COVID-19
Report

ECLAC-UNESCO

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Education in the time of COVID-19

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has caused an unprecedented crisis in all areas. In the field of education, this emergency has led to the massive closure of face-to-face activities of educational institutions in more than 190 countries in order to prevent the spread of the virus and mitigate its impact. According to data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), by mid-May 2020, more than 1.2 billion students at all levels of education worldwide had stopped having face-to-face classes. Of these, more than 160 million were students in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has argued that even before the pandemic hit, the social situation in the region was deteriorating, owing to rising rates of poverty and extreme poverty, the persistence of inequalities and growing social discontent. In this context, the crisis will have a profoundly negative impact on the various social sectors, particularly health and education, as well as on employment and poverty (ECLAC, 2020a). Meanwhile, UNESCO has identified major gaps in educational outcomes, which are related to the unequal distribution of teachers in general, and of the best qualified teachers in particular, to the detriment of lower-income countries and regions and of rural areas, where indigenous and migrant populations tend to be concentrated (UNESCO, 2016a; Messina and García, 2020).

In the sphere of education, many of the measures that the region's countries have adopted in response to the crisis are related to the suspension of face-to-face classes at all levels, which has given rise to three main areas of action: the deployment of distance learning modalities through a variety of formats and platforms (with or without the use of technology); the support and mobilization of education personnel and communities; and concern for the health and overall well-being of students.

Contents

The aim of this document is to shed light on various consequences that these measures will have on educational communities in the short and medium term, and to offer key recommendations on how to manage those consequences in the best possible manner, drawing attention to opportunities for learning and innovation in the post-pandemic education system.

I. Educational measures during the COVID-19 crisis[1]

The information collected on the 33 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean up to 7 July 2020 shows that, in the area of education, most of the measures taken are related to the suspension of face-to-face classes at all levels of education. Of these countries, 32 suspended face-to-face classes, with this measure still in force nationwide in 29 countries (Nicaragua has not taken this course of action). In Uruguay, schools began to reopen in rural areas as of 22 April, before opening nationwide on 29 June. In Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, a partial return began on 25 May, and in Ecuador the return to face-to-face classes began on 1 June. There was a partial return to face-to-face classes in Belize, Grenada and Saint Lucia during June. At the time of writing, the student population in the 32 countries affected by these measures has exceeded 165 million students, according to official UNESCO information (see figure 1).

Figure 1 | Latin America and the Caribbean (33 countries): countries that have taken measures to suspend face-to-face classes at the national level and the number of students affected, by date, early March to early August 2020
(Number of countries and students)
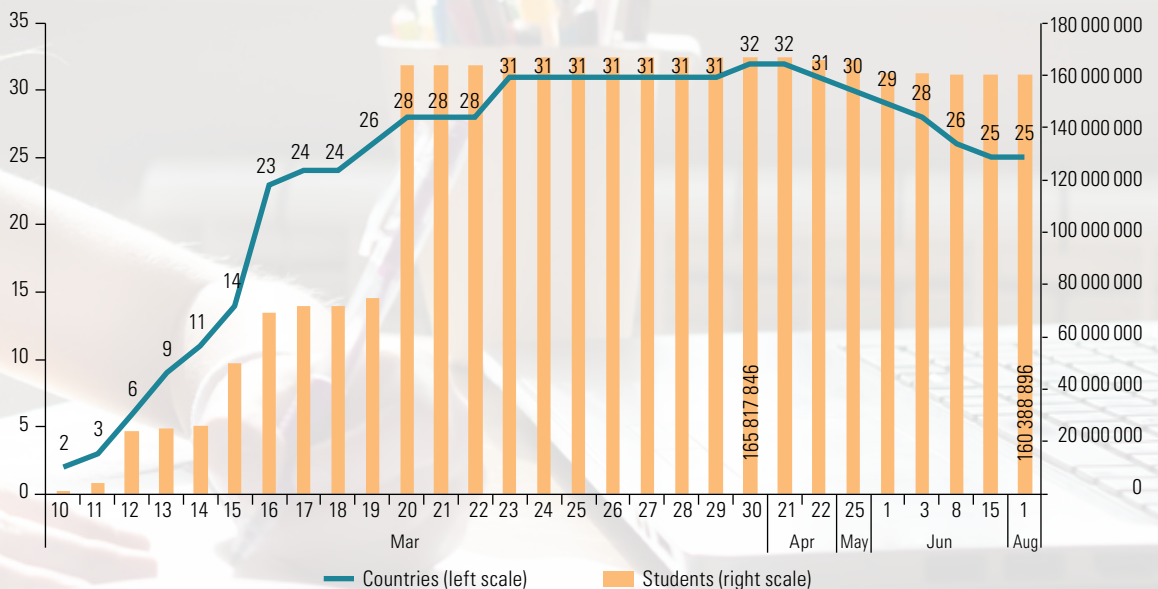
Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), "Education: from disruption to recovery" [online] https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse.
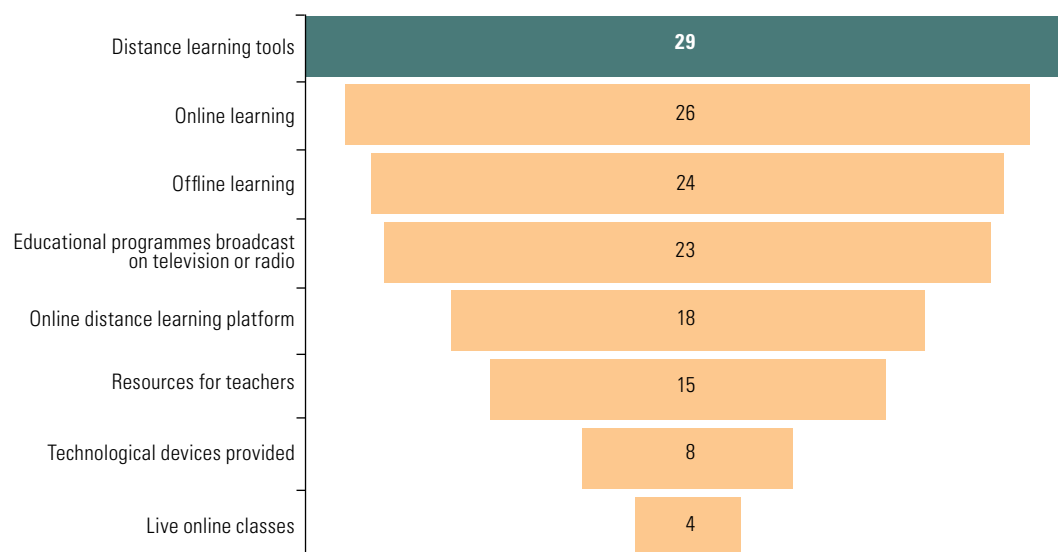
In addition to interrupting educational paths, school closures affect the diet and nutrition of the student population, especially in the most vulnerable sectors. At the time of writing (early July), 21 of the 33 countries have continued to operate school feeding programmes in various forms. The most widely used modality (13 countries) is the delivery of food kits to be prepared at home, followed by the provision of lunches (3 countries) and, to a lesser extent, cash transfers and food vouchers. In addition, many students access other services through schools, such as the provision of contraceptives, mental health services or recreational activities, which have also been disrupted.

