 300,000 as a result of the devastating impact of the pandemic.

The main areas of activity for children in the region are **domestic labour and agriculture**, but they also participate in high risk jobs such as **mining or collecting materials from landfills**.

Organised gang violence

Another structural problem in the region related to school dropouts is violence, including that committed at home and by organised crime groups. The figures are chilling: in this region, **one in two children under the age of 15 is subjected to corporal punishment in the home; 1.1 million adolescents aged 15-19 have experienced violence or other forced sexual acts**; the adolescent homicide rate is five times higher in this region than the global average; and more and **more children are migrating on their own**.

One country historically affected by social violence is El Salvador, where in 2019 almost 4000 children and adolescents were withdrawn from schools for reasons of delinquency, gang involvement and forced displacement.

The decision disrupted their school routine and led to absenteeism, dropouts, repetition, over-age students and school mobilisation, recalls Alicia Ávila de Parada, Educo's director in the country.

“The presence of *maras* and gangs in the communities as well as near and even within schools generates a major risk for children and adolescents, both as victims of theft, robbery, injury, rape or homicide, as well as the harassment to which mainly male adolescents are subjected so that they join gangs or carry out criminal activities such as sexual abuse of girls and female adolescents,” he says.

Cefas Asensio explains that violence by the *maras* and other organised groups is a complex problem that cannot be resolved if the only alternative is punishment. The cycle of violence will be reproduced “if we do not make changes to the values, mentalities and educational approaches, and offer alternative work opportunities” or reintegration opportunities for these individuals.

Within violence, a particularly serious issue is the **trafficking of children and adolescents for commercial sexual violence purposes**, which occurs in some countries, like Bolivia. In 2019 there were 425 victims of trafficking reported in the country, 60% of which were girls. **Sexual exploitation has increased during the pandemic taking advantage of the vulnerable situation of families**. “Despite the existence of laws to combat this form of violence, there are regulatory gaps and many limitations, for example in terms of budget and infrastructure to attend to victims, as well as trained and informed professionals to deal with the problem,” explains Viviana Farfán, Educo's Safeguarding specialist in Bolivia.

Support for reducing the risk of trafficking

There are various factors that increase the risk of many children and adolescents becoming victims of crimes such as trafficking or commercial sexual violence. Some of these factors are **family neglect, alcohol or drug consumption, or suffering from other types of violence**. These are common situations among a large number of the people who live on the streets.

Raquel is a 17-year-old adolescent who lived with one of the groups of homeless young people in Cochabamba. There she experienced fear because of the use of illegal substances and the fights she witnessed. On the other hand, she felt good there because she had a partner she wanted to be with.

In 2020, Raquel participated in activities for identifying and training that are carried out in the framework of Protejeres, an Educo program aimed at children and adolescents who are at risk from becoming trafficking victims and sexual violence, and which carries out prevention and training activities.

The information provided in these Protejeres spaces is combined with a series of dynamics and games that make adolescent girls and young women feel confident enough to approach, participate and learn.

Regarding her experience in the program, Raquel says: “I like that we are all together, laughing, playing, we always have fun. I feel more informed and safer; I was able to tell my nieces and nephews not to trust strangers; I also told my sister what the youth workers told us”.

Three months ago, Raquel had a baby, who is now her biggest motivation to keep going, and she has stopped drinking alcohol. According to Raquel, she managed to leave the streets to go and live with her partner and stopped being in contact with “the group”. However, she has very little contact with her family and is currently experiencing high levels of violence from her partner. The teenager wants to leave the relationship and says she is scared of being alone with her baby, but even more scared of staying with



him. At the same time, she is aware that she can do it and must analyse her future options: “I have learnt from the training [in the program] **that no one can hurt me or force me to do things I don’t want to do**”.

As part of its activities, the Educo Protejeres program provides support for the teenager to obtain her baby’s identity card and receive comprehensive care (health, legal assistance and food). It also provides accompaniment and counselling, in coordination with the competent national body, as well as monitoring the domestic violence situation. It also looks at options for her to find a place to live and work in order to **reduce the possibility of her returning to the streets and being exposed to networks** that violate her rights.

