

Education is in a state of global emergency

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted societies worldwide and is jeopardizing years of progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and universal human rights. The pandemic is disproportionately affecting the poorest and most marginalised people and communities. **Existing inequalities are being exacerbated.** While the health crisis has mostly affected older generations, young people and children have been the silent victims of the social and economic crisis. School closures have been a central part of governments' response to controlling the spread of the virus. This meant that in April 2020, **1.6 billion children and young people were out of education – approximately 90% of the entire student population¹.** Among others, many children with disabilities were excluded from distance learning, because of inaccessible options. **Approximately 220 million children** remain affected today. Across Africa, **120 million girls are affected by school closures.** Moreover, two thirds of an academic year have been lost on average worldwide due to COVID-19 school closures.²

Covid-19 has exacerbated existing structural and systematic educational inequalities and poor-quality learning faced by the most vulnerable children, especially girls. 24 million learners from pre-primary to tertiary education are at risk of not returning to their studies.³ Amongst them, the poorest and most marginalised children are most at risk. The World Bank predicts the first potential reversal in global child poverty trends since the late 1990s. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, an additional **22–33 million children could be left below the extreme poverty threshold.**

The economic crisis acutely threatens public finances and the capacity of governments to maintain present provision let alone expand education to achieve SDG4- a good quality education for every last child. UNESCO estimates at least \$210 billion will be cut from education budgets this year simply owing to declines in GDP.

Schools are settings in which many children take advantage of key interventions and activities like school feeding, WASH facilities, sport, and leisure. They are social environments that help children develop and thrive. Children who are pushed into poverty because their families are struggling to make ends meet may be forced to work and will never return to school. Teenage girls face an increasing risk of domestic and gender-based violence, unwanted/early pregnancy or child marriage and have greater chances of never returning to school⁴. There is also a threat that we will roll back on progress made to include children with disabilities in education⁵. Significant setbacks in early childhood education mean another generation will be deprived from experiencing an equal and well-prepared start to formal education in the years to come.

¹ UNESCO, (2020) COVID-19 Educational Disruption and Response. <https://en.unesco.org/COVID-1919/educationresponse>

² Plan International (2020) African Girls in the COVID-19 Pandemic <https://planinternational.org/file/44968/download?token=yi4FVVG->

³ UNESCO (2020) COVID-19 education response: how many students are at risk of not returning to school?

<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373992.locale=en>

⁴ World Vision (2020) COVID-19 Aftershocks- Out of time <https://www.wvi.org/publications/report/coronavirus-health-crisis/aftershocks-out-time>

⁵ World Bank (2020) Pivoting Inclusion <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/disability/publication/pivoting-to-inclusion-leveraging-lessons-from-the-c-ovid-19-crisis-for-learners-with-disabilities>

The European Union is in a unique position to support education

Earmarking at least 10% of human development spending within the Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument for education is a unique opportunity to support children and young people. It is also an opportunity to tackle inequalities in partner countries. In the next seven years, the EU should base its support on **strengthening government systems**, following and supporting the positive model of the Global Partnership for Education, to **pave the way for more resilient and inclusive public education systems**. Specific focus should be given to countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Education in the geographic programmes:

The EU should ensure that **education**, especially **access to basic education**, is **prioritised in the countries most in need** in the National Indicative Programmes. This support should ideally come with a commitment from countries to maintain or increase their domestic spending on education during the period of support.

The EU should **support education at national level** through a variety of complementary implementation modalities, by applying a gender and inclusion lens to all aspects of education, including planning, budgeting and expenditure:

- Specific focus should be placed on **funding governments to ensure the enrolment of out of school children and the return to education of** girls, poorer and marginalised children, displaced and refugee children, children with disabilities, with support to Cash Transfers Schemes, complementing universal social protection where such transfers exist, and prioritising the provisioning of accessible technologies for these groups. **Sector support** should fund the development of quality learning and Accelerated Education Programmes (AEP), teacher training (including specialised education support personnel for children with disabilities) and ensure adequate numbers of qualified teachers, and their adequate remuneration. They should ensure that schools have satisfactory WASH and sanitation facilities and sanitary equipment, appropriate facilities for boys and girls, including Menstrual Hygiene Management. Specific focus should be given to child protection including the prevention and response to school-related gender based-violence (SRGBV) and psycho-social support for vulnerable children.

While early childhood care and development is not prioritised in many low and middle income countries, it is part of basic education and plays an important role in the physical and psychological development of children, particularly of marginalised groups. Kindergartens or other ECD settings offer child protection and nutrition services for children guaranteeing that they are better prepared for school - at least one year of free and inclusive pre-primary education should be supported. Early childhood care and education should be supported by expanding public systems as opposed to for-profit provision, as the latter can exacerbate inequalities between young children. Education must be gender-sensitive as it is a critical time for the socialisation of gender equality, and must combine care, nutrition, protection and stimulation.

