

Gaps, challenges and progress made in the promotion and provision of access to quality education¹

for

Session 4: UN system support to the implementation of the Third United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (2018-2027)

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Introduction

The Third United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (2018-2027) was established by the General Assembly with a view to accelerating global actions for a world without poverty. As part of the virtual inter-agency expert group meeting convened by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), UNESCO participates in the session 4: UN system support towards the achievement of the objectives of the Third Decade. Relying on the achievement of many underpinning goals related to social, human and economic development, ending poverty by 2030 already was an ambitious goal prior to the pandemic. Today, for the first time in 20 years, global extreme poverty rose and it is expected that by the end of 2021, more than 140 millions people will have fallen into extreme poverty because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This document aims to recall UNESCO's role and work in the achievement of the overall Agenda 2030 and more particularly, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. SDG 4 is rights-based and seeks to ensure the full enjoyment of the right to education as fundamental to achieving sustainable development. Education in itself is an empowering right and one of the most powerful tools by which economically and socially marginalized children and adults can lift themselves out of poverty and participate fully in society. In order to do so, there must exist equality of opportunity and universal access. Normative instruments of the United Nations and UNESCO, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) lay down international legal obligations which recognize and develop the right of every person to enjoy access to education of good quality. This legal framework is considered of great importance by Member States and the international community in implementing the right to education. At a time where education systems have been disrupted like never before, this paper will highlight gaps, challenges and progress made in the promotion and provision of access to quality education. In 1960,

In 2015, the Incheon Declaration for Education 2030 was adopted and UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency for education, was mandated to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 agenda² with a view to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. As such, UNESCO's main responsibilities revolve around: undertaking advocacy to sustain political commitment; facilitating policy dialogue, knowledge sharing and standard setting; monitoring progress towards the education targets; convening global, regional and national stakeholders to guide the implementation of the agenda; and functioning as a focal point for education within the overall SDG coordination architecture.

Education is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the achievement of the SDG4 is essential to the implementation of many other SDGs: health and well-being (SDG3), gender equality (SDG5), decent work and sustainable growth (SDG8), responsible consumption & production (SDG12) and climate change mitigation (SDG13). It is also important to mention that UNESCO's

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² UNESCO. Incheon Declaration. World Education Forum 2015.

mandate goes beyond education and that the agency works in numerous other fields - Communication and Information, Culture, Natural Sciences as well as Social and Human Sciences – and therefore supports the overall Agenda 2030 in numerous ways.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented global crisis, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities and putting at risks the progress made towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Education, key to reducing inequalities and building sustainable societies, was heavily disrupted and UNESCO estimates that over 1.5 billion learners³ — representing 91% of the world’s school population — were affected at the peak of the crisis. In such a context, UNESCO launched the Global Education Coalition in March 2020 to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic on education provision but also to support Member States in their recovery from COVID-19. Since then, more than 175 partners from all horizons have rallied together to ensure that “Learning Never Stops”.

In October 2020, UNESCO convened an extraordinary session of the Global Education Meeting to protect and rethink education in the current and post-COVID-19 world and agree on priority actions for educational recovery and progress. World leaders endorsed a 15-month emergency plan for education -the 2020 Global Education Meeting Declaration⁴ and committed to protecting education finance and taking actions to accelerate progress towards SDG4 in the COVID-19 context and beyond.

Based on the important documentation produced by the agency over the past months, notably the annual 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report^{5 6}, this paper undertakes to first, highlight the gaps, challenges and progress made in the promotion and provision of access to quality education up until 2020 and then outline UNESCO’s global responses to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on education.

Gaps, challenges and progress made in the promotion and provision of access to quality education

1. Primary and secondary education

The first target of the SDG4 focuses on the need for universal access to schooling of good quality that leads to relevant learning outcomes. In 2018⁷, **completion rates** stood at 85% in **primary education**, 73% in **lower secondary education** and 49% in **upper secondary education** at the global level; those have increased steadily, but slowly, since 2000. In 2018, an estimated 258 million children, adolescents and youth, or 17% of the total, were not in school and since the mid-2000s, progress in the attendance rate has stalled. For each age group, sub-Saharan Africa had the highest share of out-of-school individuals, surpassing Central and Southern Asia. Disparities by wealth in attendance rates are large: among 65 low- and middle-income countries, the average gap in attendance rates between the poorest and the richest 20% of households was 9 percentage points for primary school-age children, 13 for lower secondary school-age adolescents and 27 for upper secondary school-age youth. As the poorest are more likely to repeat and leave school early, wealth gaps are even higher in completion rates: 30 percentage points for primary, 45 for lower secondary and 40 for upper secondary school completion. Also, over-age participation is a challenge, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. In 20 low- and

³ Data from UNESCO. 2020.