Recommendations from Educo in El Salvador to fight against sexual violence and its repercussions on the education and development of girls

Primary duty bearers

- Duty bearers must articulate their work with the community and the family to strengthen their primary and fundamental role, in accordance with art. 9 of the LEPINA. It is essential to strengthen competencies within the family to implement positive discipline and positive treatment in order to establish a relationship based on healthy communication and respect for human dignity, mainly focused on eradicating sexist views and sexual violence against girls.
- Strengthen educational investment in sexual violence prevention processes, mainly focused on strengthening and raising awareness with comprehensive sexuality education and access to friendly sexual and reproductive health services. Similarly, investment is needed to make the internal protocols and mechanisms for protection at school more robust.
- Promote and develop other flexible alternatives (making use of new technologies) so that girls who are pregnant, are mothers or are victims of Other Forms of Violence can find options for continuing their education.
- National and local duty bearers are encouraged to place the issue of prevention of sexual violence against girls and adolescents on national and local agendas in order to “denaturalise” the phenomenon and begin to dismantle the ideas and conditions that perpetuate the perpetration of these crimes.
- In terms of violence prevention, it is necessary to strengthen the mechanisms for applying the regulatory framework, policies, programmes and development plans at the local and national levels, especially in order to have an impact on the protection of children’s rights. Attention to and reduction of forced internal displacement and irregular migration affecting children, adolescents and their families is a matter of urgency in the country’s current situation.
- Social violence must be addressed comprehensively, including crime prevention, crime suppression and victim care. One of the main protection challenges is the investment and implementation of specialised programmes to protect children who are threatened and used by *maras* and gangs.

Secondary duty bearers:

- Work must be done to promote and develop protective and safe environments by ensuring inter-agency coordination. This should be done from a life-cycle approach that integrates the protection actions of the different duty bearers.
- Promote the development of new masculinities in men and boys in community settings as a way of developing new forms of relationships and changes in men’s roles in different areas of socialisation.



