



Changing course, transforming education

On 24th January 2022, the United Nations (UN) celebrate the fourth International Day of Education. UNESCO believes that education is a human right for all throughout life and that everyone has the right to access quality education opportunities. The Organization is the only UN agency with a mandate to cover all aspects of education.

It has been entrusted to lead the Global Education 2030 Agenda through Sustainable Development Goal, focused around the provision of quality, inclusive education for all.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education worldwide in unprecedented ways. Today like never before the multiple dimensions of learning institutions appear clear, as learning, well-being, social and protection sites for children and youth alike. With the spread of the Omicron variant, governments have resorted once again to school closures. As of today, more than 635 million children and youth worldwide are affected by full or partial school closures. Countries in the Gulf Region are no exception with schools only partially open in most of the countries.

Learning and learning poverty: The effects of the crisis on learning are substantial. It is said that many countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region could experience a learning catastrophe if urgent action is not taken to provide remedial, digital and social and emotional learning for all learners. Emerging evidence from over 28 countries worldwide shows that learning losses have been large and unequal. Stemming from a pre-existing learning crisis, learning poverty is growing. The share of 10-year-old children who cannot read a basic text is expected to rise from 53 per cent pre-COVID-19 to 70 per cent in low- and middle-income countries³. The rise is a result of the prolonged school closures and poor learning outcomes,

despite government efforts to deliver remote learning. As an example, almost 40 per cent - 37 million children and youth in the MENA region - were not reached with broadcast and distance education, the majority of whom were already vulnerable and disadvantaged. The learning and earning trajectories of a generation are at stake.

Growing inequalities: The crisis has shown and exacerbated inequalities in education and magnified some of the pre-existing weaknesses of education systems. Children and youth in disadvantaged households are less likely to benefit from distance education due to a lack of connectivity, devices and adequate caregivers' support. Children and youth with disabilities have often been left behind in education policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and many struggle to be included in online-based learning.

Evidence and data: The COVID-19 pandemic has also disrupted education data collection, which means governments have less data and evidence to inform their responses and policies.

Lessons learned: Nevertheless, the pandemic has generated some critical lessons and highlighted that transformation and innovation in education are possible and that readiness is key to prompt crisis responses. The State of Qatar has established several platforms to expand e-learning and teachers and educators in public schools were able to quickly adapt thanks to distance education training that they had already received prior to the pandemic and within the ministry's strategy of integrating technology in the education provision. Particular attention was also paid to the continuation of education for persons with disabilities while tablets and home broadband Internet access were provided to students who lacked such assets.

The crisis as an opportunity: The crisis could become an opportunity to build more equitable, adaptive and resilient education systems to enable access to learning at all times for all children and youth in the MENA region. Changing course and transforming education is imperative. Today more than ever. The crisis has highlighted the irreplaceable role of schools, but also the need to 'extend' where and when learning happens, including through lifelong learning opportunities and networks of learning cities.

A new social contract is needed where all involved actors ought to share a similar vision of the public purposes of education. Concerted and coordinated efforts, participation, partnerships, including the private sector, are key to deliver on the Sustainable Development Agenda. Strengthening a range of learning modalities is urgently needed to ensure that all learners have access to both learning and services to support their well-being.

Reimagining schools and learning institutions as sites of inclusion and equity, where the well-being of children and youth is promoted, is pivotal to build the societies and futures we strive for. Learning disparities need to be addressed through differentiated interventions and targeted policies that direct additional resources to those further disadvantaged. Pedagogies need to be more strongly centred on the learning of each child and young person.

Developing pedagogies around 21st skills and competencies, emphasizing ecological, intercultural and interdisciplinary learning that help children and youth navigate the complex demands of their lives and steer the change they want to see in society is critical.

Teachers and parents need support with the challenges created by the disruption of face-to-face learning. Teaching should be further professionalized and teachers recognized in their roles as knowledge producers and agents of change, key figures for educational and social transformation.

Reimagining education today is possible: Widening the right to education throughout life and strengthening education as “a public endeavour and a common good” are key principles in the way we envision the futures of education.

Providing global and regional leadership in education, UNESCO has a unique capacity in convening and mobilising people, ministries of education, universities and learning institutions. And it is precisely this capacity that is needed to shape our shared educational futures, to build a new, internationally agreed social contract for education and a new deal for implementing it.