- **Grants to civil society.** Civil society, especially local CSOs, has an important role to play in holding governments to account, and in contributing to the design and, in specific cases, the implementation of education programmes that are fully inclusive. CSOs can deliver education

programmes and support communities in hard-to-reach areas where the State fails or is absent, including for refugees and internally displaced people (IDP), as long as non-State provision supplements but does not supplant the role of the State. CSOs can contribute to teacher training and accelerated learning. NIPs and RIPs should ensure that part of the envelopes earmarked for education will be directly managed by EU Delegations in the form of **grants to civil society organisations, with a focus on local actors**

- Support **technical assistance** to develop costed programmes expanding access to key basic services and facilities necessary to ensure a safe and effective learning environment for all students. This would include expanding capacity for equitable access to distance learning initiatives like ensuring infrastructure and networks meet the needs of the most vulnerable, appropriate devices and accessible digital material are available, radios are purchased and distributed. It should support other solutions linked to breaching the digital divide and ensure accessibility for all learners, including children and youth with disabilities;

Over the 7-year period, the EU should strengthen national education budgets, either by direct contributions or by supporting actions that drive public investment in inclusive and quality education. Moreover, if funding is not available through thematic programmes, the EU could **earmark funds from the NIPs to co-fund Global Partnership for Education (GPE) initiatives in countries that are eligible for support**. Delivering aid through multilateral organisations helps EU aid go further, faster, and achieve better results.

Where secondary and vocational training or tertiary education are prioritised in the National Indicative Programmes, the EU must ensure that partner countries already have the capacity and support to reopen schools safely and to continuously ensure access to inclusive quality basic and primary education, as early as possible. Technical, and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) will help address children's needs and job aspirations, increase motivation for education, boost school attendance and transition rates, and enable young people to gain market-relevant skills as well as the knowledge and confidence to succeed in their chosen field of work. Strengthening the TVET sector also requires sector development (education system) components such as harmonizing of fragmented governance, updated curricula, TVET teacher training, apprenticeship models, creating labour market information (LMI) system and career guidance counselling system, decreasing the drop-out and smooth transitions from TVET to labour market or to tertiary level education. We call for gender-transformative and youth-responsive investments in TVET that bring together public and private sector partners (especially employers).

Acknowledging the need for multi-year funding, sufficiently long to address educational needs in protracted crises, **geographic programmes should also provide for funding complementary to ECHO support on Education in Emergencies in fragile contexts**. Programmes contributing to strengthening education systems (including through WASH infrastructure in schools, cash transfers to support families and school feeding, early childhood and child friendly spaces and AEP) in fragile or conflict affected countries should be supported. This type of programming would contribute to resilience building and to conflict prevention, enabling the operationalisation of the triple nexus.

Education in the thematic programmes and EU commitments to education globally:

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) is the largest source of multilateral funding for education. The partnership has a unique role – agreeing standards for education planning and policy-making, and mobilising development financing from public and private donors around the world to support and monitor the implementation of national education plans. **The EU can increase its impact on education at global level by continuing to fund the Global Partnership for Education as well as Education Cannot Wait (ECW).** In order to meet the gaps, the EU should make a pledge of 560 Million euros for the 2021-2025 period at the replenishment conference of the GPE in July 2021 and 60 million euros for ECW over the next two years. If funding from the thematic programmes is not available or sufficient, the EU should consider mobilising additional resources from the emerging challenges and priorities cushion given the global emergency in education.

The international aid architecture for education requires working effectively in multi-stakeholder partnerships. We support the EU's and member states' efforts to ensure coordination between these initiatives at global and national levels and believe that the focus of the EU's collaboration with multilaterals should be on GPE and ECW.

Operationalising the education benchmark

The EU should direct funding for education to all levels of education with a higher proportion of the funding going to basic education. In doing this, the EU should prioritise funding to support public, quality inclusive education that enables all learners, especially girls, to fulfil their potential. This would ensure support for vulnerable countries in reaching SDG4.

In monitoring the implementation of the NDICI, the programmes should be linked to the relevant DAC codes and should **consider programmes where education is the main priority sector and multi-sectoral programmes where education is not the main priority but plays a significant role.** A **greater share of the benchmark should be dedicated to strengthening basic education** with links to DAC codes: 11120- primary education, 11230-basic life skills for youth and adults, 11240-early childhood education and 11250- school feeding.

The EU should continue implementing a twin-track approach, by allocating general funding to foster quality and inclusive education systems for all, as well as targeted funding to follow the learners at higher risk of being left behind. In this regard, systematic and consistent use of markers should be ensured, including the OECD DAC policy markers for gender⁶ and for disability⁷, which allows tracking of equitable funding for specific groups of learners, within the overall grant portfolio.

⁶ <https://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/dac-gender-equality-marker.htm>

⁷ [https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD/DAC/STAT\(2020\)48/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD/DAC/STAT(2020)48/en/pdf)

A gender-transformative approach should be integrated into education programmes, addressing and challenging gender discriminatory norms and other barriers to girls' and young women's access to education, and ensuring that these programmes also contribute to reaching the 85% gender target in the NDICI regulation.

NDICI co-financing to ERASMUS should not be considered part of the benchmark, to allow more spending from the instrument to be used to support national education systems and global initiatives, and to ensure sufficient funds focus on basic education and poverty reduction.

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