Asia

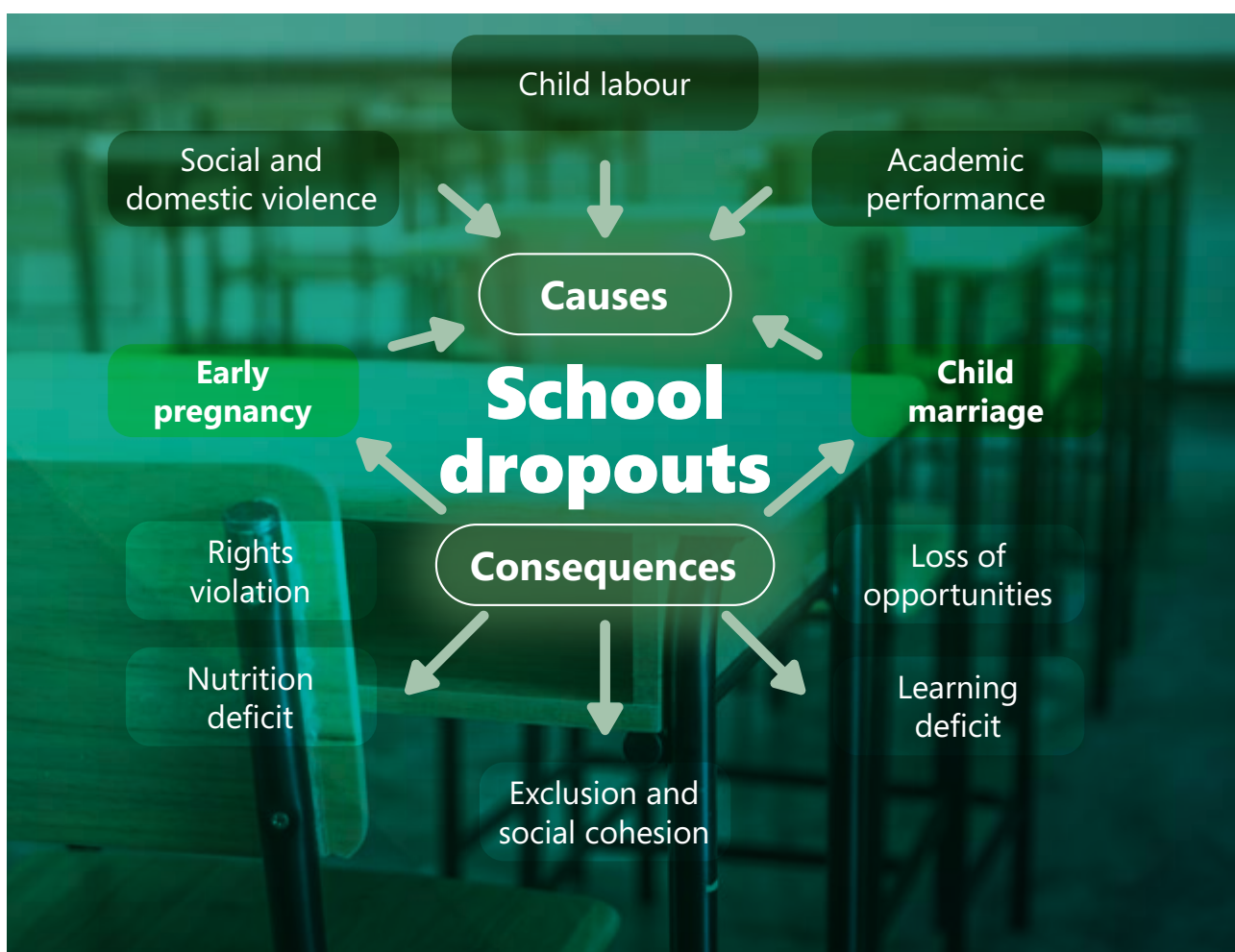
With **986 million children and adolescents** in pre-school, primary and secondary, Asia is the region globally where the **effects of the educational crisis** have been felt the most. The three countries Educo works in, India, Bangladesh and the Philippines, are home to almost half of these students. Since the year 2000, the region has achieved significant progress to ensure universal primary education, but it has had less success in secondary education. A total of 19 million primary school-age children were not enrolled in school before the pandemic, while the figure reached 109 million in secondary school.

As a result of COVID-19, significant learning losses are occurring in countries in East Asia and the Pacific, where, according to UNESCO data, **remote education has failed to reach 80 million students**, which may mean

that children leave school before completing their studies. The continuity of education has particularly affected alternative learning systems (ALS) and second chance education programmes for people whose circumstances prevent them from attending mainstream schools or who are trying to complete basic education levels after dropping out.

School dropouts

No figures are available for early school leavers at regional level, but data from some countries confirm an increase. **In the case of the Philippines** for example, **3 million fewer basic education enrolments have been recorded** for the 2020-2021 school year than for the previous one, and enrolments in alternative



learning systems were just over half of what they were before the pandemic. In India, in January 2020 it was announced that the rate of dropouts was below 3% for the first time, but education experts in the country estimate that this will double in a year due to the barriers related to remote learning.

In some Asian countries, they are seeing **a migration from private schools to public ones**, who will therefore require more staff and resources, which are already scarce at present. This trend has been detected for example in Nepal and India. In India, there is a high number of low-cost private schools that many families can no longer pay for due to a drop in their income, explains Cecilia Soriano, the regional campaigns coordinator for the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE).

In the Philippines, where in-person classes have been suspended for a year, the existing experience in remote learning, targeted at specific groups of students, has been used to develop a nationwide scheme. This system of educational modules with written materials has made it possible to give continuity to classes and to reach as many students as possible, since the penetration of new technologies is still very low, says Joan Lagata, head of education in the Bicol region on the island of Luzon. Although "it is far from perfect" and will not give the same results as in-person education, this learning alternative is enabling the teaching of the most important skills in anticipation of the transition to a new normal.

