

COVID-19 has reversed progress towards Education for All:  
What can be done?

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## **Introduction**

### **TITLE**

Good evening. It is an honour to give the closing keynote at this conference. Covid-19 has been a disaster for schooling because it has undone much of the progress that has been made over the last 20 years in getting all the world's children into school. What must we do to repair the damage?

### **PLAN**

My comments are in three parts. First, I shall outline the global campaign to achieve Education for All (EFA) that started 1990 and was savagely disrupted by outbreak of covid-19 in 2020. Second, I shall summarise the devastation that the pandemic has wrought, undoing years of progress in the EFA campaign and exacerbating cultural, economic, and social inequalities. Finally, I shall suggest how countries and institutions can use open education, particularly open schooling, to repair some of the damage.

## **Education for All**

### **TIMELINE 1**

Over 70 years ago, the nations of the world, in approving the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, asserted that “everyone has a right to education”. The process of decolonisation began soon after and many newly independent countries set to work to build their own national education systems. But in the following years many regions encountered daunting problems: notably mounting debt, economic stagnation, rapid population growth, widening economic disparities, war, occupation, civil strife, the preventable deaths of millions of children environmental degradation. These challenges hampered their efforts to meet basic schooling needs, and so the poor education of their populations became a brake on

countries' development. Even some industrialised countries saw education deteriorate because of cuts in government expenditure in the 1980s.

By 1990 however, with the Cold War ending, the world seemed more peaceful nations more willing to cooperate. Moreover, the essential rights and capacities of women were being acknowledged. The international community believed that this context, and the cumulative experience of educational reform in many countries, made the goal of basic education for all an attainable goal for the first time in human history. A campaign to achieve Education for All (EFA) was launched at a conference in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990. Its goal was that: 'Every person - child, youth and adult - shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs' (UNESCO, 1990).

But the 1990s also proved to be a turbulent decade. The EFA campaign made little headway, so a follow-up forum was held in Dakar, Senegal in 2000. This charged UNESCO with developing an action plan for making faster progress. As a senior officer at UNESCO at the time, my job was to coordinate the efforts of national and international development agencies to implement EFA. The Dakar plan took a broad view of education and including areas such as adult literacy and vocational training. The same year the UN approved the Millennium Declaration and formulated the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These MDGs included a simpler set of goals for education.

UNESCO's partners in the EFA plan, notably the World Bank, urged that our efforts be focused on these narrower MDG goals, so that we could do more with the funds available. Therefore, through the decade of the 2000s, the EFA project concentrated on getting all the world's children into and through primary school. This made for a fairly successful campaign. By 2015, the target date for achieving the MDGs, all countries, except Nigeria and Pakistan, could claim to have achieved Universal Primary Education, even if its quality was often poor and many children did not complete primary school.

## **MEGA-SCHOOLS**

In 2004 I moved from UNESCO to the Commonwealth of Learning, where I wrote about the post-2000 EFA campaign in my book, *Mega-Schools, Technology and Teachers: Achieving Education for All*. This was published in 2010, when it was clear that the expansion of primary education had raised the expectations of

parents, thereby exacerbating the greater challenge of achieving universal secondary education.

## **TIMELINE 2**

In 2006 the number of children between the ages of 12 and 17 not attending secondary school was estimated at 400 million. This figure remained at 258 million in 2019 and the UN projects that in 2030 over 200 million children will still be out of school.

This is a huge challenge for many countries because research shows that secondary schooling is considerably more costly than primary schooling. A country is unlikely to achieve universal secondary schooling if the unit cost of secondary is more than twice that of primary. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for example the disparity is often much larger. Ratios of secondary to primary costs can range between 3:1 and 6:1.

Nevertheless, countries did their best during the decade of the 2010s. As a former UNESCO official deeply involved, I look back with pride on what was done and deeply regret that the covid-19 pandemic has negated much of the progress we made.

### **The impact of Covid-19**

#### **IMPACT OF COVID-19**

Covid-19 is the greatest challenge that these expanding national education systems have ever faced.

According to UNESCO, the learning losses in 2020 equalled the gains made in the last 20 years. 50 million learners are impacted by school closures, and covid-19 has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable. The number of school dropouts will increase, with 11 million girls unlikely to return. Deficits in targeted support, Internet connectivity, accessible software and learning materials are likely to widen the gap for students with disabilities.