⁴ UNESCO. Extraordinary Session of the Global Education Meeting, Education post-COVID-19: 2020 Global Education Meeting Declaration. 2020.

⁵ In 2015, the Global Education Monitoring Report, an editorially independent report, hosted and published by UNESCO, was mandated by 160 governments to synthesise, analyse and clearly present the best available data, evidence and research to explain progress and differences in education, and to make recommendations that stimulate reflection and dialogue and thereby improve policymaking.

⁶ UNESCO. 2020. Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and education: All means all. Paris, UNESCO

⁷ Unless stated otherwise, data and information provided in this section come from the latest GEMR (2020).

middle-income countries, at least 30% of 15-year-olds were still in primary school; in Malawi, the share was 75%.

Regarding **learning outcomes**, the 2018 PISA⁸ highlighted slight regression in high-income countries over the past 15 years (one in five students was below minimum proficiency levels) and stagnation in middle-income countries (one in two students was below minimum proficiency levels). However, PISA data are scarce and do not reflect the learning crisis taking place globally. In that respect, UIS estimated that 617 million children and adolescents worldwide were not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics in 2017⁹. To spotlight this crisis, the World Bank and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics introduced the concept of Learning Poverty: the state of being unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10. Bringing together schooling and learning indicators¹⁰, data from 2018 showed that 53%¹¹ of all children in low- and middle-income countries suffered from learning poverty while only 9%¹² did in high-income countries. Progress in reducing learning poverty is far too slow to meet the SDG aspirations: at the current rate of improvement, in 2030 about 43%¹³ of children will still be learning poor.

2. Early childhood education

Ensuring that all children are prepared and not behind when entering school is an important part of reducing inequality. However, interpreting data on **early childhood education participation** depends on the age group definition, institutional arrangement and early entry patterns. Thereby, participation generally increases with age, reaching its highest level the year before primary school entry age. In 2018, participation one year before primary school entry age was 67% globally, with shares ranging from 41% in low-income countries to 91% in high income countries. But beyond mere participation in early childhood education, there is a need to systemically assess **early childhood development** and UNICEF has developed a tool to evaluate whether children are ‘developmentally on track’ by ages 24, 36 and 48 months (SDG4.2.1), though internationally comparable data on this indicator remain scarce.

3. Technical, vocational, tertiary and adult education and skills for work

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) is often regarded as a crucial vehicle for social equity and inclusion (as well as sustainable development) in that it tends to reach parts of the population ordinarily excluded from general education. Data show **adult education and training** participation rates in the previous month to be 1% for low-, 2% for lower-middle-, 3% for upper-middle- and 16% for high-income countries. In OECD countries, adults with high skills are three times as likely to participate in training as adults with low skills: 58% vs 20%.

Related to skills, the 4th target captures learning that prepares youth and adults to participate in the world of work. It refers to ‘decent jobs and entrepreneurship but the variety of labour market contexts and required job skills covered makes monitoring global progress difficult. ICT skills, because of their ever-increasing importance, and the mapping of their distribution can help understand trends at the global level. For instance, the use of basic formulas in spreadsheets, one of nine skills monitored, is

⁸ The **Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)** is a worldwide study by the [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#) (OECD) in member and non-member nations intended to evaluate educational systems by measuring 15-year-old school pupils' scholastic performance on mathematics, science, and reading.

⁹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) (2017). “More Than One-Half of Children and Adolescents Are Not Learning Worldwide”. Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS).

¹⁰ This encompasses the share of children who have not achieved minimum reading proficiency (as measured in schools) and is adjusted by the proportion of children who are out of school (and are assumed not able to read proficiently).

¹¹ World Bank. 2019. Ending Learning Poverty: What Will It Take?. World Bank, Washington, DC.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

possessed by 7% of adults in lower-middle-income countries, 20% in 19 upper-middle-income countries and 40% in high-income countries while further disaggregated data highlights large disparities by age, gender (at women's expense in low- and lower-middle-income countries and at men's expense in upper-middle-income countries) and by wealth.