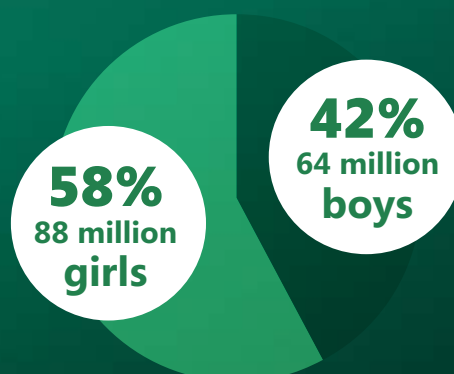
International bodies have expressed particular concern for the effect of the crisis on girls, as **one of the main obstacles for accessing education in this region is gender discrimination**.

Child labour

In Asia and the Pacific, 7.4% of children aged 5 to 17 work, a low figure compared to 19.6% in Africa, but in absolute numbers the quantity is almost the same (62 million in the first region and 69.9 million in the second). Only in India, a country where only 43% of



152 million
children work



Economic activity

70.9%
Agriculture

17.2%
Services

11.9%
Industry

Age profile

48%
5-11 year olds

28%
12-14 year olds

24%
15-17 year olds

Source: https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_713925/lang--en/index.htm

students complete the second cycle of secondary school, an estimated 10 million children work or are looking for work.

Children and adolescents do not only carry out domestic and agricultural tasks, they are also forced to work in the streets and in mining activities. **The labour exploitation of children as cheap manual labour in factories and industries is common currency in many Asian countries**, a phenomenon fuelled by extreme poverty. **In Bangladesh, 3.45 million children work**, 95% of them work in the informal economy, and, of those, most of them perform hazardous tasks. “In the crisis context of the pandemic, many children desperately need to return to work despite the threat of coronavirus, and many children who have previously stayed out of child labour are forced to work to support their families’ struggling economy”, says Afzal Khan, manager of the Child Labour projects for Educo in the country. He also explains that “we are deeply concerned that the COVID-19 pandemic may pose further obstacles to the implementation of the country’s plan to eliminate some types of child labour by 2025, the most hazardous forms

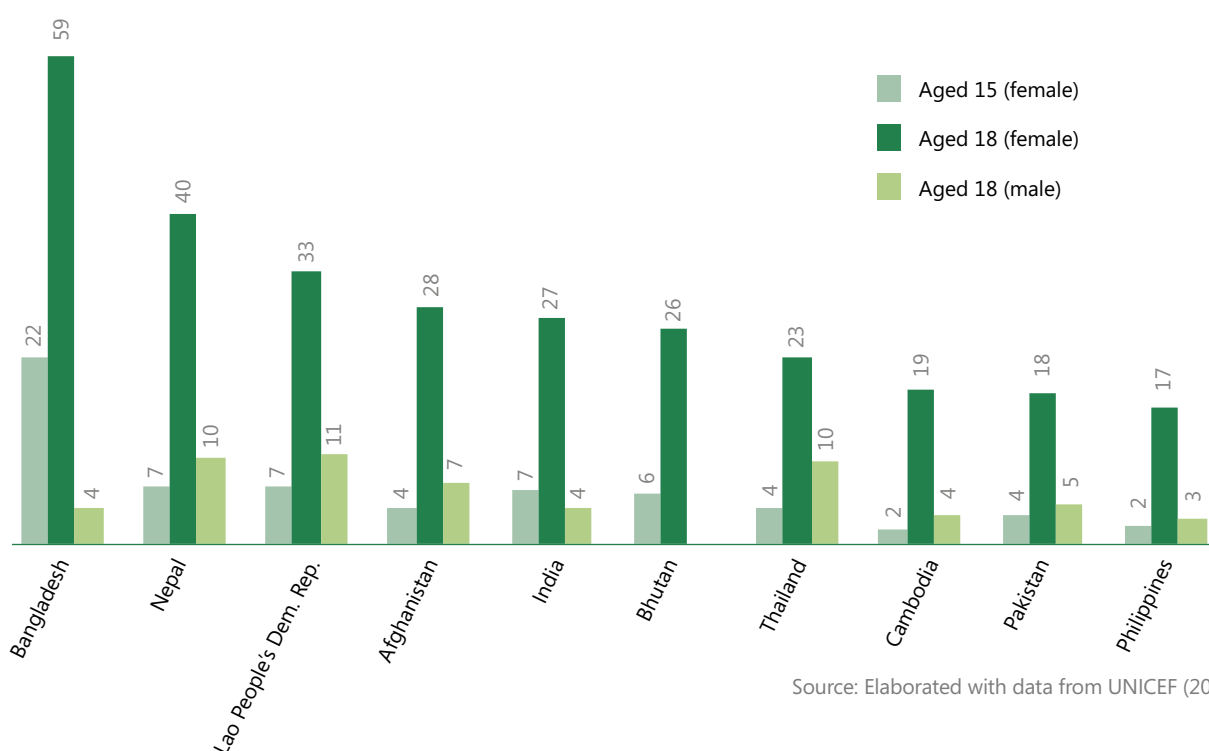
of child labour, as part of Bangladesh’s commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)”.