Most countries (29 out of 33) have established ways of continuing to provide education services through various distance learning modalities. For example, 26 countries implemented Internet-based forms of learning and 24 established offline, distance learning strategies, including 22 countries which offer both modalities (offline and online), 4 have exclusively online modalities and 2 only offline modalities.

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[1] Unless otherwise indicated, the cut-off date for the information used to prepare this report is 7 July 2020 for ECLAC and 16 June 2020 for UNESCO.

Among the online distance learning modalities, the use of virtual, asynchronous learning platforms in 18 countries is noteworthy, while only 4 countries offer live classes (Bahamas, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Panama). With regard to offline distance learning methods, 23 countries broadcast educational programmes through traditional media such as radio or television (see figure 2).

Figure 2 | Latin America and the Caribbean (29 countries): strategies for continuing education through distance learning modalities
(Number of countries)

Distance learning tools	29
Online learning	26
Offline learning	24
Educational programmes broadcast on television or radio	23
Online distance learning platform	18
Resources for teachers	15
Technological devices provided	8
Live online classes	4

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Information System on Educational Trends in Latin America (SITEAL), "Sistematización de respuestas de los sistemas educativos de América Latina a la crisis de la COVID-19", 2020 [online] https://www.siteal.iiep.unesco.org/respuestas_educativas_covid_19.

At the time of writing, only 8 of the 33 countries provided technological devices as one of the measures adopted to implement distance learning activities (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Jamaica, Peru, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Uruguay). For several years now, Uruguay has had a State policy, in the framework of the Ceibal Plan, that includes providing the school population with devices (laptops or tablets). In addition, to carry out distance learning activities, the strategies of 14 countries include providing training resources for teachers, especially with regard to tools for the use and management of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

II. Continuing education and the impact on the curriculum

Within the framework of the suspension of face-to-face classes, the need to maintain educational continuity has presented challenges to which countries have responded with different remote options and solutions, including adjusting the school calendar and how the curriculum is implemented, all adapted, prioritized and adjusted in various ways. In order to make adjustments, it is necessary to take into account the characteristics of national or subnational curricula, the country's resources and capacities to develop distance learning processes, the levels of segregation and educational inequality in the country, and how much of the school year had elapsed. While some of the region's countries such as Mexico and the Dominican Republic and some areas of Ecuador and Brazil were in the middle of the school year when the pandemic began, the vast majority were at the beginning.

Most countries have digital resources and platforms that can be accessed remotely, which have been bolstered with unprecedented speed by the ministries of education by online resources and the launch of free-to-air television or radio programming. However, few countries in the region have national digital education strategies with a model that takes advantage of ICTs (Álvarez Marinelli and others, 2020). This is compounded by unequal access to an Internet connection, which results in an

uneven distribution of resources and strategies, mainly affecting lower-income or more vulnerable groups (Rieble-Aubourg and Viteri, 2020). To address this situation, authorities must, on the one hand, prioritize efforts aimed at maintaining contact and educational continuity for those populations that have greater difficulty connecting and live in social and economic conditions that are least conducive to supporting education processes at home, and, on the other hand, design protocols for resuming and continuing education when the schools eventually reopen, which take into account the differences and inequalities that will deepen during this crisis.

The pandemic has transformed the contexts in which curricula are implemented, not only because of the use of platforms and the need to consider circumstances other from those for which the curriculum was originally designed, but also because certain knowledge and competencies are more relevant in the current context. A number of decisions need to be taken and resources made available that present a challenge for school systems, educational establishments and teachers. This is true of curricular adjustments and prioritization and the contextualization needed to ensure that the contents are relevant to the current emergency situation, based on consensus among all relevant stakeholders. Equally important, these adjustments must prioritize the competencies and values that have come to the fore in the current situation, namely solidarity, self-directed learning, care for oneself and others, social-emotional skills, health and resilience, among others.

A controversial and complex issue is the decision-making criteria and approaches regarding learning priorities and how to make adjustments. An alternative is to select curricular content that are more relevant, which are prioritized over others. Another possibility is to integrate the contents and learning objectives into interdisciplinary thematic clusters that allow various subjects to be addressed at the same time through topics that are particularly pertinent and relevant for pupils in the current context, using project or research methodologies that allow for an joined-up approach to learning. Under this approach, value must be attached to teachers' independence and to developing complex competencies among teachers. Some countries have prepared curriculum prioritization proposals that include a reduced set of fundamental learning objectives in different disciplines, moving from curriculum prioritization to the current curriculum, adopting a modular approach to content by level, shifting from basic education to new learning associated with integrated or significant objectives that can create links between subjects.

Curriculum adaptation, flexibility and contextualization should address elements such as the prioritization of learning objectives and content that enable a better understanding of and response to the crisis, incorporating aspects related to care and health, critical and reflective thinking with regard to information and news, understanding social and economic trends, and encouraging behaviour that is empathetic, tolerant and non-discriminative, among other things. Meanwhile, a balance must be sought between identifying core competencies, which will be necessary in order to continue learning, and deepening the comprehensive and humanistic character of education, without giving in to pressure to strengthen only instrumental learning.

Likewise, when adjusting curricula and developing pedagogical resources, the needs of groups with specific requirements should be considered. For example, adjustments must be made and the necessary support provided for students with disabilities or who live in various conditions and situations that make it difficult for them to continue their studies. The linguistic and cultural diversity of migrant populations and indigenous communities must also be addressed. Likewise, a gender perspective must be incorporated in order to make visible and eradicate situations of gender inequality or violence that could be worsening under lockdown.

For now, it is impossible to say with any certainty what impact the crisis will have on the implementation of curricula in the different grades of primary and secondary education, but it is expected that differences in learning achievement will be exacerbated, in light of the prevailing educational inequalities and unequal access to curriculum coverage.

III. Countries' readiness for continuing education online: widening of the digital divide

As most countries have opted to ensure educational continuity through online resources, the Internet presents a unique opportunity: the plethora of pedagogical resources and knowledge as well as the various communication tools available provide ideal platforms to bring schools and learning processes closer to homes and to students in lockdown. In recent decades, many Latin American countries have made significant investments in digital infrastructure in school systems. Education policies on digital technology were implemented quite early on in some of the countries in the late 1980s. Until the mid-1990s, the strategies in Latin America were generally aimed at improving learning and teaching outcomes within schools. The focus then shifted to giving pupils access to equipment, with special attention paid to the lower socioeconomic strata in an attempt to level the playing field and ensure equality. In recent years, with the widespread availability of mobile connectivity and the increased accessibility of digital devices, policy focus has shifted to the development of digital skills in pupils (Trucco and Palma, 2020).

Despite these efforts, as is often the case in processes of change, the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean are not equally prepared to tackle this crisis by capitalizing on digitization. While the region has made significant progress in terms of reducing gaps in access to the digital world, particularly bolstered by the widespread availability of mobile connectivity, there are still considerable gaps in material access to the digital world, which has important implications for the opportunities and participation of new generations (ECLAC, 2019; Trucco and Palma, 2020). In 2016, the average for 14 Latin American countries showed that around 42% of people living in urban areas had Internet access at home, compared with 14% of those living in rural areas (ECLAC, 2019). These figures are significantly higher when mobile Internet access is taken into account, but few countries have such data available.