Regarding **tertiary education, global participation** reached 224 million in 2018, equivalent to a gross enrolment ratio of 38% and shares ranged from 9% in low-income to 75% in high-income countries.

4. Adult Literacy

Globally, 86% of adults and 92% of youth are literate. Women remain less likely to be literate, but the gap is closing in the younger generation. However, gender gaps remain particularly large in Central and Southern Asia (15 percentage points), sub-Saharan Africa (14 points) and Northern Africa and Western Asia (11 points). Additionally, the number of adults who have not completed primary school will continue declining relatively slowly but may remain above 10% in Africa until the 2050s, even if universal primary completion is achieved by 2030, which means adult literacy will remain a challenge.

5. Education for sustainable development and global citizenship

Although it predates the Agenda 2030 by more than 40 years, UNESCO's 1974 Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Cooperation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms already offered guiding principles on peace and non-violence, human rights and fundamental freedoms, cultural diversity and tolerance, and human survival and well-being to promote **education for sustainable development and citizenship**. However, data are lacking on the target's indicators and measurement challenges risk side-lining target 4.7 in the SDG 4 agenda – a double loss, as its issues can contribute to other targets' and SGDs' achievement. In 2016/17, only 83 countries, more than half in Europe and the LAC region, responded to a consultation on whether the guiding principles of the 1974 Recommendation were reflected in their education policies, curricula, teacher training and student assessments: only 12% of those fully reflected the guiding principles. While the principles do not mention gender equality, 93% of countries consulted were teaching prevention of gender-based violence, some 66% taught prevention of violent extremism and 71% education for global citizenship. 8 in 10 countries reported revising textbooks to deliver the principles, although change was constrained by the slow process of curricular reform and textbook development and roll-out.

6. Learning environment and teachers

To achieve SDG4, it is necessary that **education facilities be built or upgraded so that they be child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all**. About 45% of schools in low-income countries and 78% in lower-middle-income countries have basic water supply and some 335 million girls still attend schools that lack essential menstrual hygiene management facilities. Regardless of exactly how countries are reporting on schools' infrastructure and materials for learners with disabilities - reporting being hampered by the multiple combinations of functional difficulty types and possible adaptations - few schools seem to meet accessibility standards across the world.

The 2015 Safe Schools Declaration gives political support to protection of the right to education and continuation of education in armed conflict situations. In February 2020, 102 countries had endorsed the declaration. However, enforcement is severely lacking in some countries: in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, school closures doubled between 2017 and 2019 due to growing insecurity, disrupting education for more than 400,000 children (UNICEF, 2019b).

Additionally, many children are prone to experience physical exhaustion, violence and harassment, and exposure to significant danger on their way to and from school while corporal punishment remains

not fully prohibited in a significant number of countries eventually impacting school completion and attendance.

Progress towards SDG 4 is impossible without **teachers** trained to take on multiple challenges. Patchy global data show that many lack adequate training. In sub-Saharan Africa, 49% of pre-primary, 64% of primary, 58% of lower secondary and 43% of upper secondary school teachers received minimum training according to national standards (female teachers are as likely to be trained as male colleagues). Overall pupil/teacher ratios are more readily available: in most regions, they have declined since the 1990s at primary and lower-secondary levels. However, they remain high in sub-Saharan Africa (where the 2018 ratio is still superior to that of 1990) and Central and Southern Asia at primary and lower-secondary levels.

7. Inclusion in education

The principles of Inclusion and equity are encompassed by the 5th target of SDG4: “eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations”. Those principles also underpin the achievement of each of the other nine targets and are at the centre of the latest GEM Report.

While there seemingly is **gender parity** in pre-primary through secondary education enrolment globally, disaggregating data at country-level shows that intersecting disadvantage severely affects education opportunities of children and youth. For instance, in one-quarter of low-income countries, for every 100 males, fewer than 87 females are enrolled in primary education and fewer than 60 in upper secondary, at which level only 25% of countries have achieved parity.

Inclusion goes beyond gender parity and indeed, those most likely to be excluded from education are also disadvantaged due to wealth, language, location, gender and ethnicity. In at least 20 countries with data, hardly any poor rural young woman completed upper secondary school. However, identifying the most marginalized groups with intersecting disadvantage (such as indigenous groups, individuals with disability, immigrants or the poorest youth) is still challenging and can therefore hinder monitoring of inclusion in education. For instance, disability can be assessed differently according to the age group thus resulting in important discrepancies between the prevalence of disability amongst those groups in a given population. Also, data on many education indicators are collected using survey instruments which may not be available in languages respondents or enumerators fully understand, compromising data quality.

