

Social and human development and good governance at all levels

Remarks by Emeritus Professor Diane Elson, Member UN Committee for Development Policy

The Covid-19 pandemic has set back LDC achievements in social and human development and put their further progress in jeopardy.

My fellow panellist will focus on the health challenges, I will focus on the challenges that arise from the closure of schools and places of work that have been necessary to contain the epidemic.

Even though countries across the world have experienced school closures, a study by UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank found that the average days of instruction missed in low-income and lower-middle-income countries is two to three times more than in high-income countries.

The UN Committee for Development Policy study of the impact of Covid-19 on the Least Developed Countries and the OHRRLLS Flagship report on the State of the LDCs have both identified serious losses in learning and the danger that these losses will accumulate as many children fall behind during school closures and never catch up.

Loss of household income due to closure of places of work are likely to mean that many poor children, especially girls, may never return to school, even after they re-open.

School closures put at risk progress made towards gender equality, making girls and young women more vulnerable to child marriage and early pregnancy.

In many countries immediate policy responses have included support for a range of remote learning modalities, including online, Tv and radio, and paper-based take-home materials. But poor children, especially in rural areas, have limited access to remote learning, not least because of lack of electricity.

Moreover, while it is important to increase digital connectivity, it is vital to recognise that home-schooling increases the unpaid care work that has to be done by parents, most especially by mothers. Evidence is emerging of adverse impacts on ability of mothers to earn a livelihood while being responsible for home-schooling, further jeopardising progress towards gender equality.

Increasing digital connectivity is not a panacea and is not a substitute for more investment in a high-quality school system. But the Education Finance Watch Report from the World Bank and UNESCO found two-thirds of low-income and lower-middle income countries covered by the survey have cut their education spending this year, compared to only a third of upper-middle and high-income countries.

It is heartening that several Heads of State of Least Developed Countries have recently signed a *Call to Action on Education Finance* committing to increase domestic spending on education with a goal that the share of their annual total public expenditure allocated to education will progressively increase towards a goal of 20% over the next five years.

But without international measures to increase fiscal space for LDCs, this may be an increasing share of a shrinking pot. An increased share for education does not guarantee an increase in the level of real per capita spending.

Support for governments to increase tax revenue, as well as enhanced measures of debt relief and reallocation of SDRs will be critical. As will recognition that requiring austerity measures in return for support will make it impossible to Build Back Better. In particular requirements to freeze or cut

public sector wage bills will hamper investment in high-quality education, since the largest group that will be affected is teachers.

Of course, spending more money while necessary is not sufficient. Systems of governance matter. To produce high-quality education services budgets must be transparent and there must be effective systems of scrutiny by, and accountability to, parents and students, with equitable representation of girls and women and other marginalised groups. In addition, the work of civil society budget scrutiny groups, that focus on poverty and inequality, should be welcomed and supported, as they track what use is actually made of budget allocations and challenge failures in delivery. The best way to ensure value for money is a well-informed and active civil society.

Without urgent action, we risk creating a lost generation of young people, especially young women, who will be unable to contribute effectively to development, and be unable to benefit effectively from development. We must ensure this does not happen. But without more effective international action to secure more vaccine for the Least Developed Countries, efforts to remedy education losses may be in vain.