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Quality education and lifelong learning for all – sustainable recovery from Covid-19 pandemic

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has created the most severe disruption to global education systems in history, forcing more than 1.6 billion learners in over 190 countries out of school at the peak of the crisis. All learners, teachers, parents and family members, sectors and levels of education and learning were negatively affected: formal and non-formal education, schools, universities, community learning centres, adult literacy courses, etc.

School closure meant not only losing the chance to continue education and learning, but for millions of children, it meant losing a lifeline, necessary socialisation, safety, a meal, a chance for a better future. Moreover, this is threatening the progress made towards gender equality- being out of schools means bigger risk of adolescent pregnancy, early and forced marriage, and violence, for many girls and women around the globe.

There are two noticeable ways in which education helps people to cope with the new situation that COVID-19 presents – **teaching and learning about general health and preventive measures to stop the spread of the virus**, protect health, and save lives. **Education also plays a role in teaching people how to better use digital technology**, as it enables them to continue learning, schooling, learning skills that help them to find a job or to work from home.

But the pandemic exposed a clear need for other types of content, which should be considered in the recovery period. Not only should the provision of health education and digital skills be increased, but also media literacy, critical thinking and civic education, because of the increased need for information, orientation and critical understanding that people have in times of crises. Not to mention the need to be critical about the dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories that can create panic and lead to further crises.

Furthermore, education and learning should include awareness towards the ways in which people participate in democratic societies and decision making. In fact, **civic education should raise awareness about the importance of upholding human rights during a crisis**, because authoritarian regimes used pandemic as an opportunity to cut civil rights, freedom of speech, and participation of citizens, etc.

Also central is sharing information and raising awareness about the global issues of sustainable development, anthropogenic climate change and environmental degradation that could cause or encourage the spread of new viruses and diseases.

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While online and remote learning did help to bridge the gap and disruption that pandemic caused in education and showed many advantages that ICT and digital technologies offer for the lifelong learning and education, **the exclusive focus on online technologies could leave millions behind**, increase existing digital gaps and thus reduce the potential support learning can provide to achieve other SDGs. For many areas of education, and for many marginalised groups, in-person instruction will remain an important form, so the recovery efforts should find an adequate balance.

The **pandemic deepened injustices** in accessing and benefiting from education and revealed the challenges to education that have not been adequately addressed before. In order to guarantee everyone's right to education, it is necessary to focus on the recovery of the education system: schools and other educational institutions, as well as on lifelong learning opportunities at every age. Further on, it is important to **tackle systemic inequality and discrimination**, and to use education and lifelong learning to prevent future crises, or to mitigate their consequences. It is necessary to **invest more and design and implement alternative mechanisms for financing education**, to increase quality, to support teachers and educators, so they can cope with the new challenges, and to focus on those most excluded from education opportunities.

Education and learning help not only to think about 'new normal', but also help to re-think and critically address the problems of 'old normal' - uneven global development, power structures, and socio-economic disparities that lead to increased gaps, widen inequalities and injustice, with every new crisis. **This crisis is therefore also an opportunity to become more aware of those who were already left behind by our education systems before the crisis and who have been significantly affected by the pandemic**: students with disabilities, internally displaced people and refugees, people living in context of conflict and generalised violence, older people, vulnerable girls and women, amongst many other social groups.

Key messages

I. **Disruption of global education systems and the need for more funding**

The COVID-19 pandemic has created the most severe disruption to global education systems in history. The impact of **the pandemic is threatening the entire Sustainable Development Agenda, including Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4)** as school closures in over 190 countries are affecting over 1.6 billion learners, deepening patterns of inequality and exclusion.

Despite the world's progress in transitioning into a more sustainable economy, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will not be met until at least 2082, according to new data.

The 2020 Social Progress Index, compiled by the US non-profit group Social Progress Imperative (SPI), said SDG fulfilment is 62 years behind schedule and could be delayed further by Covid-19 (ESG Clarity, 2020).

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All learners, teachers, parents and family members, sectors and levels of education and learning were negatively affected: formal and non-formal education, schools, universities, community learning centres, adult literacy courses, etc.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is estimating the global economy to enter a "recession at least as bad as during the global financial crisis or worse" and across the world governments are working quickly to respond to the crisis. EASG is calling upon governments to ensure that all economic stimulus is equitable, inclusive, and explicitly pro-poor. Importantly, many governments in so-called developing countries do not have enough resources to respond to the pandemic, as they have a myriad of challenges relating to poor health systems, lack of social safety nets and less financial resources to provide fiscal and monetary response to counteract recession. At the same time, many industrialised countries put in place sanctions and restrictions that have consequences on developing countries.

