

Learning from the present, looking to the future

Why children will be the main victims of the pandemic

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During times of great damage, children are most likely to endure harmful consequences on a wide range of aspects: health development – both physical and mental –, social integration and so on. Researchers from the Research on Improving Systems of Education program studied how disasters were affecting children, investigating the consequences of the earthquake that hit Pakistan in 2005. They found out that children who were younger than 3 –included foetuses– at the time of the earthquake were significantly smaller in height than non-affected children (3 cm on average) in 2009 [4], highlighting the long-term consequences on health that great natural disasters could have on children.

The COVID-19 crisis has led many governments to close schools. The scope of consequences is yet to be observed but it is already obvious that many children will bitterly bear those costs. Was it necessary to close school? Probably. Closing schools in the past slowed the spread of epidemic diseases, and thus saved lives. [5] But the effectiveness of such measures ultimately depends on how deadly the virus turns out to be in the future and the actual accessibility of an internet connection.

Forthcoming consequences are inevitable. But even as of now the virus is affecting children in many ways. Most of the problems raised here are intertwined, and their intensity depends on how

“Children are not the face of this pandemic. But they risk being among its biggest victims”, says a policy brief launched by the Secretary-General of the United Nations. [1]

While children are not the main vectors of the pandemic, it affects them in an unprecedented way. However, they somehow seem to be excluded from the main concerns that invade all media: immediate health impact (they are less prone to catch the coronavirus), economy and labor market (which they have not entered yet). In fact, the world is going through its worst recession since the Great Depression from the 30s. [2]

“The hidden paradox of disasters, often missed in the immediacy of the Covid-19 pandemic, is that even if those who suffer today are the elderly, those who will pay throughout their lives will be the youngest.” [3]

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much those factors are gathered. In spite of that two situations might help sketch the rationale of the concerns for children: school closures and family care.

Education and school closure

There has never been a consensus about the best approach to take on schools throughout this pandemic, specially at its beginning, when nobody had a clear opinion on whether schools should close or not. [6] But as of March 31st, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization estimated that 91.3% of total enrolled learners – 1,5 billion students over the globe – were affected by those measures. [7]

Children's right to education is recognized by most countries. Article 28 of the Convention of the right of the child states that "States Parties recognize the right of the child to education." Undisrupted education made therefore distance learning compulsory. Technology offers tremendous opportunities for it, so that it goes way beyond a rescue option. Intelligent online learning systems can adapt to every child, making the learning experience fit to their personal needs. State institutions and non-governmental organizations have been very creative in dealing with those new and unprecedented challenges. UNESCO published a list of applications and websites, [8] created to face said challenge in matter of education using internet, but also, in a broader way, of all distance learning platforms, including non-internet-based resources (like radio or television) for people who would not have sufficient internet coverage.

"That being said, the Covid-19 crisis strikes at a point when most of the education systems covered by the OECD's latest round of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) are not ready for the world of digital learning opportunities." [9] People across the globe do not have equal access to distance learning resources for many different reasons, and the pandemic has highlighted those inequalities and deepened them. Mainly there are great differences among countries on the availability of information and communication technology (ICT) at home, which mainly relies on income issues but also sometimes on the number of children at

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home using such devices. To overcome those difficulties, the UK and other countries decided to provide laptops for most disadvantaged children.

[10], but these policies are not always feasible. Access to internet is not equally available everywhere either. This is the reason why some alternative non-internet-based solutions had been set, but, at a broader scale, access to and availability of effective-distance learning platforms is not well and equally spread around the world. [11]

There is therefore a great work of monitoring children to be provided on the part of both state institutions and teachers. UNESCO gave some recommendations to make this task more homogeneous. [12] First of all, remote supervision has to be provided — distance learning does not mean alone learning.

This implies that assessments have to be upheld and adjusted. Assessments can obviously not be carried out the way they used to, but they give children both an aim to keep learning during those tough times and "information about [their] progress for families and teachers. The loss of this information delays the recognition of both high-potential and learning difficulties and can have harmful long-term consequences for the child." [13]

Regular supervision is essential to the learning process of children. In the above-mentioned study about the consequences of the Pakistan earthquake in 2005, researchers found out that affected children scored worse at tests than unaffected children in 2009. "Children lost between one point five and two years of learning as a result of the earthquake at all school-going ages." [14] If we take into account the fact that "the percentage of children who cannot read and understand at age 10 – stood at 53% of children in low- and middle-income countries — before the outbreak started." [15], we might rightfully dread the forthcoming education outcomes of the crisis if no fast measures are taken. This emphasizes the need for public policies – and for teachers on a smaller scale – to endeavor-supporting disadvantaged groups (children with no access to household ICT, children with disabilities, children already at risk of dropping out of school, etc.). Finally, UNESCO encouraged collaboration among teachers, a necessity that arises from the disparity in both the knowledge of the teachers on how to use ICT and children's access to such technology. In some countries, now that the crisis seems to be cooling down, some schools have implemented a system where usual classes are divided in half, each one alternatively going to school while the other is being home schooled. This makes collaboration among teachers a priority.

