

Education must not fall victim to COVID-19

I have always believed that education is the basis of equality and freedom and the best social uplifting tool. Therefore, I am deeply convinced the issue of education in times of COVID-19 is central to the future of all of us, in developed, emerging and developing countries alike. This is why it was important for me to participate in this SOS education event, carried out on the occasion of the annual United Nations General Assembly.



During the COVID-19 lockdowns earlier this year, schools were closed for more than 90 per cent of the world's student population, leaving at least a third of children completely cut off from their education. Today, hundreds of million students remain affected by school closures. The consequences for their education, protection and well-being are considerable.

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The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated deep inequalities in access to education, quality learning and above all digital connectivity. This is true in developed countries, where the closure of schools and universities has highlighted the persistence of the digital divide, between those who can afford computers and fast Internet access for everyone in the family and those who only have smartphones or no access at all. Between those who live in bigger houses with gardens and those living in small flats.

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But obviously these inequalities are even more important in developing countries. If these difficulties continue, the future of an entire generation is at risk. This would call into question one of the most positive trends we have seen over the past half-century: the great progresses made regarding

access to education.



According to World Bank data, in 1970 68% of children in low- and middle-income countries attended primary school, this proportion reached 89% in 2018. It is striking that the gap in school enrolment rates between girls and boys, which was 18 percentage points in 1970 in these countries, is only three points today. Moreover, this gap is nil at secondary level and the reverse is true at tertiary level: there are now more women than men in the universities of low- and middle-income countries.

All economists agree that a rise in the level of education is a necessary precondition for the economic take-off of countries, even if not a sufficient one. However, many challenges remain: teaching conditions are often difficult and teaching quality insufficient. Already before COVID-19, more than half of all 10-year-old children in low- and middle-income countries were unable to read a simple story. And millions of adolescents are not learning the transferable, digital and entrepreneurial skills to prepare them for the future. We see also a worrying rise in unemployment among young graduates in many countries.

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Still, widespread education favours the establishment of democratic societies that respect human rights, preparing people to exercise an enlightened citizenship. It enables societies in particular to move towards the empowerment of women and girls. What has been achieved in the field of education over the last 50 years has already made a tremendous contribution to reducing gender inequalities worldwide, even if much remains to be done and not just in the developing countries.

Progresses in education in danger

However, all of this is in danger if education is not prioritised in plans to reopen economies. 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 that school provides. And girls are at a greater risk of forced marriage and early pregnancy.

As ever, the most vulnerable are paying the heaviest price: those living in poverty or conflict, from ethnic minority groups, with disabilities, and internally displaced or refugee children. As schools remain closed, they fall deeper into deprivation and fall further behind their peers.

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 economic losses will stretch far beyond own families.

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Governments around the globe must prioritise their children – who are the future earners of any society – when it comes to decisions on re-opening and education funding. Helping to popularise this idea was the aim of the event organised with UNICEF.



European Union at the forefront of supporting education worldwide

The European Union has been and will remain at the forefront of supporting education worldwide. It is also the leading international donor when it comes to child support. Through the € 36 billion of the [Team Europe initiative](#) the EU and its Member states are supporting our external partners to fight Covid-19 and its socio-economic consequences. A significant part of that effort goes to children and schools. In our upcoming Comprehensive Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee, we intend also to strengthen our support to digital education and the protection of the most vulnerable children.

I will pay a lot of attention to make sure that all EU external policies continue to attach high priority to education and that we help ensure that all children have an equal start in life. Even in times as difficult as those of Covid-19.