EASG further underlines that these difficult times must not further trends of commercialization and instrumentalist approaches to education. We are particularly worried about the risks related to the tools and platforms used for online teaching and learning, including threats to education as a public good and the safety and integrity of students as well as teachers. At this time, strengthening public education systems must be seen as an essential part of a more robust public response for protecting people's life and dignity, including the establishment of fair progressive tax systems, the closure of tax havens and the end to tax avoidance.

Civil Society Organizations play a key role in supporting governments through the crisis, by helping to raise awareness about protective measures, spread official information, activate networks to support the most vulnerable sectors, facilitate distance education and the production of teaching and learning resources.

The global Covid-19 crisis has led to falls in commodity prices, an increase in future borrowing costs for global South governments and contributed to the largest ever capital outflow from developing countries. Government revenues will fall as a result, and debt payments will increase while countries need to expand healthcare and social protection in response to the crisis. Developing countries had already been facing heightened debt vulnerabilities and rising debt costs before the Covid-19 outbreak. UNESCO warns that the funding gap to achieve SDG4 in poorer countries risks increasing to US$ **200 billion annually** due to COVID-19 if we do not take urgent action (UNESCO, GEMR, 2020). The scale of the public health crisis and need for rapid policy responses means vital government resources must be urgently directed towards the needs of populations and not diverted to lenders. The outbreaks of Covid-19 so far show that time is essential. Governments need to have resources for decisive action today. Any delay will make the pandemic more difficult to control and a later repair of economic damage more costly, especially for borrower countries.

The organisation "Aerzte der Welt" estimates that the cancellation of external debt payments in 2020 for 69 countries classified by the IMF as Lower Income Economies and for which data is

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available, would save $19.5 billion in external debt payments to bilateral and multilateral lenders in 2020, and $6 billion in external debt payments to private lenders. If it was extended to 2021 it would save a further $18.7 billion in multilateral and bilateral payments and $6.2 billion in external payments to private lenders.

In the absence of a wider, multilaterally agreed debt cancellation multilateral institutions, including the IMF and World Bank, should offer an immediate cancellation of all principal interest and charges for the remainder of 2021 for all countries in need, and most urgently for all PRGT and IDA countries (Aerzte der Welt, 2020).

Overall, the crisis has exposed vast disparities in countries' emergency preparedness, internet access for children, and availability of learning materials. Although much focus has turned to online learning platforms, many public schools are not set up to use them or do not have the technology and equipment to provide online teaching. **Nearly half of the world has no internet access[1] and government and international immediate action are required to tackle old and emerging inequalities.**

II.   The need to protect those most affected by the pandemic and other crisis

Within these 1.6 billion children, COVID-19 outbreak is affecting girls and boys, young women and men differently. Thus, policies and interventions responding to the outbreak should be designed and implemented in line with both International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law. They must be equitable, gender-sensitive and adapted to the specific learning and education needs of the most disadvantaged groups of society including students with disabilities, those who belong to ethnic minorities, and those affected by multiple crises, including conflict, climate change and disaster. In doing so, policies should adopt a transformative approach to teaching and learning, securing a school environment and education practices that not only respect human rights but promote their full enjoyment for all learners.

Persons with disabilities are less likely than others to complete education, and more likely to be excluded altogether from schooling. To reduce the impact of disruption in education, some States are adopting remote learning practices. In these cases, however, students with disabilities are facing barriers on account of the absence of required equipment, access to the internet, accessible materials and support necessary to permit them to follow online school programs. As a result, many students with disabilities are being left behind, particularly students with intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, students with disabilities are also negatively affected by other dimensions of school closures, including access to school meals and opportunities to engage in play and sports with their peers. (OHCHR, 2020).

Before COVID-19, more than 130 million girls were still out of school and many of those in school were not learning. The multifaceted challenges that girls face in claiming their right to education include poverty and school fees, distance to school, domestic responsibilities, early and forced

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marriage and early and unintended pregnancy, lack of safety and school-related gender-based violence, lack of sanitation and menstrual hygiene facilities in schools, and gender stereotyping in curricula, textbooks and teaching processes.