In 2018, about 80% of 15-year-old students from the region who took the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test had Internet access at home and only 61% had access to a computer (see figure 3). Only one third of students had educational software at home, compared with more than half of students on average in OECD countries. In general, students across the region have less equipment than students in OECD countries and, while most of them do have connectivity, a significant proportion remains completely excluded, especially in countries with limited resources. It should be noted that adolescents have greater access to the Internet and mobile phones than primary school children, as evidenced by the data from Kids Online surveys in the region (Trucco and Palma, 2020). In addition, with secondary school drop-out rates still high in the region, significant proportions of 15-year-olds are already out of school in many of these countries.

Household access to digital devices is also very unequal in the countries of the region. Beyond access to mobile phones, laptop computers are the most common device in households; on average, around 57% of students in the seven countries analysed have laptops at home, as shown in figure 4. However, there are significant disparities in access to each type of device, by socioeconomic and cultural status. Between 70% and 80% of students in the highest socioeconomic and cultural quartile (quartile IV) have laptops at home, compared to only 10% or 20% of students in quartile I (see figure 4). The exceptions are Chile and Uruguay, where there is greater access to this type of equipment, thanks, in part, to public programmes that provide portable devices. Access to desktop computers and tablets is more limited. Consideration must be given to the implications of difference in access in the current context, as it is highly likely that several members of a household will need to use the same device in order to continue education or work activities from home.

Figure 3 | Latin America (10 countries) and average for the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD): 15-year-old students with digital devices available at home, 2018
(Percentages)
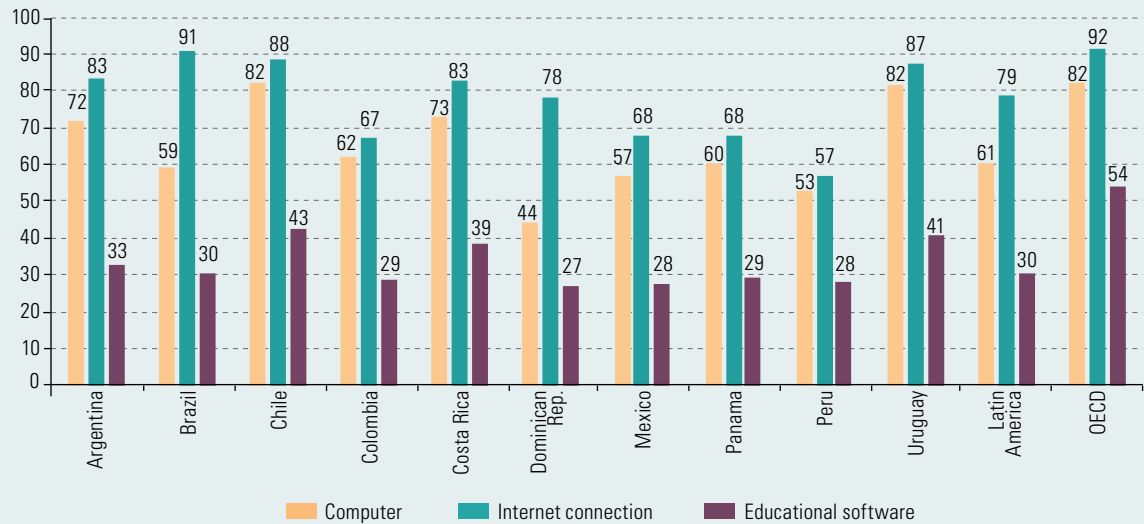
Computer ■ Internet connection ■ Educational software

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of data from Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018.

Figure 4 | Latin America (7 countries): 15-year-old students with digital devices available at home, by device type and socioeconomic and cultural quartile, 2018
(Percentages)
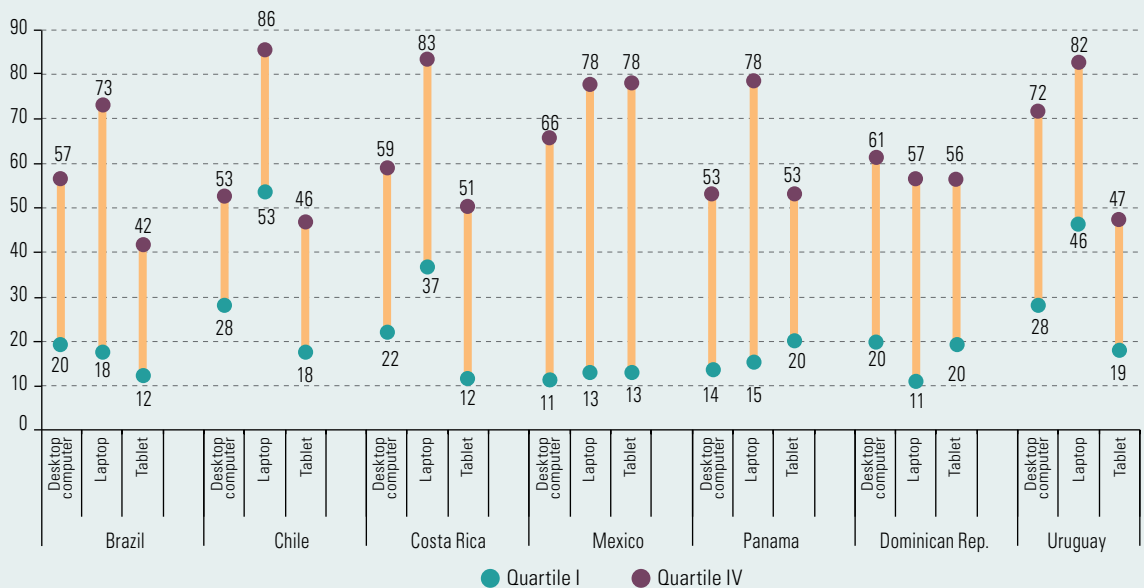
● Quartile I ● Quartile IV

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of data from Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018.

Access to Internet connection is much more widespread and, with the exception of Mexico and Panama, there are smaller socioeconomic and cultural gaps (see figure 5). The role of mobile connectivity in increasing access opportunities is thus clear. The findings of this and previous analyses show that there is a wide and complex range of access methods available, and that it is therefore not enough to have Internet access —not all methods offer the same usability, which is also highly dependent on the quality of the connection and the type of device (Trucco and Palma, 2020). Thus, there is a need to enhance real access for disadvantaged populations, since a mobile Internet connection is frequently provided through prepaid plans with limited minutes that are insufficient for browsing or using the learning platforms and other channels put in place for educational continuity.

