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Education Committee (SA2)

*Addressing the Impact of School
Closures and Distanced Learning for
Children in Marginalized
Communities*

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RESEARCH
REPORT



Forum: Education Committee (SA2)

Issue: Addressing the impact of school closures and distanced learning for children in marginalized communities

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Introduction

The quick upsurge of the coronavirus did not only interfere with the daily lives of individuals all around the world, but also forced schools in 160 countries to go into official closing in the spring of 2020. This situation soon gave birth to a concept that the world was not yet too familiar with: distanced learning. Students became dependent on technology in order to continue their academic learning, and while online platforms initially seemed like a burden, it was not too long before educational organizations came into terms with the idea of online education. Although the ongoing process of adapting to a distanced learning environment might have been easy for the majority, students belonging to marginalized groups were not able to be as successful in the transition. Socioeconomic difficulties, physical or mental disabilities, and complicated housing situations were only a few of the factors that caused more than a million underprivileged students worldwide to not benefit from online resources and materials as perfectly as the rest. Bearing in mind the high possibility of yet another period of distanced learning, it is vital that the polarization in students' educational advantages are resolved and reforms are made to better accommodate students with such conditions.

Definition of Key Terms

Marginalized communities: Socially excluded groups of people for different reasons, such as age, physical or mental disabilities, economic status, access to education, or living in isolated places or depressed areas.

Underprivileged students: Students who do not possess the money, social advantages and privileges that an average student does and have fewer opportunities compared to most.

Distanced learning: The education of students who may not always be physically present at a school, in which lessons are attended from one's own living environment. In 2020, the term also corresponds with online education, virtual classroom, and e-learning.

Hybrid Education: The educational approach that combines online materials and distanced teaching with traditional, face-to-face classroom methods. During COVID-19, hybrid education has been implemented in a way that allows some students to attend lessons in-person while others participate virtually.

Asynchronous learning: Self-paced study of material by students, as opposed to synchronous instruction, where the lesson is conducted live and everyone is present. Pre-recorded lessons, discussion forums, and audio recordings are part of asynchronous learning methods.

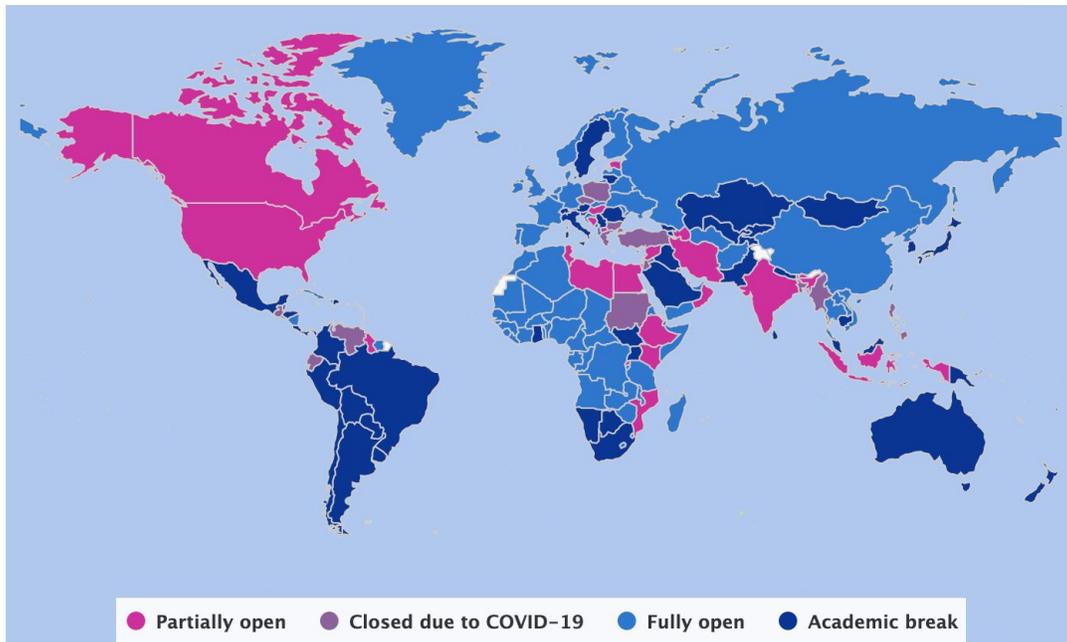
General Overview

With distanced learning becoming an experience that many were familiar with by spring 2020, most Member States expected to be ready to either open all schools or resume successful online education for the 2020-2021 academic year. It appeared, however, that even in the second semester of 2021, problems associated with integrating each and every student into this educational method were yet to be resolved, and more than a billion students worldwide were still influenced by virus-induced school closures.

Groups of students who were disproportionately affected by these new conditions were quite a lot: those with limited devices, language barriers, disabilities, working parents; those in rural areas; and in the case of migrant children, those without a permanent place of residence. When these factors are present in children's everyday life, it became difficult to expect them to show full participation in all of their classes, yet alone be able to turn in extra work or use their electronic devices outside of school hours. On top of this, assessing the progress of students who do manage to attend the online lessons might be problematic, as taking part in timed evaluations may exceed the circumstances of many.