Girls and young women's right to education is already compromised by discriminatory and harmful social norms and historical forms of injustice (Generation Equality Forum, 2020). The pandemic exacerbates all those forms of injustice as 'stay at home' policies can potentially expose women to domestic violence, forced marriage and amongst other human rights violations sexual exploitation. **Their opportunities to enjoy their right to education however will be significantly diminished in the years to come if governments and the international community do not take immediate and effective action to ensure they safely return to school and protect their right to education**. As UNICEF (2021) stresses, education for girls must be reimagined to overcome the multiple barriers they are facing to enjoy their right to education in the ongoing crisis. This should include but not limited to promoting gender-responsive and inclusive planning of emergency response in education (UNICEF, 2021).

The response to the needs of girls and women should be comprehensive of the multiple crises that affect their right to education. A recent report by Malala Fund (2021) provides compelling evidence suggesting that in 2021 climate-related events will prevent at least four million girls in low- and lower-middle-income countries from completing their education. '**If current trends continue, by 2025 climate change will be a contributing factor in preventing at least 12.5 million girls from completing their education each year'** (Malala Fund, 2021). In the specific context of conflict, data suggests that in countries affected by conflict and war, girls are more than twice as likely to be out of school than those living elsewhere (UNGEI, ECW, INEE, 2021). **Conflict and war not only compromise their current opportunities to enjoy the right to education but will have a significant impact on their opportunities for the future, as girls and women in conflict settings are often victims of multiple forms of violence including sexual abuse and exploitation** (INEE, 2020).

Government and international organisations' response should therefore address the specific needs of all learners, according to their gender, life stage, ethnic belonging, living conditions, and exposure to the ongoing multiple crises that affect education. As United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), Education Cannot Wait (ECW), and the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), (2021) stress, '*to be relevant and effective, education interventions in emergencies and protracted crises must apply a gender lens at every stage of programming. This includes addressing a range of issues such as School-related Gender based Violence (SRGBV) and discriminatory gender norms that prioritize boys' education in the face of economic hardship and insecurity'*.

Special protection should be also given to indigenous peoples, refugees and asylum seekers, and those living in conflict-affected countries or regions who have been significantly affected by the pandemic and other crisis (Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2020).

Adult and olders learners belong to those who were extremely hit by pandemic. Adult learning and education faced serious challenges even in the time before COVID-19, and civil society made huge

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efforts to meet these challenges and to help to the most vulnerable groups of learners. The closure of adult learning centres had an especially negative impact. The intergenerational learning that took place when parents and their children discussed homework in the evenings was interrupted because there is no new learning content for both children and adults. The lock-down has led to the slowdown of economic activities and the exacerbation of poverty in lower-income countries where education levels are already exceptionally low. As a result, adults who were engaged in education programmes enjoying their right to education have been forced to stop their studies. A huge shift happened - learning moved from formal to the non-formal and informal sector. Those who could use digital tools could keep some level of learning activities (especially those that could help them to deal with the consequences of COVID-19, in health, employment, family obligations...), but those who couldn't were left behind, with the increased risk of not be able to return to the learning and educational process.

ALE needs to re-conceptualise and advocate for resilience that involves learning that is truly transformative, rather than merely be reactive or adaptive to the impacts of the climate crisis in our everyday life.

III.   Upholding human rights during the pandemic

The new social norms and new economic measures that arouse as the respond to pandemic could easily served often to justify exclusion, punishment and even unnecessary distancing, and increased social inequalities. Especially developing countries faced additional challenges with increased threats to democracy and human rights – their ways of actions and engagements are limited, and authoritarian regimes use the opportunity for further cuts in the civic rights, freedom of speech, participation of citizens etc. Vulnerable and marginalized communities (especially in high density, socio-economically unequal and predominantly migrant areas) can be additionally affected by the new measures; the social distance and stigmatization can increase, as well as harassment based on political, racial or religious biases. Further on, access to education and learning opportunities became jeopardized especially for the vulnerable groups (as well as access to other social services).

Civic education should raise awareness about the importance of upholding human rights during the pandemic, because authoritarian regimes used pandemic as an opportunity to cut civil rights, freedom of speech, participation of citizens, etc. Education and learning should include awareness towards the ways in which people participate in democratic societies and decision making. Also central is sharing information and raising awareness about the global issues of sustainable development, anthropogenic climate change and environmental degradation that could cause or encourage the spread of new viruses and diseases.