Figure 5 | Latin America (7 countries): 15-year-old students with Internet access at home,
by connection type and socioeconomic and cultural quartile, 2018
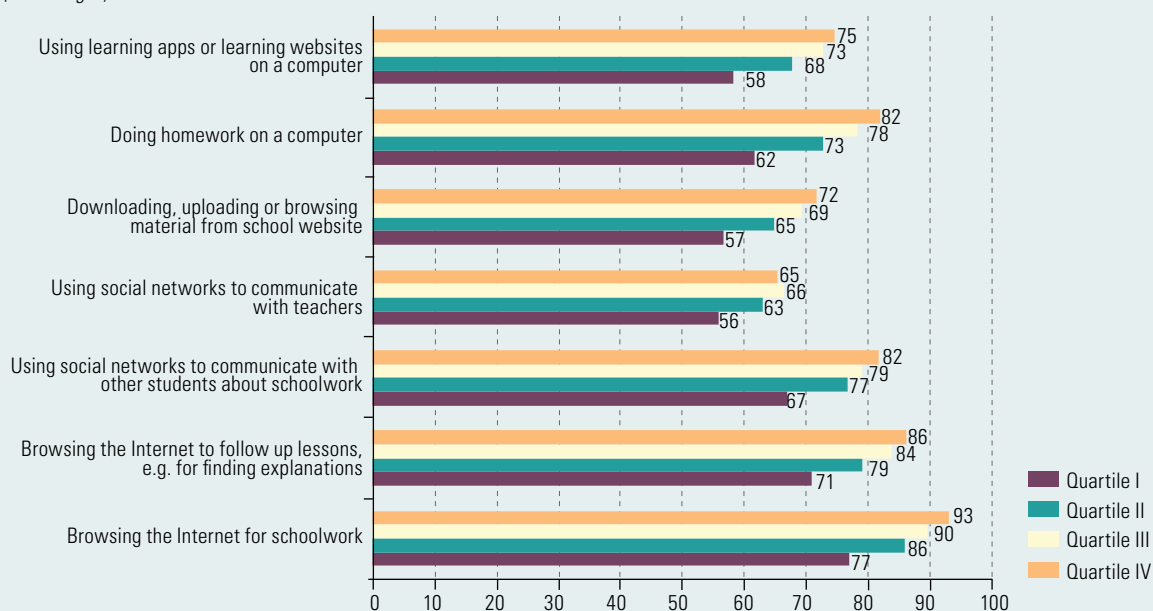*(Percentages)*
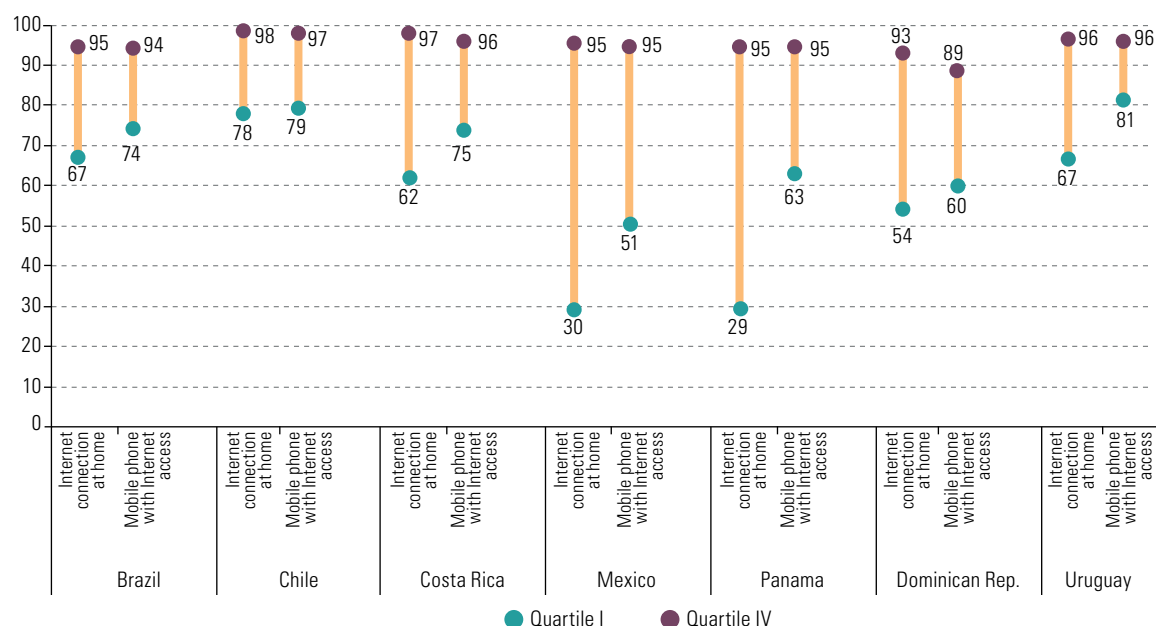
Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of data from Organization for Economic Cooperation and
Development (OECD), Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018.

Unequal access to online learning opportunities widens pre-existing gaps in access to information and knowledge, hindering socialization and inclusion in general, not to mention the learning process that distance education seeks to provide. These gaps must be viewed from a multidimensional perspective, for it is not merely a question of differences in access to equipment but also in the skill sets needed to leverage the potential of ICT, which are uneven among students, teachers and the family members overseeing the current homeschooling processes. Therefore, it is key for policies promoting more equal access to technology to begin by recognizing the various dimensions that structure social inequalities in the region and working intentionally to reverse them.

Figure 6 shows that as early as 2018, most 15-year-old students in the seven countries of the region that participated in the PISA test used ICT for schoolwork-related activities: communicating with teachers, doing homework and browsing online for research or for study content, among others. This suggests that these young people already had a head start in a process that was expedited in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this prior experience was not universal and, moreover, there are marked differences in students' socioeconomic and cultural status and their use of the Internet for schoolwork: there is a higher proportion of students with experience among those from higher socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds (see figure 6). In addition to socioeconomic and cultural differences, age also influences online activity, which increases significantly in adolescence. It is in adolescence that use of the Internet through activities related to socialization and entertainment begins, so it is likely that primary school children are at a disadvantage when it comes to the continuation of studies online (Trucco and Palma, 2020).

In the medium and long term, preparing to bridge this wider digital divide creates virtuous synergies of social and cultural inclusion for children and adolescents, opening up lifelong opportunities and the skills to deal with future crises. Beyond the skills and educational activities involved in cognitive learning, it is essential to develop self-care and effective risk management strategies, as well as to train students how to protect themselves as Internet users, particularly in light of the current circumstances in which children and adolescents spend more time online. Not all of them start off with the same knowledge, attitudes and learning required to develop and adopt coping strategies to benefit from the opportunities offered by the Internet and to reduce or deal with the risks (Trucco and Palma, 2020). Similarly, not all teachers are well prepared to conduct and facilitate educational continuity online, as discussed below.

Figure 6 | Latin America (7 countries):[a] Internet use among 15-year-old students, by activity type and socioeconomic and cultural quartile, 2018
(Percentages)

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of data from Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018.
[a] Simple average for Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Panama and Uruguay.

As early as 2008, UNESCO had developed a set of standards to help policymakers and curriculum developers identify the skills that teachers need to deliver education supported by technology. The standards were updated in 2011 and again in 2018 in response to technological advances and to the new vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, incorporating the principles of equity and inclusion. The document, *UNESCO ICT Competency Framework for Teachers*, identifies 18 competencies organized around 6 aspects of teaching practice (understanding ICT in education policy; curriculum and assessment; pedagogy; application of digital skills; organization and administration; and teacher professional learning) and in three levels of pedagogical use of ICT by teachers: knowledge acquisition, knowledge deepening and knowledge creation (UNESCO, 2018a).

