

Education and Academia Stakeholder Group
HLPF 2020 Side event
Education: the pathway for transformation during and after a crisis

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The world is experiencing an exceptional, painful and tragic moment.

Nothing will be the same from now on.

The pandemic has cost and will cost thousands of human lives. It will also have a dramatic effect on the deepening social inequality that is already growing in all countries, especially in the poorest.

The post-pandemic world will be even more unequal than the one we had before, putting the fundamental rights of millions of human beings at risk.

We must act urgently, responsibly, in solidarity and creatively.

Education in our countries is where inequality has become visible in its most cruel form, not only denying access to school to millions of girls, boys and young people, but also offering less educational opportunities, schools and precarious pedagogical conditions to the poorest and most vulnerable peoples. The closure of our educational institutions has affected everyone, but especially the poorest, whose right to education has always been at risk.

The pandemic will especially affect them. Our commitment must be, today more than ever, **to leave no one behind.**

During these weeks, where we have first been surprised, and then fascinated by the possibility of holding debates, dialogues, virtual meetings and webinars, one of the phrases we have heard the most is **that the pandemic has taught us many things.** This is undoubtedly so. We

have learned a lot, although I do not think that is the most mentioned in the meetings where the impacts of COVID-19 on education are discussed.

For example, the pandemic is said to have revealed that not all boys and girls held in their homes have the same learning opportunities. An observation whose evidence should have scared us from the very formation of modern educational systems in Latin America, **where the poor never had the same opportunities as the highest income sectors and never lived the same way.** We did not need the pandemic to recognize the brutal and unfair relationship between the living conditions of the poorest and their opportunities for education or learning.

The pandemic has also made us discover the seriousness of the digital gap that separates the richest from the poorest, a fact that we have known for a long time and that **is not limited to the advances in microelectronic-based technological innovations of recent decades.** Obviously, there was always a direct relationship between access to basic goods or resources and people's educational opportunities, be it a book or a computer; drinking water, electric power or digital connectivity.

Pandemic discoveries do not end here. There is no virtual event on the impact of COVID-19 on education, which does not highlight the important role that the family has in the education of children and young people. It is still embarrassing that we discovered this once more than 90% of the world's children were left without schools and had to retreat to their homes to escape illness. Families have always been and will be central to promoting children's educational opportunities, although Latin American governments have almost always insisted on ignoring it.

Families (their diversity and complexities) have almost never been at the center of priorities for education managers. For instance, little attention has been given to an issue that the pandemic has dramatically exposed: it is mothers who take care of their children's education, which raises the need to think about care policies that are fairer, more balanced and that do not deepen the already immense gender inequality that exists in our societies.

I think we should stop being surprised by what we should have learned by now. In any case, we should be surprised that only in a few fleeting opportunities there have been policies designed to promote effective educational equality in Latin America.

We are concerned about what the "new normal" of our school systems will be, although what we should be most concerned about is that we do not return to the normalcy that has always governed our schools, which have been plagued by inequality both inside and outside them.

This last issue is fundamental today, more than ever: educational inequalities will multiply because they occur both inside and outside the school. And if the pandemic has revealed undeniable dimensions of the gaps or abysses that separate educational opportunities from

one another, it has also generated an economic crisis that will have a regressive impact on the right to education of the poorest and most vulnerable communities in Latin America.

Let's take a quick look at 5 dimensions that ECLAC has highlighted and the worsening of which will have a severe impact on educational inequality in our region:

1. Job insecurity, unemployment and informality are increasing in a Latin America where already more than half of the economically active population works in informal and precarious conditions.
2. The employment opportunities of the poor decrease while their debts grow, making their living conditions more vulnerable and unstable.
3. The economic crisis impacts on the also precarious conditions of access to decent housing. It increases urban overcrowding, which aggravates and multiplies the health risks of the pandemic.
4. Likewise, the precarious living conditions deepen in a pandemic context when a third of the Latin American population does not have access to clean water and less than a quarter has basic sanitation.
5. Finally, the worsening of the living conditions of the poorest tend to deepen and widen the processes of production of social injustice that Latin American societies go through: gender inequality, violence and institutional racism, discrimination and ethnic segregation.

This is the context that challenges and forces us to act from the government, without nostalgia for the "old normal" and taking advantage of this unexpected and immense crisis to build a more democratic, fair and equal education for our people.

Let me conclude with an issue that I consider to be especially relevant.

We have already seen that reopening schools is a much more complex task than closing them. While in the North, school systems in many countries have gradually returned to classes, in the South, the debate on protocols and conditions for reopening is beginning to generate controversies.

I don't want to stop and tell you what we are doing in Argentina in this regard, but I do want to tell you that we are aware that, in addition to being complex, the return to face-to-face classes is a process that should multiply the public investment efforts of our government, in the context of an unprecedented fiscal crisis.

Thus, the challenge of guaranteeing the financing of public education policies cannot be postponed. The fiscal crisis in our States cannot be the alibi that justifies reducing investment

in education. Debts, minority privileges and regressive tax structures cannot be the wall that denies our societies the right to a future with dignity, well-being and social justice.

The Latin American experience shows that, in situations of crisis and economic recession, the costs always end up being paid by the most vulnerable.

Our commitment must be to definitively undo the tragic and persistent indifference of our governments to the suffering, abandonment, violence and exclusion suffered by significant sectors of our population, especially children.

Maintaining our public education budgets will be insufficient. It was before the pandemic. It will be even more so in the post pandemic.

The reopening of schools compels us to a greater commitment from our States, with the financing conditions that the health protection of our communities require, the learning needs of our students and the teaching conditions of our teachers are protected. This is not a temporary emergency situation. It is a situation that will require long-term commitment and changes.

This way, the pandemic gives us the opportunity of not being wrong again.

This is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss. Because our future is at stake.

Thank you very much.