However, despite most good will and best intentions, research has repeatedly found that fully virtual classes are much less effective than traditional face-to-face instruction. [16], due to the inherent limitedness of that environment with regard to interaction between teachers and students, and to the latter's capacity to focus during a long period behind a screen. This makes more likely school dropouts

and lesser work in the process of learning, which is going to have an impact on test scores. [17]

Moreover, school closure may not only impact learning outcomes, but also child development. "School is not only about instruction [...] the role of schools is actually far richer and more complex, and involves developing a wider set of knowledge, so young people learn about the society they are part of, their culture and develop a sense of self. This cannot be achieved solely through the delivery of digital content." [18] Teenagers are at an age where their development depends on the relationship they have with their peers, more than that with their family. Therefore, many of them live the crisis as "an injunction to regression." [19] And even where schools reopened, sanitary prevention measures make social relationships somewhat harder. [20]

There are also mental health issues to be faced as a result of the lockdown, as another report of the United Nations has shown. Many children's emotional state and behaviour has been affected during confinement according to reports by Italian and Spanish parents. [21] Moreover, children, including adolescents, are at particular risk of abuse during the pandemic. Children with disabilities, children in crowded settings and those who live and work on the streets are particularly vulnerable. A UN Policy Brief on the impact of COVID-19 on children has been published specifically on this topic with recommendations on how to address children's risks and needs. [22]

Adolescents and young people are also an at-risk group in the present crisis, as most mental health conditions develop during this period of life. Many young people have seen their futures impacted. For example, schools have been closed, examinations have not been held, and economic prospects have diminished. A study carried out with young people with a history of mental health needs living in the UK reports that 32% of them agreed that the pandemic had made their mental health much worse. [23] The main sources of distress included concerns about their family's health, school and university closures, loss of routine and loss of social connection. Provision of mental health services must include specific actions tailored for this population. [24]

Families under pressure

From the results of the study in Pakistan, researchers drew a simple conclusion: "we must make governments and aid agencies recognize that the trade-off between investing in human capital and immediate aid is a false one." [25] Responses to the crisis cannot exclusively rely on cash transfers or other kinds of immediate-effect policy. They have to take into account the primary environment of children: families.

The pandemic crisis highlighted the crucial role of families in dealing with disasters. Families have proven to adapt wonderfully to this unprecedented situation. They are the place where people look for shelter because they have the ability to mitigate the negative impacts of crises. However, some obstacles might alter this capacity.

The first thing families have had to do is reorganizing their time and schedule. Parents were told to stay home and some of them could while others couldn't, because their job was an essential one. In any case, the closing of schools made things a lot more complex for parents. In fact, for those who had to work outside, nobody was there to look after their kids. [26] And homeworking has not been a family picnic either.

Family has a great role to play in the instruction of children and provides major inputs into a child's learning. However, they often rely on schools for

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this; families usually only provide additional support. Home schooling can be a good experience, but only if families are prepared to it, which is not the case in most of them. Here again, the crisis has deepened inequalities. Reorganization of parent's time had to be very logistical too: 9% of 15-year-old students do not have a quiet place to study in their homes. [27] Moreover, the share of ICT might have been an additional difficulty, especially in large families. [28]

Effective distance learning also depends on both non-cognitive skills of the parents and of their amount of knowledge. The Pakistani aforementioned study, it has been found that children with educated mothers did not feel losses on educational outcomes, but children whose mother had not completed primary education did.

But education was not the only challenge families had to face. They were put under a tough financial pressure. Some low-income families relied on school to provide their children with free meals. [29] Many creative ideas have been set to mitigate this negative outcome of the crisis. [30], but once more it was not the case equally everywhere.

Actually, many childcare services could not be carried out anymore because of the lock down, with harmful consequences on children's health and well-being. Special emphasis was put on physical and emotional maltreatment at home (abused children

were locked home with their abuser), on gender-based violence and on psychological distress (due to lack of social interaction, anxiety, death of relatives, etc.). [31] Also lack of internet monitoring exposed children to online sexual predators.