The idea behind the initiative is that teachers who use their ICT competencies in practising their profession are better equipped to provide quality education and to effectively develop schoolchildren's ICT skills. Although these standards have existed for some time, few institutions have adopted them with a view to adapting initial teacher training programmes so that future generations of teachers can develop the skills needed for education in the twenty-first century.

IV. Tailoring assessment methods

Assessing and monitoring learning —as well as providing feedback— are important for understanding schoolchildren's progress and taking appropriate pedagogical actions to improve it.

Distance learning activities have reaffirmed the formative role of assessments. Drawing information on each student's individual learning from diagnostic and follow-up exercises, teachers can provide feedback and modify their teaching strategies to make them more effective. Moreover, the development of formative assessment and self-assessment instruments facilitates a collaborative process between teachers and students for evaluating their progress towards intended learning outcomes.

Similarly, guidelines or policy adjustments are needed to address issues such as class promotion and the application of standardized or large-scale assessments. Some countries have opted to eschew repetition and to pursue educational continuity and recovery for the next few years, to cancel or postpone assessments, or to adopt alternative approaches and methodologies for testing and validating learning.

According to data collected by the Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC/UNESCO Santiago), in April 2020, several Latin American countries started to make decisions regarding the administration of large-scale assessments. For example, Mexico has introduced an alternative assessment that takes into account the fact that major tests and assessments, including the learning portfolio assessment, will not be administered and there will be no end-of-year examinations for the current school year. Ecuador, meanwhile, is postponing some certification tests for education professionals and is considering alternative methods for national student assessments. Other countries have opted to cancel various national examinations: such is the case in Argentina, with the national assessment for schools with extended school days; in Costa Rica, with the fifth grade national mandatory assessment (*Pruebas Nacionales de Fortalecimiento de Aprendizajes para la Renovación de Oportunidades Primaria* (FARO)); and the Dominican Republic, with the national assessment for third grade students *(Evaluación Diagnóstica Nacional de Tercer Grado de Primaria)*. In many of these cases, countries must also overcome the problems associated with the suspension of legally mandated exercises, the results of which serve as inputs for the production of indicators or for decision-making with regard to national or local education policies.

Given the value of the information available through these examinations and their usefulness for education systems, they must be conducted under ideal conditions to ensure fairness, as well as confidence in their administration and use of the information gleaned from them. The current situation is far from ideal in this regard and countries will have to give priority to greater objectives than the regular administration of assessment tools.

Countries have a responsibility to define the strategy to be followed regarding assessment processes, and this is not a negligible matter among all decisions being made. While there are no universal solutions, some minimal considerations must be taken into account. First, it is important to weigh the timeliness and usefulness of assessment in providing feedback to students, and to monitor students' learning and the effects of the strategies implemented in the current context, with a view to the reopening of schools. Second, efforts must be made to identify mechanisms that ensure equality in assessment processes, bearing in mind that the current crisis continues to affect various aspects of preparation for examinations, including progression of learning, the availability of infrastructure, and even the state and development of social-emotional skills.

Lastly, there is no one-size-fits-all approach for all countries. The effects and severity of the pandemic vary in each country, and the evolution of the crisis calls for rapid and innovative responses that are specific to local needs. To this end, it is crucial to draw on experiences from other countries and to consult with teachers and experts from academia and other sectors to widen the scope for developing curricula and assessment methods.

V. The need to provide support to teachers and school management

Teachers and education staff as a whole have played a key role in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and have had to face a number of different emerging demands during the social and health crisis. Most teachers have not only had to re-plan and adapt education processes —including adjusting methods and curricula, designing materials, and diversifying the media, formats and platforms used— but have also had to take part in activities to safeguard the material safety of pupils and their families, such as distributing food, health products and school materials. Teachers and educational staff have had to face the demands of providing socioemotional and mental health support to pupils and their families, which is an aspect of their work that has become increasingly important during the pandemic.

In performing their teaching activities and meeting these new demands teachers often find themselves with inadequate training and resources to address the challenges of adapting teaching content and formats to pupils in disadvantaged situations. Even before the pandemic, teachers in the region had few opportunities for training on inclusion (UNESCO, 2018b) or for working with pupils in less favoured and more diverse contexts (UNESCO, 2013).

In addition, the new circumstances have meant teachers have to use virtual platforms and methodologies with which they may not be familiar. Although most Latin American countries that participated in the latest Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) by OECD (2019) reported that teachers had received training in use of ICT for teaching in their formal education or training (64%

of teachers in Brazil, 77% in Chile, 75% in Colombia, 77% in Mexico and 53% in the City of Buenos Aires), teachers in these countries consider that they urgently need training in this area; indeed, it is the second most in demand. Similarly, a high percentage of principals (59% in Brazil, 64% in Colombia, 44% in Mexico and 39% in the City of Buenos Aires) reported shortage or inadequacy of digital technology for instruction (OECD, 2019).

According to a survey in Mexico (Mancera Corucera, Serna Hernández and Barrios Belmonte, 2020), remote work strategies include tasks such as filling out books or study guides, requesting homework, making videos explaining content, working on specific websites and giving online classes. However, online classes and video recordings are much more common in private schools (where 56% and 43% of teachers perform these activities, respectively) than in other schools (where the proportions are below 10%).

The need to adjust to distance education has also created responsibilities and demands that hugely increase the time teachers spend preparing classes, ensuring suitable connections, and following up on their pupils in various formats. For example, in Chile, in a self-assessment survey 63% of teachers reported working more or much more than before, and more than half considered that conditions are worse than before the pandemic for teaching well and balancing time spent on domestic work and teaching work. The situation is particularly bad among female teachers, with a proportion 10 percentage points higher than for male teachers (Elige Educar, 2020). In Latin America and the Caribbean, most teachers are women: in preschool education 95.5% of teachers are women, in primary education 78.2%, and in secondary education 57.8% (UIS, 2018). Before the pandemic, women teachers were facing double working hours, which included not only classroom work, but also non-classroom teaching duties such as administrative tasks and lesson planning and preparation, as well as unpaid domestic and care work.

The opportunities for continuing to teach remotely are very unequal between different territories and segments of society in each country. For example, in Mexico, a survey of nearly 4,000 teachers at the preschool, primary and secondary levels in the 32 states revealed that, on average, 85% of teachers were engaged in distance education. However, in the poorest region of the country, on 20 April 2020 only 64% of teachers were working remotely (Mancera Corucera, Serna Hernández and Barrios Belmonte, 2020). The same survey also shows marked differences between public and private schools. The time spent on distance education varies considerably between teachers in private schools, where 24% of teaching staff spend seven hours or more a day, and those in public schools, where 64% spend two hours or less. The same differences can be seen in teachers' perceptions of the difficulty of distance education; on average, half of the people surveyed considered that adaptation is very difficult, but even more said so in the least favoured regions (70% of teachers in the south of Mexico), in contrast to private schools, where only 37% shared this view.