Marriage and violence

Child marriage is one of the practices that leads to school dropouts among girls in Asia. **One in three women aged 20 to 24 is married before she is 18**, in many cases because **it is the only option for families who do not earn enough to survive**. Although it also happens with boys, the risk of a teenage marriage **is higher with girls and, in particular, among girls from rural areas**, those that live in **poor households** and those who have studied only secondary school at the most. This is coupled with a high prevalence of early pregnancy.

According to UNICEF, a higher number of girls have been forced to marry since the start of the pandemic and in Indonesia alone 33,000 child marriages were authorised in the first six months of 2020, twice as much as in 2019. And **almost five in every ten married girls have a child before they turn 18**.

Percentage of women and men aged 20-24 married before the age of 15 and before the age of 18



When studying is not a priority at home

Arif is 11 and is the eldest of three children. His family moved to one of the marginalised neighbourhoods of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, when his father died.

When he was only eight years old, he started working as a substitute for his stepfather as a bicycle taxi driver. The most he could earn in a day was 1.50 euros; as it was too little, his brother started to help him and his sister became a domestic worker.

Arif was just another of the **1.28 million children who are involved in hazardous occupations in Bangladesh**, as the Government classifies the transport sector as high-risk.

In 2019, the teenager suffered an accident while working and had to stay in bed for a month. Once he recovered, his mother managed to place him in a small farm delivering milk. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing, the demand for milk dropped and so did his salary. For the same reason, the income of the rest of the family also decreased, making it harder to obtain food supplies. His work situation has improved slightly recently.

Arif studies in one of the schools Educo runs in Dhaka for working children as part of the ODHIKAR project, implemented by the local partner organisation ESO and funded by ChildFund Korea. This project provides primary education for children and professional training for some



students, as well as alternative income-earning opportunities for their families.

Although he admits that he sometimes feels very tired and loses concentration at school because he attends classes after working hours, he is convinced that “education is very important in life, because it makes life perfect and ensures dignity for everyone. I want to be a teacher and be able to teach lots of children that drop out of school and work like me”.

With the pandemic, **there has also been an increase in abuse, harassment and sexual exploitation**. For example, in Bangladesh, it has been reported that the number of beatings by caregivers of children increased by 42% during confinement. In the Philippines, between 1 and 26 March 2020, there was a four-fold increase in reports of online sexual exploitation compared to the same period the previous year.

Educo Bangladesh poses the following action points to help guarantee the future of the most vulnerable children



The government must take the initiative to include all working children and their families in the social safety net, including those who do not permanently reside in the area.