Sometimes, in low-income countries, children were put under the pressure to drop out of school, [32] to support financially the family. [33] "As the pandemic wreaks havoc on family incomes, without support, many could resort to child labour," [34] said ILO Director-General, Guy Ryder.

Conclusion

The current crisis is affecting children in an unprecedented way. If no specific measures are taken,

the burden of those consequences is going to rely on children. This is why it is essential to plan policies ahead, [35] so that the lessons learnt are taken into account to promote new ways to improve learning, but without increasing the burden of parents or, at least, helping them to bear it in better conditions.

This words of the Secretary-General's statement on the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on children can be a good conclusion to reach this objective — "we must commit to building back better by using the recovery from COVID-19 to pursue a more sustainable and inclusive economy and society in line with the Sustainable Development Goals. With the pandemic placing so many of the world's children in jeopardy, I reiterate my urgent appeal: let us protect our children and safeguard their well-being." [36]

- [1] https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420_Covid_Children_Policy_Brief.pdf; cf. <https://data.unicef.org/topic/covid-19-and-children/>
- [2] <http://www.oecd.org/economic-outlook/june-2020/>
- [3] <https://www.riseprogramme.org/publications/we-have-protect-kids>
- [4] https://www.riseprogramme.org/sites/www.riseprogramme.org/files/publications/RISE_WP-039_Adrabi_Daniels_Das_o.pdf
- [5] <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/208354> on the Spanish flu of 1918 and 1919.
- [6] <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/mar/24/clear-as-mud-schools-ask-for-online-learning-help-as-coronavirus-policy-confusion-persists>
- [7] <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>
- [8] <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/solutions>
- [9] <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/learning-remotely-when-schools-close-how-well-are-students-and-schools-prepared-insights-from-pisa-3bfd1f7/>
- [10] <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-52341596>
- [11] <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-sends-class-home-estonias-ready-germany-lags/a-52830864>
- [12] <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373305>
- [13] <https://voxeu.org/article/impact-covid-19-education>
- [14] Op. cit.
- [15] <https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/educational-challenges-and-opportunities-covid-19-pandemic>
- [16] <https://in.chalkbeat.org/2020/3/9/21178707/indiana-virtual-charter-schools-linked-to-a-decline-in-student-test-scores-a-new-study-shows>
- [17] Carlsson, M, G B Dahl, B Öckert and D Rooth (2015), "The Effect of Schooling on Cognitive Skills", Review of Economics and Statistics 97(3): 533–547. The researchers considered a situation in which young men in Sweden have differing number of days to prepare for important tests. A few days of extra schooling raised scores on tests of the use of knowledge by 1% of a standard deviation.
- [18] <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-school-closures-impact-1-3-billion-children-and-remote-learning-is-increasing-inequality-138656>
- [19] <https://www.ladepeche.fr/2020/06/01/du-retour-dans-le-cocon-familial-au-deconfinement-une-periode-difficile-pour-les-adolescents,8912080.php>
- [20] <https://www.ledevoir.com/opinion/libre-opinion/579650/la-distanciation-et-le-developpement-des-enfants>
- [21] Argiles et al., 2020.
- [22] https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420_Covid_Children_Policy_Brief.pdf
- [23] Young Minds, 2020.
- [24] <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-teenagers-can-protect-their-mental-health-during-coronavirus-covid-19>
- [25] Op. cit.
- [26] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3298323/pdf/09-1827_finalD.pdf
- [27] <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/learning-remotely-when-schools-close-how-well-are-students-and-schools-prepared-insights-from-pisa-3bfd1f7/>
- [28] <https://news.err.ee/1068223/large-families-need-computers-to-help-with-homeschooling>
- [29] <https://www.worldbank.org/en/data/interactive/2020/03/24/world-bank-education-and-covid-19>
- [30] <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/20/818300504/schools-race-to-feed-students-amid-coronavirus-closures?t=1591863089220>
- [31] [https://www.unicef.org/media/65991/file/Technical%20note:%20Protection%20of%20children%20during%20the%20coronavirus%20disease%202019%20\(COVID-19\)%20pandemic.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/65991/file/Technical%20note:%20Protection%20of%20children%20during%20the%20coronavirus%20disease%202019%20(COVID-19)%20pandemic.pdf)
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- [33] <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/covid-19-may-push-millions-more-children-child-labour-ilo-and-unicef>
- [34] <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/covid-19-may-push-millions-more-children-child-labour-ilo-and-unicef>
- [35] <https://www.brookings.edu/research/covid-19-and-school-closures-what-can-countries-learn-from-past-emergencies/>
- [36] <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-04-16/secretary-generals-statement-the-effect-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-children-scroll-down-for-french-version>