In another survey carried out in Chile, 56% of teachers reported sending learning guides or resources (physical or digital) to their pupils, but not giving classes. Only 18% reported giving live classes, which are concentrated in private schools and secondary education, and 22% reported that they send recorded classes (Educar Chile, 2020). A third survey of teachers in Chile revealed that teaching activities during the pandemic are mainly based on sending activities (81%) and homework (75%) for pupils to work on independently; however, merely 9% of teachers reported that most of their pupils have a habit of studying on their own and only a quarter of them considered that their pupils have the skills needed to use distance education applications (IIE, 2020).

Availability of ICT in pupils' homes appears to be a determining factor of educational opportunities and of the types of resources that can be used during the pandemic, as well as of those that can be used after. As mentioned earlier, the digital divide and inequality in the material conditions of households and schools are major challenges that must be addressed. Likewise, in environments where it is possible, support and training for teachers are key to the use of new technologies in education.

These new formats require trained and empowered teachers, who are able to make teaching decisions based on the curricular guidelines in each country and the conditions and circumstances of their pupils. While people from many different areas have had to make materials and resources available on different platforms during the pandemic, teaching staff in particular need time and guidance to explore them, understand them, and have the right information to make decisions about their use.

In teaching, the use of virtual systems creates a risk of losing the links formed during face-to-face lessons and can generate tension owing to overexposure of teachers and pupils, or difficulties in

maintaining teacher-pupil relationships and mediation. This is especially true in the initial education levels, particularly the preschool and primary levels, when there must be coordination with parents or caregivers to support and mediate children's processes.

From a social point of view, rises in unemployment and poverty (ECLAC, 2020b), and higher levels of domestic violence and physical and mental health problems mean that all school staff are faced with the difficulties and tensions experienced by families, without, in many cases, the material or professional resources needed to address them. This situation causes emotional exhaustion, feelings of being overwhelmed, and stress among teaching staff.

To design and implement educational responses to the social and health crisis there must be active participation by all parties involved in education, both during periods of lockdown and in the process of reopening schools. There must be improvements to management teams' ability to find creative, contextualized responses to organizational, teaching, and support issues for teachers, enabling them to address educational continuity, socioemotional support, and the strengthening of schools' social role. It is also crucial to empower teachers and educational staff to make contextualized and flexible pedagogical decisions, maintaining an appropriate balance between autonomy and the provision of support.

In addition, it is essential to consider the child-rearing, care and livelihood burdens borne by education workers. A high percentage of teachers and other education workers do not have permanent contracts, work for more than one employer, or work on an hourly or subject-based basis. According to information from TALIS, in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and the City of Buenos Aires between 72% and 79% of teachers have permanent contracts, while in Chile the proportion is only 62%. Instability and overwork limit teachers' chances of maintaining educational continuity and increase problems with unemployment and job insecurity, including remuneration.

According to the systematization of responses by Latin American education systems to the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic carried out by the Information System on Educational Trends in Latin America (SITEAL) of the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), teachers in most of the countries covered (15 out of 18) have been provided with resources of various kinds (see figure 7). These resources have focused on the provision of online courses (11 countries) and web-based resources for teachers (9 countries). Other resources aimed at teachers as part of educational responses to the crisis include the provision of digital libraries (4 countries), emotional support (3 countries) and digital devices (2 countries).

Figure 7 | Latin America (18 countries): government initiatives to support teachers in the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, by type of support
(Number of countries)
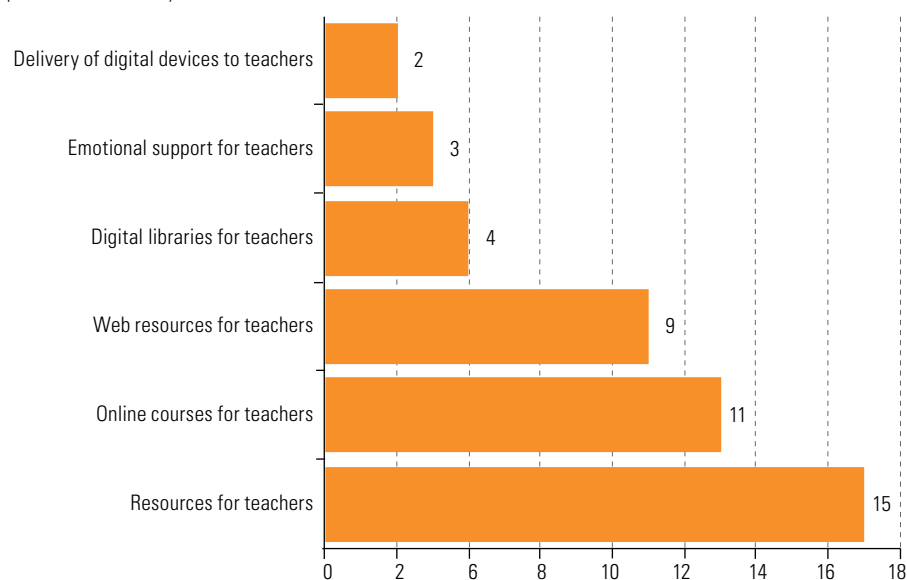
Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Information System on Educational Trends in Latin America (SITEAL), "Sistematización de respuestas de los sistemas educativos de América Latina a la crisis de la COVID-19", 2020 [online] https://www.siteal.iiep.unesco.org/respuestas_educativas_covid_19.

Note: The 18 Latin American countries included are: Argentina, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay. Date of last update: 8 June 2020.

A number of the online courses for teachers have focused on building and improving digital skills in the context of online distance education. For example, the Plurinational State of Bolivia has provided a course entitled Training for Digital Teachers (Dirección Departamental de Educación La Paz, 2020), the Ministry of Education of Ecuador launched a self-learning course for teachers called My Online Classroom (Ministry of Education of Ecuador, 2020) and in Colombia the Plan Padrino programme has sought to promote capacity building and the exchange of teaching experiences among higher-education institutions regarding the use and adoption of ICT in training (Ministry of Education of Colombia, 2020a). In El Salvador, a cascade training process has been initiated to train 100 technical specialists from the Ministry of Education to provide technical assistance for capacity building in online education; in turn, these specialists are expected to train the 46,000 teachers in the public education system (Ministry of Education of El Salvador, 2020a).

Other countries have also focused their training response for teachers on health-care issues. In Uruguay, the Training Department of the Human Resource Management Office of the Central Governing Council (CODICEN) of the National Public Education Administration (ANEP) has offered an online course to all teachers working in ANEP on health-related promotion and prevention issues (see ANEP, 2020). A different case is that of Nicaragua, whose schools remain open at the date of this report, so that, instead of online courses, the authorities have provided guidelines and guidance through workshops for teachers and managers on preventive measures in health and on healthy habits (Ministry of Education of Nicaragua, 2020).

With regard to provision of digital devices for teachers, as part of the process of digitalizing education in El Salvador, work is underway to acquire digital equipment for 100% of pupils and teachers in public education (Ministry of Education of El Salvador, 2020b). In Argentina, there are proposals to offer loans from Banco de la Nación Argentina at a subsidized rate to enable teachers to buy computers (Molina, 2020). In Paraguay, although no equipment has been distributed directly to teachers, priority was given to the delivery of 2,500 laptops with Internet access to 504 educational institutions in indigenous communities. This decision was made because the coronavirus is not circulating in these communities and because their way of living together as a family and a community means that "the school is within the community" and, therefore, that links with teachers have been maintained (Office of the President of the Republic of Paraguay, 2020).