Throughout 2020, several national governments worked towards diminishing such negative effects of online education on marginalized students by seeking unique mediums of education. Among such countries are Brazil, Kenya, and Armenia. Brazil and Kenya began broadcasting educational material via television and radio to make sure that households without telephones or computers were still able to attend school, while Armenia provided devices and internet packages to families in need. A similar attempt at minimizing the burden on students was observed on the global level, with both the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) partnering with different organizations. Through these efforts, numerous documents that outlined possible solutions for Member States were put together, and willing regions got the chance to seek direct educational assistance from the agencies.

In the second semester spent with online education, the extended period of school closures has increased worries. It is significant to note that for many underprivileged students, going to school on a daily basis had become a stable and secure routine. Some children ate their daily meals in the school cafeteria, some were supervised by adults only during the school day, and some were simply safer in school than they currently are within their household. Due to this, not only support for the online environment, but also alternative, face-to-face schooling options are being considered for disadvantaged students in many countries. UNICEF, as well, believes that such a long season of distanced learning will increasingly become more harmful for children in marginalized communities. In a press release made on December 7, 2020, the organization touched upon a study that used information from 191 countries and found no correlation between school status and the number of national COVID-19 cases. In light of such information, UNICEF is discouraging governments from closing all schools as a first response to growing infection rates and asks all schools to safely reopen as soon as possible.



UNESCO's data of global school closures as of January 5, 2021

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

United States of America (USA)

The United States of America, as the country with the highest number of recorded COVID-19 cases, holds an important role in determining the near future of distanced learning. Several states in the country began announcing official academic breaks on March 25, 2020. By April, such ongoing school closures had affected over 55 million students. School reopenings and implementation of hybrid education models took place in many states throughout the year; however, a nationwide educational recovery is yet to be achieved. In an announcement made on January 26 of 2021, the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (C.D.C.) urged all schools to reopen as long as sufficient precautions, such as wearing masks and social distancing, are taken. If the C.D.C.'s remarks are followed, schools all over the USA may soon be back to in-person teaching.

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) was founded in 1946 in order to supply children with immediate humanitarian aid after World War II. Since then, the agency has transformed into a significant organization in ensuring the long-term wellbeing of children worldwide. In 2020, UNICEF started to focus more on providing equal educational opportunities to all children, regardless of their living conditions. On April 29, the agency published the official "Framework for Reopening Schools," which evaluates and presents suggestions as to how children in marginalized groups can be reached and securely reintegrated into the education system. Nowadays, UNICEF is regularly

calling upon national governments to take into account the existence of such underprivileged students in the process of reopening schools.



The flag of UNICEF

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been working towards protecting and further improving education, science, and cultural values around the world since its establishment in 1945. As the main educational body of the United Nations, an important mission of the agency has been seeking educational rights for anyone who wishes to receive formal schooling. The UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education, which is the first international document to legally underline the right to education, was adopted in 1960, and this education-for-all stance was maintained during the pandemic. Ever since school closures first began, UNESCO has continuously released recommendations and resources to keep up with the new style of education. With this in mind, several analyses of how distanced learning affects different groups of children were also conducted, and the results of such studies were published on their website in the past year. On top of their global work, the agency has supported specific regions, such as the Arab States, Asia-Pacific, Latin America, and the Carribean in responding to COVID-19 by granting their citizens safe and technologically advanced methods of education.



The flag of UNESCO

International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE)

Founded in 1938, the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) is a UNESCO-affiliated non-profit organization that aims to improve the quality and accessibility of online education. One of the organization's main objectives is to successfully enact UN's Sustainable Development Goal 4: ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. In order to contribute to this goal, ICDE has collaborated with over 190 educational institutions worldwide in more than 70 countries, therefore supporting 15 million students. In 2020, the organization held workshops and webinars on many popular topics, including the provision of technological material to those in need, asynchronous learning, hybrid education, and equity in online schools. Their events allowed a global network of instructors to share their experiences and recommendations for e-learning during the pandemic.



The logo of ICDE

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Although UN agencies were quick to provide both analytical and logistical support to national governments, the failures in fully implementing such suggestions were mainly due to the lack of global cooperation. Countries, during different times of the year, took different measures about school closures and national lockdowns. Therefore, a common standard for distanced learning, and how students in marginalized groups could quickly be integrated into this education, was never created. Instead, UNESCO and UNICEF focused on issuing non-binding suggestions and frameworks for any willing country to take advantage of while offering direct assistance to a few regions around the world. It might have been beneficial and long-lasting if such UN agencies and the educational departments of each Member State were given a platform to coordinate with each other, which is something to be considered for the upcoming months of online education.

Possible Solutions

As outlined in the General Overview, one of the leading reasons behind marginalized students being out-of-touch with distanced learning is the financing of it. Tools such as computers, stable internet connection, and efficient software are often difficult to acquire under reduced economic circumstances, and with the pandemic, it is even harder for families in marginalized communities to find what they are looking for. Because of this, it is important that national governments are able to identify regions with

low-speed internet access or weak technological infrastructure, so that they can directly get involved in helping underprivileged families. Such processes can be carried out in coordination with relevant UN agencies giving monetary or technical support. Yet another way for schools to take part in solving this issue is through the continuation of communication with families in need. If schools and their districts took the initiative to keep in touch with the guardians of students that seem to need additional assistance, it could be much easier to ensure that their education is not hindered. While doing so, it is important to notice that students in different households will have diverse needs, therefore conducting individual evaluation of each student's conditions is helpful. For independent Member States to successfully implement such solutions, however, collaboration among different States should also be encouraged. This would both put more emphasis upon frameworks being published by the UN and establish a faster flow of information and resources among countries seeking to support their underprivileged students.

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