

Risks, Discrimination and Opportunities for Education during the Times of COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT: The COVID-19 pandemic has been and still is a serious challenge to Mankind, even if it does not constitute an actual threat to the lives of nations. The pandemic has caused a situation of international sanitary crisis, numerous losses of lives, traumas, economic shocks and significant social costs. In short, COVID-19 will entail certain changes which are essential to Mankind in the short and medium term, at least. One of the social areas that faced the strongest challenges, without being really prepared for it, is that of Education. Teachers, pupils and students, parents, schools and local communities and, last but not least, the state were suddenly put in a position to change their rules of operation, teaching techniques or examination methods overnight. New technologies, difficult to assimilate in the short term by all players involved, material financial and educational resources which proved inaccessible to many students, especially in less developed regions or states worldwide, racial, gender, but also regional discrimination, young women and girls exposed to domestic or sexual violence, in short, this constituted a magnifying glass for inequalities. As in any major crisis situation, COVID-19 has generated not only significant risks, discrimination or costs, but also unanticipated opportunities, substantial human and technological progress platforms, including in the field of Education. UNDP recommends "five priority steps to tackle the complexity of the crisis: protecting and developing health systems and services; reinforcing the social protection; protecting jobs, small and medium-sized businesses and informal sector workers; making macroeconomic policies work for everyone; promoting peace, good governance and trust to build social cohesion". It is very easy to notice the fact that none of these five priorities are possible to be fulfilled without the solid foundation of a good quality education (UN Sustainable Development Goals no 4). International experts raise an important question: will the current pandemic actually be the trigger for transformation? The answer and the appropriate solutions will imply political will and vision, a proper prioritization, budgetary resources, partnerships, good use of the innovative human intelligence, international solidarity and a non-discriminatory approach, ensuring that learning is accessible to all.

KEYWORDS: education, schools, COVID-19, pandemic, impact, risks, challenges, discrimination, costs, opportunities, e-learning, challenges, changes, UNESCO, UN

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been and still is a serious challenge to Mankind, even if it does not constitute an actual threat to the lives of nations. The pandemic has caused a situation of international sanitary crisis, numerous losses of lives, traumas, economic shocks and significant social costs. In short, COVID-19 will entail certain changes which are essential to Mankind in the short and medium term, at least. One of the social areas that faced the strongest challenges, without being really prepared for it, is that of Education. Teachers, pupils and students, parents, schools and local communities and, last but not least, the state were suddenly put in a position to change their rules of operation, teaching techniques or examination methods overnight. New technologies, difficult to assimilate in the short term by all players involved, material financial and educational resources which proved inaccessible to many students, especially in less developed regions or states worldwide, in short, this constituted a magnifying glass for inequalities.

As in any major crisis situation, COVID-19 has generated not only significant risks, discrimination or costs, but also unanticipated opportunities, substantial human and technological progress platforms, including in the field of Education. We will try to present below some of such risks and opportunities that will lead to important changes in the education system of the states worldwide in the future.

2. The right to education – a fundamental human right

The right to education is recognized as a fundamental human right (Renucci 2012, 612). It is enshrined in the national laws through constitutions and laws and guaranteed in international law under international treaties. Internationally, the right to education and, in certain texts, to professional training is enshrined in art. 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in articles 13 and 14 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and in articles 28 and 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Hennebel and Tigroudja 2016, 1222-1223). Article 26 of the Universal Declaration practically provides the universal framework for the enshrinement, under subsequent international treaties or national constitutions, of the fundamental right to education:

- “(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
- (2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.”
- (3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, article 26).

At the regional level, mention should be made, *inter alia*, to Article 2 of the (first) Protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (European Convention on Human Rights) and Article 17 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights.

The international doctrine in this matter generally includes the right to education in the second generation of the fundamental human rights and freedoms (Andriantsimbazovina, Gaudin, Marguenaud, Rials and Sudre 2012, 322-323), or in the category of economic, social and cultural rights (see also Renucci 2012, 598-612). However, there are authors in the doctrine who, due to the complex nature of this fundamental right, which involves both the prerogatives of children and parents, as well as obligations of the state, qualify this right as having a mixed nature and include it simultaneously in the category of civil and political rights pertaining to the first generation of fundamental rights and freedoms (Selejan-Gutan 2011, 230).