Governments and education providers face a challenge of maintaining teacher's jobs, wages and benefits, and particularly of ensuring their well-being. Continued engagement with teachers to ensure their return to school will be a critical factor in ensuring that children return too.

In this scenario, teachers require priority support during lockdown and in the processes of reopening schools in the following areas, at the very least:

- Training, advice and resources to work on different distance education formats, including training in skills and methodologies for use of ICT and other distance teaching and learning platforms in education, and in criteria for contextualized and flexible curriculum decisions, assessment and feedback for learning.

- Support to maintain and build on advances in methodological innovation and implementation of alternative forms of teaching —incorporating opportunities for learning through play in the curriculum and contextualizing the experienced situation— and educational strategies to accelerate and resume learning of pupils who have been more severely affected during the pandemic.

- Priority protection of health, socioemotional support, and capacity building in teaching socioemotional skills to pupils and their families.

- Guarantees of continued employment and decent working and contractual conditions.

- Strengthening of local networks of teachers through spaces for support, learning and development of collaborative proposals to tackle curricular, teaching and socioemotional support work.

VI. Psychological and socio-emotional impact on the education community

For a large share of the population, confinement measures mean living in overcrowded conditions for a prolonged period, which has serious implications for the mental health of the population and in terms of the increased exposure of children and adolescents to situations of violence. According to ECLAC/UNICEF (2020), 51.2% of children and adolescents in urban areas in Latin America live in housing conditions that are deficient to some degree. Two out of 10 live in moderately deficient housing conditions while 3 out of 10 live in severely deficient housing conditions. In other words, more than 80 million children and adolescents in urban areas live in deficient housing conditions and some 18 million reside in severely deficient households. Research has shown the important relationship between deprivation in the housing context and the violation of other rights of the child. Overcrowding means inadequate space for study and rest, which has repercussions on cognitive development in childhood and on career paths and well-being in adulthood, while also increasing susceptibility to situations of abuse (ECLAC/UNICEF, 2020).

In emergency situations, schools are a fundamental space for emotional support, monitoring of risks, educational continuity, and social and material support for students and their families. Responses should be adapted to the diversity of situations in each family and community and their support needs. Maintaining psychological, social and emotional well-being is a challenge for all members of the education community: students, families, teachers and education assistants. Those who work in education, families and communities must develop vital adaptation and emotional resilience skills. Within this framework, socio-emotional learning is a valuable tool for mitigating the harmful effects of the social and health crisis and a condition for learning. This requires accompaniment, support and resources that are specially adapted for this purpose.

One example of the provision of resources for emotional support is that of Chile, whose Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) has developed a series of socio-emotional support mechanisms aimed at the education community. Teachers have been provided with guidelines for self-care and socio-emotional well-being in the context of a health crisis, along with a teaching journal for the development of personal and autonomous socio-emotional learning based on their own experience, so that they can later pass this on to their students (MINEDUC, 2020a). The Ministry of the People's Power for Education (MPPE) of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela has also developed a plan for psychosocial support for students, teachers and families (MPPE, 2020), as has Cuba, which has published four pamphlets on the theme of education for socio-emotional care in the face of natural, technological and health disasters in the country (UNESCO, 2020).

Placing socio-emotional learning at the centre of the education response provides an opportunity for transformation and the development of a more comprehensive and humanistic curriculum, which incorporates key dimensions of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (linked to citizenship, health, sustainability, gender equality and human rights, among other aspects) with education communities focused on students' well-being and learning. Socio-emotional learning should not be understood only as individual and contingent support, but as a lifelong learning process, both in periods of confinement and distance education and in the school return plan. Teachers and education staff need support and training for socio-emotional learning, which should be understood as a central dimension of the education process that must be developed across all school activities.

VII. Prioritization of vulnerable groups

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development considers education a key factor for the achievement of the 17 SDGs and of greater well-being, prosperity and environmental sustainability. That is why SDG 4 expresses the commitment of the international community to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

SDG 4 highlights equity and inclusion as guiding principles and as objectives in themselves, assuming that "no education target should be considered met unless met by all" (UNESCO, 2016b, p.7). Thus, in

the Incheon Declaration: Education 2030: Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all, Member States committed to "addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation and learning outcomes" (UNESCO, 2016b, p.7) and to that end, education policy efforts must be focused on the most disadvantaged groups.

The policy intention of leaving no one behind and the commitment to reach the most disadvantaged groups runs throughout the 2030 Agenda and holds promise to bring the poorest and most marginalized groups to the forefront of political decision-making, in an exercise of justice and redress for their historical subordinate status (Vargas, 2019). In the context of the pandemic, this mandate to prioritize the most disadvantaged groups is unavoidable, mainly to ensure that the current conditions of inequality do not worsen.

The 2030 Agenda and SDG 4 identify children, youth, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees and internally displaced persons and migrants (United Nations, 2015, para. 23) as groups whose development should be prioritized. In the region, there are also large gaps in education access and achievement based on ethnicity and race that derive from the historical and structural exclusion and discrimination affecting Afrodescendent and indigenous populations (ECLAC/UNICEF, 2019; ECLAC, 2017 and 2018). The combination of these axes of social inequality reinforces circles of exclusion and vulnerability.

Given that inequality has been highlighted and exacerbated by the pandemic, policy options designed for education in the current context must recognize historical debts to these groups in order to guarantee their right to education, both in terms of the availability of and access to learning opportunities, and the provision of quality and relevant education adapted to their conditions, needs and aspirations (Vargas, 2019). With respect to educational continuity, it is important to consider the diverse needs and responses required by different groups, and to incorporate pedagogical approaches that are sensitive and adapted to differences in culture, language, gender and accessibility.

A specific situation that must be addressed is the risk of disengaging from education and dropping out of school among these groups which are most vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic and the consequent health, social and economic crisis. Measures must be implemented in the short and medium term to avoid the definitive interruption of education. In the short term, efforts must be made to ensure that the most susceptible children and adolescents do not disengage from education and to exhaust all possible options to encourage them to continue learning. In the medium term, mechanisms must be created to ensure that there is no negative impact on the education experience or advancement of students who have not been able to continue learning during this period. This implies coordinating measures such as the elimination of repetition and establishing flexible mechanisms for curricular continuity along with support strategies for the recovery and acceleration of learning. These education measures must be complemented with socio-emotional support and social and financial security measures for students and their families. Coordination with other policies to protect and guarantee children's rights and to provide social protection for families with dependent children is essential to support families in vulnerable situations as best as possible.

A. The impact of the pandemic: gender dimensions and multiple effects

Experience shows that health emergencies have different impacts determined by gender, and that preparation and response efforts must interpret these dimensions, both to avoid deepening inequalities and to take advantage of opportunities to foster gender equality. In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic is no different.