The contents of education are key to advance in the construction of a global citizenship and states should take effective action to include human rights education in all levels and forms of

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education. A human rights-based approach to education is not only necessary to secure global citizenship but essential to transform our societies and make them fair and inclusive.

Reflections on educational quality must be at the center of the concerns of governments and the international community in order to overcome this and further crises. But it must be understood that quality is a disputed concept, which needs to be culturally contextualized, so it is not convenient to reduce it to school performance. Standardized tests have often limited capacity to measure quality since they exclude the multiplicity of conditioning factors that affect educational systems. A more comprehensive approach to quality must include the learning environment, training for teachers and fairer work conditions, and school practices that promote critical thinking about the teaching-learning process and the ways our societies are organised. By promoting creativity amongst students and their critical skills our societies will be in a better position to address ongoing and future crises.

This approach to education and social development highlights the need for governments to acknowledge the interdependence of SD4 with the whole SDGs agenda and plan accordingly. SDG4 is in some way a partial reading of the conceptual and normative framework of the right to education. However, it constitutes a strategic and progressive approach to state obligations in education and for that reason it should be fully financially supported. The emerging needs for education for sustainable development, global and active citizenship education, peace, human rights and democracy – these areas are becoming increasingly important and cannot be left to the free market, private funders and foundations

Overall, **EASG recalls that education is an enabling human right, and at the same time it is part of a social protection structure that includes the right to health, information, work and comprehensive human safety**. These rights cannot be ensured in isolation. The COVID-19 pandemic shows that the rate of economic growth will decrease globally and that the crisis will increase geopolitical and technological rivalry. However, projections on the social impact of the pandemic do not show key data about the terrible consequences it will have on people's lives and especially on the most vulnerable, and on patterns of poverty and inequality.

IV.   **Final remarks: re-visiting the 'old-normal' and thinking about a 'new-normal'**

Education and learning help not only to think about 'new normal', but also help to re-think and critically address the problems of 'old normal'.

This reflection is crucial to make the most of the lessons learned from the pandemic, because we know that exclusion, discrimination and inequality were already here before being struck down by COVID-19. The pandemic has only revealed the underlying picture for so long. By revealing that old normality, we are aware of how much we must change. The educational systems have an enormous responsibility in this work, since through education it is possible to contribute to eradicating the prejudices, stereotypes and patriarchal customs that feed inequality.

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The old normality has also been underpinned by predatory and impoverishing economic systems, in which closed groups, smaller and smaller, have enriched themselves at the expense of vast majorities. That must change forever.

Additionally, since the world of work is transforming constantly, and will be unpredictably changed after the COVID-19, education and lifelong learning are integral to the changing world of work as new skills, attitudes and capabilities are required. They have a central role to play in adaptations of people to keep pace with the changes, in acquiring knowledge and developing competencies that would help them not only to find and keep the decent job within this dynamic development, but also to actively participate in the creation of their professional future and in shaping the world of work.

The rapid development of new technologies, especially Information and Communications Technology (ICT), Artificial Intelligence (AI) and increased digitalisation pose new challenges and opportunities. While their benefits have become apparent not just in work settings but also in our daily lives, their long-term consequences are difficult to predict and there are numerous risks that these developments in the world of work that technology and ICT bring.

Finally, **establishing public trust, managing fear and perceptions of risk, and leveraging community engagement are key to effective crisis response**. Governments need to decide how to engage community members in reopening plans and implementation; what, when, and how often information should be shared with affected communities; and with whom and through which channels to communicate (Center for Global Development, 2020).

Since COVID-19 pandemic exposed structural problems and systemic inequalities, the plans for the recovery should be based in **transformative approach.** It is important to re-conceptualise and advocate for **recovery and resilience** that involves learning that is truly transformative, rather than merely be reactive or adaptive to the impacts of the pandemic or different crisis in everyday life. The urgency of truly transformative approach and not 'business as usual' includes education and lifelong learning to challenge the rigid patterns, social structure, architecture of power and traditional relationships that harm individual and social development. Therefore, policy makers should recognize education as the core of social transformation, and include relevant actors, including civil society as full partner.

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