The Government should review the National Plan of Action on child labour taking into account the impact of COVID-19 and implement it accordingly. In particular:

- Review the list of hazardous work for children including domestic work, dry fish, brick factories, rubbish collection, etc.
- Strengthening/proper functioning of the National and Divisional Child Labour Wellbeing Council and at District and Sub-District level (Upazila) the Child Labour Monitoring Committee (CLMC).
- Allocation of the necessary budget for the implementation of the activities of the National Action Plan.

In order to protect children during the pandemic, the government can provide financial support for child labour through the Ministry of Labour and Employment's Workers' Welfare Fund.

Government and civil society organisations should collaborate with additional efforts to prevent and eliminate existing and potential child labour. In particular:

- A major effort will have to be made to integrate the working child population into local educational establishments, both public and private, in order to ensure continuity of education, which could lead to the withdrawal of this population from hazardous work.
- The government must create opportunities for child labourers to access vocational training, which could help remove child labour from the workplace.
- The government needs to make a major effort to enforce child labour laws at all levels, in consultation with CSOs working on child labour issues.
- There is an urgent need to initiate a massive awareness-raising campaign at local and national level to sensitise children, parents, employers and the community against child labour. In this respect, the government and civil society can work together.

What have we learned?



The COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone, regardless of gender, place of residence, income level, ethnicity or socio-economic background, but the consequences have not been the same for everyone, and they are significantly greater for the most vulnerable people. **The crisis is deepening disparities in all areas and threatens to erase in a single stroke much of the progress achieved in the last decade** and further delay the achievement of the SDGs.

The devastating effects of the pandemic are especially being felt in education. The months of school closures and measures taken to limit the spread of infection have exacerbated chronic problems already affecting this sector, including **the exclusion of millions of children from schools, unequal access to quality education and the perception of students as recipients, rather than actors, in education**, despite the fact that it is a vital aspect of their development.

Efforts to continue the school year using remote teaching methods have put the resilience of the different stakeholders to the test, forcing students to **depend on their own resources**. It has also forced teachers to adapt suddenly to a teaching model they have not been trained for and without the necessary resources and support. At the same time, it has demanded more involvement from families in the education of their children, acquiring new commitments and accompanying children in educational tasks that require digital and other competencies that in many cases they were not prepared for.

During the pandemic, **the economic, social and technological divides have hindered learning** for students who were already in a disadvantaged situation due to their personal or socio-economic situation, increasing the risk of disengagement from the education system and reducing their chances of successfully completing their studies.

The experience of the last year has corroborated the idea that remote education can offer quality and be effective in terms of content learning, provided that it is preceded by adequate teacher training, resources, technological and pedagogical knowledge and skills. However, there is a consensus that it cannot replace in-person education and should only be used as a temporary solution, in emergency cases or as a complement to education in the classroom, because it does not offer the same level of stimulation and equal possibilities for interaction, thus preventing socialisation at critical ages. Nor, as we have seen, does it enable the realisation of **other rights associated with schooling, such as nutrition, protection, child wellbeing** and others.

Education is fundamentally a relational process and **schools represent essential profoundly significant spaces** in which children are shaped, they grow as people, learn to socialise, to value diversity and where fundamental values are appropriated and manifested that are the pillar 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. The

educational situation created by the pandemic has made clear the need to rethink EDUCATION, in capital letters, and its role in relation to the model of society we want to build.

Education specialists and professionals also underline that **the pandemic has highlighted the need to diversify teaching models** in order to respond to the unsatisfied educational demand of certain population groups, such as certain indigenous communities, who speak a language other than the one used in public education.

He also made it clear that better preparation is needed, because while the current pandemic has hit all countries unexpectedly and abruptly, others can be expected in the future. While some countries have been able to take previous distance learning experiences to a large scale, the pandemic has shown the need to rethink the school, its contents and strengthen the link with the community.

There is evidence that **schools are spaces that offer trust, security and protection** for many children in vulnerable situations and lacking protection. The closure of schools deprived them of an effective mechanism which contributes to their wellbeing.