In an edited collection about this challenge, Reimers brought together contributions from 15 countries. His conclusions are stark: 'The COVID-19 pandemic created an education crisis which robbed many students of the opportunities to learn what they were expected to learn and they lost skills already gained. These losses were unequally distributed among students and education systems and, as a result, if

nothing is done, the outcome will be increased educational inequality, from which economic and social inequality will follow. These will further complicate other social challenges: the challenge of increasing productivity, reducing poverty and inequality, increasing civic cohesion and trust in institutions and democratic governance, and addressing issues such as climate change or intra and interstate violence'.

Note that the damage is not restricted to poorer countries. Reports on the response of US school systems to the covid-19 pandemic argue that 'America resorted to remote learning against pupils' interests', and comment that 'America failed to learn from the safe opening of classrooms abroad'.

### **Repairing the damage**

#### **WHAT TO DO?**

Such assessments led UNESCO to comment: 'prioritizing education recovery is crucial to avoid a generational catastrophe' But how can the world make it a priority?

First, the focus must be on K-12 education (schooling). In general tertiary education coped well with the pandemic, pivoting easily between classroom instruction and emergency remote teaching. Students were relatively satisfied with the arrangements. Tertiary education leaders must now focus on expanding capacity for the tens of millions of extra enrolments that are expected in the next 20 years as people's aspirations grow.

Sadly, too many tertiary leaders have devoted their recent energies to corrupting - and ultimately futile - efforts to boost their institutions' global rankings. Yet research concludes that: 'At the end of nearly 20 years of rankings, there is... no correlation between rising in the rankings and making a significant contribution to society or the public good'. Higher education systems must focus on serving people if they want to align with the public good. The existing global network of open universities, for example, which already counts millions of students, could expand at low cost to accept many more.

Recovering lost schooling is a tougher challenge because very large numbers of people need it now and are hard to reach. There were already over 250 million youngsters not receiving secondary education before the pandemic hit. Tens of

millions who were in school before the pandemic are likely to have dropped out, because of school closures, at huge economic and social cost to them and their countries. According to the World Bank: 'this generation of students now risks losing \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings in present value, or about 14 percent of today's global GDP, because of COVID-19 pandemic-related school closures'.

The World Bank report focuses on reopening schools and notes the potential of online learning. But boosting these conventional approaches to schooling will only scratch the surface of the problem. The model of open schooling, pioneered by India and already used in various lower-income countries, holds more promise. It can be implemented at scale and usually involves many socio-economic partners to create an eco-system that supports marginalised learners in a holistic way.

India established a National Open School as an autonomous organisation in 1989. Now called the National Institute for Open Schooling (NIOS), is very successful, with 2.7 million pupils enrolled and 350,000 new ones admitted annually. The NIOS has inspired the development of other open schools, work that has been facilitated by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). According to COL's website: 'Open schooling is an effective response to the rapidly increasing demand for secondary education... It can provide skills for employment and entrepreneurship and can be conducted cost-effectively and at scale. Open schooling uses open, distance and online methods to scale up access to secondary schooling to reach the unreached. There is no single right way to offer open schooling, and COL works with ministries and institutions to develop models of provision that are appropriate for context'.

In general, open schools offer a combination of distance/online learning and face-to-face sessions in local study centres, which are often run by organisations dedicated to other aspects of children's welfare. These study centres answer the needs of remote pupils for human contact and support. India's NIOS has a network of over 6,000 study centres for its programmes. They are called 'accredited institutions' and usually run by partner bodies that also support the pupils in other ways. The richness of the digital infrastructure in these study centres has improved steadily in recent years.

## **Conclusion**

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the covid-19 pandemic has caused worldwide disruption. It has worsened existing inequalities among people and among countries. Disruptions to education, most particularly school closures, will leave lasting damage unless effective recovery strategies are undertaken quickly. After covid-19 recedes, governments will face the difficult challenge of balancing public finances while repairing the damage to many sectors of society. This requires approaches to educational recovery and expansion that are more cost-effective than traditional schooling and can be implemented at scale without requiring new infrastructure. Open schooling, which combines centrally organised teaching and local centres that cater to the diverse needs of children whose lives have been blighted by the pandemic, is the most cost-effective strategy for addressing the challenge. It can be implemented rapidly and allows local community organisations to contribute to the recovery process in a coordinated manner.

**THANK YOU**

Thank you. For the references supporting this paper I refer you to this website.