Covid-19, education and the UN: resilience, adaptability and co-operation

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The 100 days that shut down formal education

1.5+ billion (or 90% of) affected learners; 188 country-wide closures
What are the consequences

The crisis (i) exposed inequalities the world refused to confront and (ii) poses daily moral dilemmas

**Interruption of learning**
- half world not *given* chance to online education: unpreparedness;
- half the world without even *the means* to be online: digital divide

**Disruption of social support**
- from school meals to students with disabilities; plus new ones for students whose homes are not suitable

**Financial impact on governments**
- largest depression ever will call for actions on debt

**Financial impact on households**
- potentially grave, although sometimes unpredictable
What is the role of the UN system... 
...and how does this translate in education?

- **Peace and security**
  ‘in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed’

- **Human rights protection**
  Unique opportunity to address issues of privacy

- **Humanitarian aid**
  Huge experience of responding to emergencies [see UNICEF UNHCR]

- **Sustainable development**
  Build an evidence base of strong practices, make recommendations and help build more resilient education systems for the future

- **International law**
What are the challenges of the UN System?

- **Context unfavourable to multilateralism**
  e.g. witness the challenges WHO is facing

- **Concentrated power of big-tech**
  e.g. rapid UNESCO action to build coalition but no principles in place

- **Generalized emergency**
  i.e. playing an insurance function is compromised [but see UNRWA]

- **Rapid and uneven changes**
  e.g. governments need recommendations now but their contexts are different: not only in technology; cf. different role of examinations

- **Education is not health**
  i.e. there are no ‘clinical’ practices and protocols to be followed
What should the UN System do in education?

1. Prioritize those at risk of exclusion

Too much emphasis on online distance education modalities? Crash test for the future but negative consequences on equality e.g. in Senegal >20% of high school students access online resources = apply the ‘do no harm’ principle

More attention needed on:

- low-tech solutions e.g. radio/TV (Austria, Colombia, Costa Rica, Greece, Jordan, Kenya), deliver printed materials to households without internet (France)
- teachers
- poor and disadvantaged students e.g. 85 million in Latin America/Caribbean rely on school meals; in Australia and China services to learners with disabilities suspended
What should the UN System do in education?

2. Deliver global public goods, protect rights

Using private digital services for education should not mean accepting their terms and conditions.

Need to protect privacy, data, human rights / rights of the child, guarantee equity and non-discrimination.

Agree principles, such as:
- **For users**: no identification, no advertisement
- **On data**: document/conversation privacy, access/deletion

But it is a long-term issue with multiple actors and difficult politics.
What should the UN System do in education?

3. Refocus attention when schools reopen

- Put values at heart of teaching and learning: solidarity, empathy, equity, trust, and appreciation of our common humanity
- Rethink tools students need to use technology: prepare them to protect their and others’ privacy, free expression, ability to process information, rights
- Appreciate importance of human interaction and wellbeing
- Appreciate learning outside school

The UN System has processes to draw countries’ attention to what matters most – and needs to mobilize them
What should the UN System do in education?

4. Rally to protect education services – act as one

A global recession means:

- Lower public revenue
- Lower public expenditure, including aid

The 2008 financial crisis had low impact on education share in GDP but high impact on spending level

Some joint action emerging e.g. UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank consortium for global GPE actions
The GEM Report monitors key issues on its World Education Blog gemreportunesco.wordpress.com

Issues: teachers, financing, do no harm, role of business, disability, data, equity, assessment

Country response descriptions: global, Greece, Italy, Peru, Senegal, France

And will reflect them in its forthcoming editions:

2020 Inclusion on 23 June
2021 Non-state actors
2022 Technology