

56th Session of the Commission on Population and Development

Mr Xing Qu, UNESCO Deputy Director-General
(Pre-recorded video message)

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The COVID-19 pandemic conflict, climate change and rising food insecurity have further entrenched inequalities and the exclusion of so many from quality education – leading to a dual crisis: of learning, and of well-being.

Two hundred and forty-four [244] million children are out of school – mostly at the secondary level. Many of these are girls and young women who were forced out of formal education as a result of early marriage or early and unintended pregnancy.

Millions more children and adolescents are in school, but not learning.

Indeed, in low and middle-income countries, up to 70% of children can't read a basic text by age 10.

Added to this are increasing rates of depression and stress among young people in many contexts – fuelled by fear of what the future holds, among other factors.

The toll of these stressors on health and well-being are leading to increased student drop-out and teacher shortages.

In fact, at the Transforming Education Summit convened by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres in New York last September, almost two-thirds of countries said they are worried about the well-being of their teachers and students.

World leaders sent a powerful message: Transforming education means transforming the conditions in which learners thrive.

As the custodian agency for Sustainable Development Goal 4, UNESCO is responding forcefully, with strong actions in three key areas.

First, we are **supporting governments and communities to close the gender gap** in school enrolment and participation. Our Keeping Girls in the Picture campaign, launched during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, has reached 400 million people across the world.

It recognizes that the most marginalized girls run the greatest risk of poor learning outcomes – and that educated women have better control over their fertility, healthier children, and contribute positively to societies and economies.

The Global Platform to drive leadership and accountability on gender equality in and through education, launched during the Transforming Education Summit by UNESCO and its partners, will provide evidence to track progress against commitments. It will also empower education leaders to share concrete measures to shatter the barriers and bottlenecks that continue to hold girls and women back.

Second, UNESCO is **enabling governments to provide good quality education** on relationships, puberty, sexual and reproductive health and HIV – what some countries call comprehensive sexuality education, and others may refer to as family life and health education, or life skills and healthy lifestyle education.

Although UNESCO data shows that more than 4 in 5 countries cover sexuality education in their national curriculum, implementation remains low despite support from parents, teachers and religious leaders.

UNESCO is supporting governments in training teachers and updating curricula that help reduce early and unintended pregnancies, HIV infections, risky sexual activities, and gender-based violence.

And finally, UNESCO is **strengthening efforts to embed health and well-being** in schools, including through ensuring that nutritious school meals are provided, and increasing access to health services. In so doing, we recognize that many boys and girls simply cannot learn because they are unwell, hungry and marginalized.

Moreover, learning doesn't stop once a child leaves the classroom. This is why we must also promote learning throughout life – for everyone: for active citizenship, employability, health and well-being – and the cohesion of our communities.

In one of UNESCO's campaign videos on committing for educated, healthy and thriving adolescents, a young man from Togo, Yassine, says: "Knowledge is a weapon. And when we have the right information, we are equipped to make a good choice".

Over the coming days, I count on you to take decisions that will help Yassine and his peers around the world to receive the education they need for happier, healthier, and more fulfilling lives.

Thank you.