The pandemic has boosted innovation, collaborative work, solidarity, cooperation and the inclusion of new stakeholders. As explained by the coordinator of Tejiendo Redes, Juan Martín Pérez, "learning communities were created among the students themselves. A lot of content was generated on the internet, with appropriate educational content and following national curricula".

The pandemic has served to recognise **the primary role of teachers** and the need to offer them support and ongoing training.

It has also shown **the need to take children's opinions into account** in decisions about their education. It is fundamental that they have access to public spaces, in local governments, in the family and in school contexts and in associations, in order to defend their rights, dialogue and be an active part of the processes that affect them.

Educo carried out a survey in 2020 in 20 countries about subjective wellbeing, to find out about and understand how children were experiencing the pandemic and what their aspirations were. The responses showed that, while they emphasise issues of personal wellbeing and the importance of the family, their concerns go beyond this to encompass more global concerns, such as the impact on the general population, the economy and the environment. According to the expert in Child Wellbeing programs at Educo and the coordinator of the survey, Reinaldo Plasencia, the respondents' answers "suggest that there was a certain feeling of exclusion. As an organisation and as adults, we are responsible for taking their opinions and translating them into actions in the short, medium and long term".

It will be a few years before the full extent of the pandemic's impact on education is known. However, specialists in sociology, education and economics, among others, are inclined to think that, beyond its direct academic and economic cost, it will make inequalities worse. **Real equality will be achieved when the education systems offer vulnerable children the possibility to achieve similar results and opportunities as their more advantaged peers** and ensure that no one is left behind. That involves **efforts in education being complemented by social and economic efforts in order to build more equitable and fairer societies.**

In the immediate term, **exclusion from education represents the violation of a fundamental human right.** In the medium and long term, a lack of learning and an increase in school dropouts and out-of-school children could lead to a **generational crisis**, in the loss of opportunities to enjoy a dignified life, to be and do what they value and lastly, in the **multidimensional impoverishment of whole societies.**

Looking to the future



COVID-19 has reminded society of the central role that education has for 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**, especially in terms of guaranteeing equitable access to education.

The pandemic has highlighted the need to **reduce inequalities in relation to access to and quality of learning that already existed** and that have been increased as a consequence. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Koumbou Boly Barry, the long-term impact of the pandemic on education will depend on decisions taken now. The question is “whether we will be able to bring about positive change without reversing the progress made in recent decades,”

she said in a report on the right to education in the context of COVID-19.

In order to guarantee the right to an inclusive quality education, it is necessary to look for a multidimensional response due to the interdependence it has with other rights. It is not enough to take measures in education, it is important that **needs in related areas like housing, nutrition and basic social services are guaranteed**.

The education crisis has opened a window of opportunity for rethinking education. Given the high rates of academic failure and early dropout rates, we need to reflect more deeply on the causes that lead to disengagement, failure and dropout in order to move towards **more resilient educational models** that are better adapted to the

learning needs of each country and each community, so that no one is left behind.

The experience of 2020 must serve to design solutions that include people excluded from education, those children that did not go to school before the pandemic. According to Boly Barry, as schools reopen, it is important to establish systems for monitoring and controlling school dropout at all levels, not only because it is a prerequisite for minimising the impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable children, but also **to prepare for any future crises.**

While it is logical that governments' priority was the health emergency, it is necessary to give children the attention they deserve and put them at the centre of public policies, to make them visible and listen to them, because children have also suffered the impact of the pandemic. We need to see **students as stakeholders within education** and take their opinions into account, because that is where the hows and the answers for constructing educational spaces will come from.

In order to offer a quality inclusive education for all people, it is necessary to act on several fronts at the same time. It is essential to **intensify efforts** to reduce child poverty and exclusion and to combat violations of children's rights, eliminating practices like **child labour, child marriages, all types of violence** and acts which put their security and wellbeing in danger. It is also important to bear in mind that education is a key tool for achieving these goals.