Exclusion is too often regarded as a one-dimensional issue and national laws tend to target specific groups at risk rather than adopt a broader vision including all learners. Indeed, only about 17% of countries have policies containing comprehensive provisions for all learners. However, the tendency is much stronger in less binding texts, with 75% of national education plans and strategies declaring an intention to include all disadvantaged groups. Understanding the importance of a human-rights approach to poverty eradication and inclusive education, UNESCO supports States to establish solid national legal and policy frameworks that create the foundation and conditions for the delivery and sustainability of quality education.

But ensuring inclusive education requires addressing many of the issues relating to **governance and finance, learning environment, education staff** and even the lack of belief that inclusion is possible and desirable.

The GEM report highlights that education and social programmes foster equity and inclusion in education through exemptions (e.g. from fees), cash transfers (e.g. scholarships) or in-kind transfers (e.g. school meals). Since the 1990s, conditional cash transfer programmes in Latin America have

notably increased education attainment by 0.5 to 1.5 years for instance. In 2019, about 310 million schoolchildren in low- and middle-income countries were receiving a daily meal at school. The GEMR advocates curricula adaptable to learners' diverse needs and inclusive textbooks which do not exclude some learners by perpetuating stereotypes through omission and misrepresentation. An essential condition to achieving inclusive education, teachers need to be prepared to teach students with varied background and abilities. In this regard, some 25% of teachers in middle- and high-income countries reported a high need for professional development on teaching students with special needs while just 8% of grade 2 and 6 teachers had received in-service training in inclusive education across 10 francophone sub-Saharan African countries.

As part of the current 10th Consultation on the implementation of the Convention and Recommendation against Discrimination in Education, many countries (two thirds of reporting countries) have reported targeted measures to ensure the enrolment of children from poor households in education, notably by removing both direct and indirect costs. In that respect, states reported allocating scholarships and grants and providing free transport, uniforms, school materials and meals to enrol students from poor households. Cash transfers were also used to provide incentives to parents to send their children to school instead of to work.

UNESCO's responses to COVID-19 pandemic

Since the beginning of the current global crisis, UNESCO, true to its mandate, has supported countries in their efforts to mitigate the impact of school closures, address learning losses and adapt education systems, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged communities.

In March 2020, UNESCO launched the **Global Education Coalition** (GEC), an international multisectoral partnership, to meet the urgent and unprecedented need for continuity of learning as the pandemic disrupted education systems across the world. The GEC brings together more than 175 partners¹⁴, representing a wide range of expertise and competencies, including multilateral organizations, the private sector, non-profit organizations and civil society, networks and associations, and the news media with the guiding principle of leaving no one behind. While 55% of low-income countries opted for online distance learning in primary and secondary education, only 12% of households in least developed countries have internet access at home and even low-technology approaches cannot ensure learning continuity. Overall, about 40% of low- and lower-middle-income countries have not supported learners at risk of exclusion.

As part of its membership, each partner organization makes an in-kind commitment of resources and services to the COVID-19 education response. Additionally, some Coalition members committed financial resources to support implementation of countries' response plan to be implemented while several non-GEC partners actively contribute to some of the coalition programmes. The Global Education Coalition works to support member states:

- Respond to educational disruption caused by school closures.
- Scale up distance learning and connect every learner and education institution to the Internet.
- Manage effective recovery and the return to school and learning.
- Advocate, collect data, and build and share knowledge, to strengthen the resilience of education and learning systems and reimagine the future.

As of March 2021, at least 400 million learners and 12 million teachers had benefited directly or indirectly from Global Education Coalition actions. The Coalition also issued "COVID-19 Response

¹⁴ UNESCO. Supporting learning recovery one year into COVID-19: The Global Education Coalition in action. 2021

Toolkit¹⁵, aiming at supporting the Member States to adequately anticipate, respond to, and recover from the education disruption caused by the Pandemic. Appreciating the importance of accurately matching on-the-ground needs with learning solutions, UNESCO initiated 4 large-scale missions under the umbrella of the GEC in 2020. They aim at equipping 1 million youth with employability skills, providing 1 million teachers with remote learning skills, helping 1 million learners benefit from remedial learning in STEM, and supporting 5 million girls to fulfil their right to education in the 20 countries with the greatest gender disparities in education.

