

## S.O.S for education: Speech by the High Representative / Vice-Pr



*Check against delivery!*

Today we are launching an SOS for education.

Why? Because more than 1.5 billion students have been affected by school closures.

Do you understand what does it mean? 1.5 billion students without school.

This affects their future and our present. This affects the future of the world, because the future of the world will be built by these young boys and girls deprived of school.

That is why cooperation on education with the United Nations and UNICEF is a priority for the European Union. This is why, together with the Executive Director of UNICEF [Henrietta Fore], we decided some months ago to join our forces, because the right to education must be at the centre of the political agenda.

Education is an equality builder. Through education, you build equality -we have always been saying that. L'école c'est la fabrique de l'égalité. La escuela es la fábrica de la igualdad. It is the best social elevator. For people who are born in poor households, the only hope to improve their life is through education, being competitive in the job market.

How do you become competitive in the job market? By knowledge, by learning. That is why education is the best endeavour of the governments. That is why we are here calling not to deprive young boys and girls of education.

The coronavirus has shown to all of us how vulnerable we are, even in the most developed countries. It is here, in the richest part of the world, where these things happen.

As you said, Vice-President [for Democracy and Demography, Dubravka Šuica],

how many poor young boys and girls are here in Europe will be deprived of a strong future because they would not be able to go to a good school. Only together can we overcome this crisis, through solidarity and cooperation.

This SOS concerns all of us: institutions, governments, civil society. These 200 blue packs writing an SOS here in the streets of Belgium, in Brussels, are here to remind us, the whole world, that hundreds of millions of children are still waiting to put on their school bags again, to receive the education that will determine their future.

But maybe this pandemic gives us an opportunity. An opportunity to be aware of that, to build back better, to build a better future overcoming old inequalities, facing the digital age and avoiding the big digital divide with people getting closed off in their homes. The digital divide has been more important than ever, because now either you are digital or you are out of everything. It is not a luxury anymore, it is a basic tool, as basic as water if you want to survive in this world.

We have to reimagine our future, but also to build our present. You cannot tell people 'Do not worry, your future will be digital.' Yes, but what about my present? My future will be very good, but what about my present? Because it is today, it is this afternoon, it is tomorrow morning, when I have needs [that need] to be fulfilled. That is why it is urgent, that is why it is an SOS. It is calling everybody in the world, government, civil society organisations, like UNICEF, to understand that the freedom of education is the best basic tool for the humankind to build a better future. That is why these 200 blue bags are here, in the middle of the European Institutions.

Thank you for inviting me and thank you for this initiative.

Link to the video: <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-195375>