

As classrooms for half the world's schoolchildren remain closed,



Statement by EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, EU Vice-President Dubravka Šuica, and UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore on the occasion of Digital Cooperation Action Day at the UN General Assembly, and ahead of the Special European Council on digital transformation.

BRUSSELS/NEW YORK, 23 September 2020 – As schools remain closed for half the world's students due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are issuing an S.O.S. message urging countries to prioritise schools in their re-opening plans.

The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated deep inequalities in access to schools, quality learning and digital connectivity. It has also exposed weaknesses in our education systems, including inadequate access to water and sanitation, and lack of preparation to withstand crises.

At the peak of COVID-19 lockdowns, schools were shuttered for more than 90 per cent of the world's student population, leaving at least a third of these children cut off from their education completely. Today, 875 million students remain affected. The consequences for their education, protection and well-being cannot be underestimated.

When children miss out on education they are at increased risks of exploitation, violence, abuse, and neglect. Children from troubled families face the double burden of losing their education and losing out on the safety school provides for them. Girls are at a greater risk of early and forced child marriage and early pregnancy.

The EU supports the appeal by the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres for countries to prioritise children's education, food, health and safety amid the COVID-19 pandemic and – together with the Group of Latin America and Caribbean Countries and the Group of Friends of Children and the SDGs – has initiated a statement of support to the appeal.

Children with lower levels of education are less likely to break the cycle of poverty. We know from recent data that an additional 150 million children could be plunged into poverty due to COVID-19. In July, the World Bank estimated a \$10 trillion loss in global earnings due to the time in school that children have already missed, highlighting that the economic loss will stretch far beyond individual families. Governments therefore need to prioritise their children – their future earners – in all re-opening decisions and protect and prioritise education funding.

Keeping schools closed should be a last resort. Decisions to close schools should be temporary and accompanied by plans for every child to access remote learning so that they can continue their studies to the best of their abilities uninterrupted.

Children and youth in the most vulnerable situations in every country – those living in poverty or in countries in conflict, those from ethnic minority groups, those with disabilities, and internally displaced or refugee children – are paying the heaviest price of school closures, as they fall deeper into deprivation and further behind their peers. By prioritising the most marginalised children we can reduce education inequality and ensure that every child learns the knowledge and skills they need to succeed.

Access to quality education for children is vital to the development of engaged and responsible citizens. Education is an essential preparation for life and work. Education means empowerment; it helps to address inequalities and contributes to more peaceful societies. Investing in children and their education is investing in our future.

Even before COVID-19, the world was already facing a learning crisis, with more than half of all 10-year-old children in low- to middle-income countries unable to read a simple story. Millions of adolescents are not learning the transferable, digital, entrepreneurial and job-specific skills to prepare them for the future and to play an active part in their communities.

The common knowledge that in every crisis lies opportunity has never been stronger for children and education worldwide. We have a once-in-a-generation chance to re-open schools better than they were before and reimagine learning, so that every child gains the skills they need to succeed in life, at school and in the world of work.

The European Union will remain at the forefront to support education worldwide. It is also the leading international donor when it comes to child support. The COVID-19 crisis has laid bare the inequalities of our societies, also inside the Union. With NextGenerationEU, the EU is taking concrete steps to tackle these challenges. The EU is strengthening its support to digital education, and is increasing its support to and protection of the most vulnerable children in its upcoming EU Comprehensive Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee. Its internal and external policies will continue to reflect the best interest of the child and ensure that all children have an equal start in life and become more resilient in the face of adversity, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

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