In line with the last objective of the GEC, UNESCO has notably collaborated with partners to conduct several global surveys to collect data on education responses to COVID-19 and produce comparative data. For instance, a global survey on **National Education Responses to COVID-19 School Closures** is conducted on a regular basis by UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank. Now in its third iteration, the survey instrument was designed to capture policy responses and perceptions from government officials on their effectiveness, providing a systematic understanding of deployed policies, practices, and intentions to date¹⁶. A report on the first two rounds of data collection was published in October 2020 and touched upon themes such as: learning assessment and monitoring; mitigation of learning losses; remote learning; policies to boost access to online learning and to support teachers; parental support as well as education financing. The report illustrates how educational responses to COVID-19 can widen inequities between countries, with experiences varying across income groups. For example, low- and middle-income countries were more likely to experience longer school closures than high-income countries. Most low-income countries did not find remote learning to be sufficiently effective to substitute for official school days. This likely contributed to most low-income countries planning for a return to in-person teaching and learning when schools reopen, compared to the more prevalent use of combining remote and in-person learning among higher income countries. However, most low- and lower-middle-income countries also reported that they do not have enough resources to reopen schools safely. In fact, the reduction in education funding reported by one in five countries is of concern, particularly at this time when investment in learning has never been so critical.

UNESCO has also developed **several publicly available visual monitoring tools pertaining to school closures, their duration and teachers' vaccination globally**. Indeed, UNESCO has been calling on governments to consider teachers as a priority group in COVID-19 vaccination efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19 and protect teachers and students to ensure the continuation of learning and a safe return to in-person teaching. As of May 2021¹⁷:

- 1 in 4 of teachers globally are prioritized in the first phase of national vaccination rollout plans and 1 in 3 teachers are not included in any priority group. Countries where teachers are regarded as a top priority (with front-line workers, elderly and other highly vulnerable groups) include Chile, China, Malawi, Morocco and the Russian Federation.
- 200 million learners are still being affected by school closure around the world and a significant share of those live in Latin America, especially in Brazil (home to more than 50 million affected learners). It is also important to highlight that relative to other parts of the world, the whole American continent experienced school closures the longest.

Since March 2020, **UNESCO has continuously produced documents and data to support countries in their COVID-19 education response**. With that in mind, UNESCO Education Sector has published several issue notes in April 2020 covering key topics related to the COVID-19 education response, such

¹⁵ UNESCO. COVID-19 Response Toolkit. <https://globaleducationcoalition.unesco.org/response-toolkit>

¹⁶ UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank (2020). What have we learnt? Overview of findings from a survey of ministries of education on national responses to COVID-19. Paris, New York, Washington D.C.: UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank.

¹⁷ Data from UNESCO. 2021

as health and wellbeing, gender equity and equality as well as higher education and TVET, in order to provide evidence of good practices, practical tips and links to important reference to mitigate the short- and longer-term impact of school closures.

Focusing on teachers, UNESCO published the Guidance for Teachers¹⁸ to ensure effective distance learning under COVID-19 school closures. This Guidance aims to help teachers understand key issues related to home-based distance learning during COVID-19 school closures and design and facilitate effective learning activities. The document includes resources, examples and tips for teachers and educators from pre-primary to upper-secondary level.

UNESCO advocates for **protecting, even increasing investment in education in the world**, for its own sake as a human right as well as a strategy for an efficient, effective and sustainable economic recovery. In this regard, UNESCO produced two papers assessing how education has been addressed in massive governments' fiscal responses since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis. These actions included additional spending, lost revenue, temporary tax cuts, liquidity support, such as loans, guarantees, and capital injections by the public sector. The sectors most frequently targeted include health, tourism, transportation, communication and technology, construction and infrastructure¹⁹. A total amount of USD 14 trillion was released under stimulus packages in 193 countries by December 2020, of which 86% occurred in high-income countries. Of that amount, UNESCO estimates that approximately USD 281 billion may have been allocated to education globally, of which USD 264 billion (93%) by high-income countries. At 2% globally, the share of education in total stimulus packages remains small. To ensure continuity of learning amid school closures, 46% of surveyed countries allocated their additional funding to the introduction or expansion of remote learning. Other areas that attracted governments' fiscal response are: addressing marginalization and inequalities (37%), skills upgrading (35%) and sanitation and health measures (33%). According to education levels, almost half of the countries (48%) prioritized education spending at the primary and lower secondary levels, while post-basic and early childhood education appear to have been given relatively smaller attention in additional funding. However, funding patterns differ from one region to another; for instance, Arab countries prioritized deployment of digital learning and skills upgrading while African countries prioritized funding to improving school sanitation and deploying remote learning.