Inclusion in education means finding educational alternatives that guarantee free education and avoid the marginalisation of entire groups. This means strengthening education systems with more resources of all kinds to reach the most remote areas. It also means better development of written materials, exploring how to make the most of resources like radio and television with appropriate content for each channel, and, alongside technological and telecommunication companies, look for solutions that provide access to remote learning platforms. In some contexts, it will be important to prioritise learning approaches that favour written materials and do not rely on technology or only use it to a limited extent. In any case, the solutions adopted must not mean additional costs for families.

We have to avoid the collapse of the public education system, prioritising a quality, equitable and transforming education



In the long term, a review of the educational model **in each country** seems inevitable, taking into account the following:

1 **In-person education** should be favoured, even if in the short term it requires maintaining strict health safety measures that restrict interaction, but protect the health of students. Schools have an indisputable role in socialisation that goes far beyond the learning of content and need adequate resources (in terms of numbers and preparation of teachers, materials and funding) to fulfil this role.

2 It is important to **give the most vulnerable students priority**, using educational policies which are more inclusive and equitable, by adopting detection measures for children and adolescents at risk of being left behind and the implication of the whole educational community in its broadest sense (city councils, education sector professionals, schools, community centres, parents' associations, etc.). In addition, 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, as well as specific measures for catching up on missed learning (support classes, school holidays, specific tutorials, mutual support groups, etc.) and the promotion of educational alternatives for those who are unable enter the system (bridge courses, second opportunity schools, vocational-technical education, etc.).

3 Children and adolescents are **rights holders** and their interests must be more present and they must participate in deliberations and decision-making processes in the political agenda. Institutions must take their desires and opinions into account, by offering them safe and relevant participation spaces. School is an essential space in which children and adolescents can learn to dialogue, respect others and resolve conflicts peacefully.

4 Education is an enabling right, a key objective for fulfilling the 2030 Agenda and a pillar of the economic and social reconstruction of every country and, therefore, must be **a social and political priority**. States must see expenditure in education and child protection as an investment. There are fears that the economic crisis and the resulting reduction in tax revenue will result in the reallocation of budgetary resources towards economic and health recovery to the detriment of education and child protection, when the budget for children was already inadequate before the pandemic. Governments must mobilise resources and preserve the budgets for education in real terms and not relative ones, because maintaining spending rates will be insufficient given the fall in countries' GDP.

5 Closing the **digital divide** must be posed not just because of its importance in addressing the immediate consequences of the pandemic, but as a long-term investment. Information and communication technology have become so important that they must be fully incorporated into educational practice, while ensuring equality of access, use and competencies. During the pandemic, it has been made clear that technology is not just for exchanging messages, but can also contribute to capacity building and the inculcation of fundamental values in people. Computer literacy and the promotion of critical thinking can help reduce the risks associated with internet use.

The pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of people and institutions; our security has been threatened. We are increasingly moving towards a society anchored in uncertainty, which is why it is necessary to rethink ways of learning, based on critical thinking, which develop students' ability to cooperate rather than compete. But it has also taught us many lessons, one of which is the interdependence between people and the planet: only by learning to cooperate can we live together. The future and the present of students is at stake.

List of people interviewed

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Seni Ouedraogo, Head of the Department for the Quality of Education and Training in Burkina Faso
Tapon Kumar Dus, Deputy Director of the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) in Bangladesh

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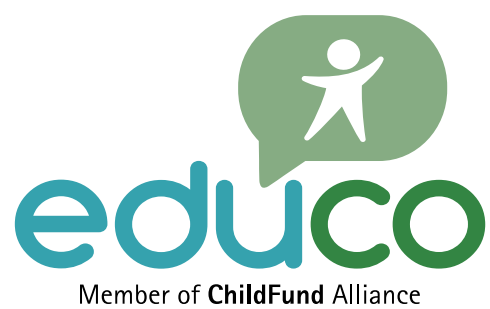
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