For many women and girls, confinement means an increased burden of unpaid care work that, in turn, has implications for their learning. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2018), in "normal" times women spend more than thrice the time spent by men on unpaid care work. With the closure of schools, this imbalance is even worse, with many women assuming multiple responsibilities simultaneously: remote work, caring for children and other family members, supervising their children's learning, and unpaid domestic work. This aggravates an already disparate situation: before the pandemic, in countries such as the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Guatemala and Nicaragua, girls spent between 3 and 4 hours a day on care, while boys spent no more than 2.8 hours. In Ecuador, girls spent 3.8 hours more than boys on domestic chores each week (ECLAC/UNICEF, 2016).

One of the biggest risks women and girls face in the context of the pandemic is violence. A recent literature review (UK Aid Direct, 2020) revealed high levels of gender-based violence in past epidemics, with the most common forms being intimate partner violence and sexual exploitation and abuse. Prolonged quarantines, overcrowding, economic uncertainty and increasing poverty because of the pandemic have already increased the number of reports of gender-based violence incidents in the region, including acts of violence against women and girls, confirming the exacerbation of pre-existing vulnerabilities (UN-Women, 2020; CIM, 2020). This increase occurs in circumstances where services responsible for health, safety and protection have had to be diverted to the pandemic response. Similarly, United Nations estimates (2020) indicate that for every three months that lockdowns continue, there will be 15 million additional cases of gender-based violence worldwide. Along with the profound physical and psychosocial impacts of witnessing violence, UNESCO (2019b) has reported that this experience can have immediate and long-term implications for the learning and well-being of children and adolescents, as well as for the increase in school violence.

Considering the school closures in Latin America and the Caribbean, it is reasonable to assume that adolescent girls are at greater risk of facing various forms of abuse. In the context of disasters and other epidemics, such as the Ebola crisis in Africa, school closures led to an increase in early and forced marriage (Plan International, 2014), transactional sex to cover basic needs (Risso-Gill and Finnegan, 2015) and sexual abuse (Korkoyah and Wreh, 2015), while teenage pregnancy increased by up to 65% in some communities (UNDP, 2015). Students from vulnerable households and from areas affected by crises and with poor child supervision will face an increased risk of this type of violence. According to a report by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), figures representing early and unplanned pregnancies in Latin America and the Caribbean were already worrying before the pandemic, as the region has the second highest adolescent fertility rate in the world (PAHO/UNFPA/UNICEF, 2018). However, this risk affects not only adolescent girls, but also girls younger than 14 years who are victims of rape. Some data show that in 2017, Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay, Peru and the Plurinational State of Bolivia recorded between 700 and 2,100 pregnancies among girls aged 10–14 years (PAHO/UNFPA/UNICEF, 2018), and the situation may worsen in the current context and prevent these girls from returning to the classroom once schools reopen.

These gender-differentiated impacts worsen the situations of vulnerability and infringements of their rights already experienced by women and girls in Latin America and the Caribbean. This context, in turn, determines their ability to participate in the alternative learning modalities implemented by many countries in the region. Responses must therefore be based on thorough gender analyses, and their design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation must involve the participation of women and girls.

VIII.   Conclusions

The responses implemented by the various countries have shown innovative initiatives and promising practices, as well as important advances in record time to ensure educational continuity. It is also clear that national education systems face systemic issues and challenges that require the implementation of medium- and long-term strategies based on the 2030 Agenda and SDG 4.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated social inequalities, inequity and exclusion, while paradoxically presenting an opportunity to strengthen social relations, guided by solidarity and collaboration in pursuit of the common good, and also by responsibility for the care of others, as an essential dimension of one's own care and survival. The current crisis has given new meaning to social ties, which in turn serve as a basis to rebuild identities and the meaning of citizenship —including in a global dimension— around a practical idea of creating the common good in the short term. This is possible through large and small collective actions on a daily basis, which, without ignoring the dominant conflicts dividing societies, recognise and encourage cohesion as a critical element of building a common future.

In this scenario, and given the next stages of the pandemic and the phenomena or processes of ongoing or future global crises —such as climate change— key actors are increasingly underscoring the need to rethink education, giving priority in new content to preparing students to understand reality, to coexist and act in times of crisis and uncertainty, to make decisions at the individual and family levels and to encourage collective solutions to urgent challenges that contribute to the

world's structural transformation. This is the essence of the definition of global citizenship education proposed by UNESCO, which seeks not only to empower people individually, but also to seize and build their realities on the basis of strengthening social relations, through care for themselves and others, empathy, respect and recognition of diversity, friendship and solidarity, thus contributing to social coexistence and cohesion, which are necessary for building collective actions.

National education responses help to identify priority challenges when implementing measures to ensure continuity, equity and inclusion in education while face-to-face classes are suspended and during the process of reopening education centres:

(i) Equity and inclusion: focus on the most vulnerable and marginalized population groups —including indigenous peoples, Afrodescendants, refugees and migrants, the most socioeconomically disadvantaged populations and persons with disabilities— and on sexual and gender diversity.

(ii) Quality and relevance: focus on improving the content of curricula (in relation to health and well-being, in particular) and on specialized support for teachers, ensuring appropriate contractual and working conditions, teacher training for distance learning and the return to school, and socio-emotional support in order to work with students and their families.

(iii) Education system: preparedness of the education system to respond to crises, i.e. resilience at all levels.

(iv) Interdisciplinary and intersectoral approaches: planning and implementation focused not only on education, but also on health, nutrition and social protection.

(v) Partnerships: cooperation and collaboration between different sectors and actors to achieve an integrated system, focused on students and education staff.

States and their education and social protection systems are faced with these challenges, which specifically reflect the need for the fulfilment of the right to education. Thus, there must be adequate resources for budget allocation and distribution.

In terms of education financing, an initial analysis by the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP, 2020) shows that the crisis caused by the pandemic will have a significant impact on two levels:

(i) The loss of education spending for the duration of the crisis, as well as the resulting additional cost.

(ii) The expected downturn in future financial resources available to the education sector.

Given the most recent ECLAC projection (2020d) of a contraction in regional economic activity and an average decline of 9.1% in GDP in Latin America and the Caribbean, safeguarding financing for education is a fundamental priority to protect national education systems from the exacerbation of inequalities in access to education and of the learning crisis. According to UNESCO, on the basis of data available from 25 countries in the region, without the pandemic, education spending would have increased by 3.6% from 2019 to 2020 (from US$ 514 billion to US$ 532 billion). However, given the projected contraction of GDP in the region, the amount of resources available for education could fall by more than 9% in 2020 alone. Since the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is still evolving and the recovery may take longer, the real budgetary consequences may not be seen until 2021. It is therefore essential to calculate the costs of national education systems and to prioritize spending, as well as to ensure the protection of education as a fundamental human right and to harness the transformative potential of education, not only to build resilient systems but also to contribute to the social recovery.

In summary, the current COVID-19 pandemic poses significant challenges for education and social systems in the countries of the region that must be addressed in a coordinated manner. It also offers valuable lessons on the real priorities of life as part of a community. Today, these challenges and lessons offer the prospect of rethinking the purpose of education and its role in sustaining human life and dignity, so that no one is left behind. In other words, as countries consider the best way to tackle uncertainties and reopen their education institutions safely, this crisis provides an unprecedented opportunity to increase the resilience of national education systems and transform them into equitable and inclusive systems that help to fulfil the collective commitment made in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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