Conclusion: Implications to poverty eradication

Education enables upward socioeconomic mobility and is a key to escaping poverty. In 2016, the GEM Report²⁰ estimated that in low-income countries, universalizing upper-secondary completion by 2030 would increase per capita income by 75% by 2050 and bring poverty elimination forward by 10 years. Moreover, access to education can also directly reduce poverty with schools providing students essential nutrition and health services they would not have access to otherwise, in turn improving attendance and school performance of students. But the links go both ways. Children living in poverty are more likely to have less education and less access to basic services. Access to clean water and improved sanitation is especially important for girls' education.

It is difficult to assess the impact of school closures due to COVID-19 on learning loss of students but a World Bank study, published in June 2020, suggested that global learning losses from five months of school closures could amount to between USD 6,472 and USD 25,680 in lost earnings over a typical

¹⁸ UNESCO. Ensuring Effective Distance Learning under COVID-19 School Closures: Guidance for Teachers. 2020

¹⁹ UNESCO. Education and training: not yet prioritized in national fiscal responses. 2021.

²⁰ UNESCO. 2016. Global Education Monitoring Report 2016: Education for people and planet: Creating sustainable futures for all. Paris, UNESCO

student's lifetime²¹. In October 2020, the World Bank also estimated that 72 million children²² could be pushed into learning poverty as a result of the current crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened pre-existing global inequalities in educational access and quality. Social and digital divides have put the most disadvantaged at risk of greater learning losses and dropping out and therefore, the above figures do not realistically represent the differences between and within countries. But school closures have also disrupted the normal distribution channels through which school meal programmes operate and many children may have been without this vital source of food. Such programmes are a key part of poverty reduction strategies, using schools as venues to address malnutrition and in 2019, the World Food Program estimated that 370 million children globally were benefiting from such school feeding programmes²³.

As mentioned before, education underpins the overall 2030 Agenda and it therefore supports poverty reduction on many levels. If we are to achieve the ambitious targets we set for ourselves in 2015, we have to build back better and rethink education so that it truly be a fundamental right for all. UNESCO convened the world's education ministers to an online event on 29 March 2021 to mark the first anniversary of the largest disruption to learning in recent history. The Assistant Director-General for Education of UNESCO affirmed that "No government can respond to this ongoing education crisis alone²⁴. Multilateral cooperation is indispensable to uphold the right to education and ensure learning continuity". Joined by colleagues from UNICEF and the World Bank, UNESCO introduced "Mission: Recovering Education for 2021" and its three priorities, identified by Ministers at the Global Education Meeting October 2020:

- No child is left behind -ensuring all children and youth are back in school and receiving comprehensive support to succeed.
- Every child is learning -accelerating learning and breaking down the digital learning divide.
- All teachers are empowered -supporting the teaching workforce.

²¹ Azevedo, Joao Pedro Wagner De; Hasan, Amer; Goldemberg, Diana; Iqbal, Syedah Aroob; Geven, Koen Martijn.2020. Simulating the Potential Impacts of COVID-19 School Closures on Schooling and Learning Outcomes : A Set of Global Estimates (English). Policy Research working paper;no. WPS 9284;COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Washington, D.C. : World Bank Group.

²² Azevedo, Joao Pedro. 2020. Learning Poverty : Measures and Simulations. Policy Research Working Paper;No. 9446. World Bank, Washington, DC. © World Bank.

²³ Borkowski, A., Ortiz-Correa, J. S., Bundy, D. A. P., Burbano, C., Hayashi, C., Lloyd-Evans, E., Neitzel, J., and Reuge, N., (2021), COVID-19: Missing More Than a Classroom. The impact of school closures on children's nutrition . Innocenti Working Paper 2021-01. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti

²⁴ UNESCO. One year into COVID: Prioritizing education to avoid a generational catastrophe. Report of UNESCO online conference. 2021.