

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented global school closures and the shutdown of many educational and learning opportunities. The effects have been felt worldwide, with children, youth, and adults experiencing setbacks in their learning, development, and well-being, as well as in their social safety nets.

After the first few waves of reflections, analysis, and attempts to build back better, there is a growing recognition that education cannot simply focus on recovery and passive adaptation. Nor should it only be about building resilience. Rather, the urgent need for transformative education has been highlighted as a way to support learners to take informed decisions and actions at the individual, community, and global levels, to be proactive and make substantial changes in the contexts that generate crises. This concept has gained traction as a potential solution to many of the challenges education is facing.

Health was not the only 'victim' of COVID-19 crises, there is also a decline in democracy and human rights. The world is witnessing an increase in authoritarianism, with a mere 13% of the global population currently living in liberal democracies, according to the latest V-Dem Institute Democracy Report. Declines in academic freedom have recently taken place in correlation with the increased move to autocracy, so the world needs policy framework and actions to protect academic freedom, as well as increased support for the citizenship education, education for peace and tolerance.

As we look to implement SDG 4, it is crucial to consider its linkages with other goals, including addressing systemic inequalities, to fully realize the potential of education as a transformative tool for achieving a sustainable and equitable future. This requires education that can boost knowledge, empower citizens, and build the skills needed in 21st-century workplaces, as well as increase environmental, financial, and digital literacy through lifelong learning. Additionally, financing for education must be expanded to ensure that the universal right to education is honored in practice, with special emphasis on the need to increase public funding for education and lifelong learning, especially for vulnerable groups.

However, previous crises have also highlighted deep-rooted social injustices, have further exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, both between people and countries, making their consequences even more critical for vulnerable groups who are deprived of the right to education, such as women and girls, elderly people, persons with disabilities, people living in emergency situations, and people living in dire material conditions. To address these disparities, we must promote inclusive and equitable quality learning opportunities and outcomes across the lifespan, including adult learning in all its many and creative manifestations, in work and life, formal, non-formal, and informal. We must strive to implement SDG4 in its all-embracing character, keeping in mind that adult education is the longest phase in the lifelong learning process. A „new social contract for education“ (as UNECO calls it) must be built upon these principles, promoting lifelong learning for all and addressing systemic inequalities, to ensure a sustainable and equitable future for all.