The main component is the right to learning, as the right to education has a much broader nature. It can include other components as well, such as professional training, scientific research and dissemination and use of its results, including even the education of convicted persons. The right to education in its broadest sense implies the right of pupils and students to training, the contribution of parents and family, community, colleagues at work, which provides the context and social experience that accomplishes the educational process *lato sensu* (Corlatean 2015, 78).

However, the right to education requires a symmetrical obligation with the same content, because the engagement in an educational process implies a duty as well, namely at least an obligation of diligence (if not as of result) of graduating a minimum form of education.

The specialized literature (Oberdorff 2010, 454-456; Tomescu 2013, 60) attributes to the right to education a double dimension:

- a social dimension, which imposes on the state an obligation of positive action, for the establishment and development of a system of educational institutions;
- the freedom granted to persons to establish their own educational institutions or to choose between a public and a private educational system.

The right to education, as a main element of the right to education, implies the assurance by the state of equal opportunities for all, which implies the rejection of *discrimination*.

3. The right to education in the system of the Convention and the European Court of Human Rights

As regards the European system of protection of fundamental human rights, Article 2 of Protocol 1 to the European Convention on Human Rights states that: “No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.”

Although drafted by using a negative wording, it has been accepted that the right to education enshrined in this text applies to all forms of education provided or permitted by the state (Jacobs, White and Ovey 578), although it concerns mainly the primary education. The European Court of Human Rights distinguishes between “education” and “teaching”, pointing out that: “the education of children is the whole process whereby, in any society, adults endeavour to transmit their beliefs, culture and other values to the young, whereas teaching or instruction refers in particular to the transmission of knowledge and to intellectual development” (Case of Campbell And Cosans v. UK, European Court of Human Rights, Judgment, Strasbourg, 25 February 1982).

From the provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights and from the European Court’s case-law, respectively, derive certain key principles referring to the architecture of the right to education at European level.

First of all, the state has a margin of appreciation in establishing and regulating education in its jurisdiction and in any period of time. This includes a margin of appreciation in relation to allocated resources, drafting the syllabus and establishing the methods of examination and the regulation of forms of admission in higher education, respectively. (Jacobs, White and Ovey 2017, 595).

However, once it has established educational institutions, the state must guarantee equal treatment in access to education and non-discrimination in the process of providing education.

In the Belgian Linguistic Case (a case relating to certain aspects of the laws of the use of languages in education in Belgium - Belgian linguistic case no. 2, European Court of Human Rights, Judgment, Strasbourg, 23 July 1968), the European Court established the rights protected under the first sentence of Article 2 of Protocol 1:

- the right to access to educational institutions existing at a given time;
- the right to an effective education;
- the right to official recognition of the studies a student has successfully completed (Jacobs, White and Ovey 2017, 579-580).

None of these rights are absolute. The state establishes the rules for their exercise, by considering the needs and resources of the community and individuals (Harris, O’Boyle & Warbrick 2009, 700).

Finally, the state must also guarantee the observance of the rights of parents with regard to their religious and philosophical beliefs. The public education service should not pursue an indoctrination purpose that would harm the religious and philosophical beliefs of parents, but should disseminate “in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner” (Case of FOLGERØ and others against Norway, European Court of Human Rights, Judgment, Strasbourg, 29 June 2007) any information or knowledge contained in the syllabus (Sudre 2010, 115).

4. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human development and education

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected humanity both in terms of health, due to the numerous victims who died or due to the people who became more or less seriously ill and who benefited from medical recovery, as well as on a larger socio-economic scale, due to the severe economic crisis and the social impact resulting from the loss of jobs, temporarily or for a longer period of time, the decrease in income, the dramatic restriction of the free exercise of the fundamental rights and freedoms. And, last but not least, due to the closure of schools and universities, which generated deep negative consequences on the educational process worldwide.

By mid-May 2020, about 4.5 million people had been infected globally and about 300,000 had died. The economic impact reported so far is severe, exceeding, according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the one generated by the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-2009.

According to UNDP reports, it is very likely that Global Human Development, which may be measured as a combination of global standards in education, health and living standards, will decline this year for the first time since when this concept was introduced in 1990 (United Nations Development Program, Human development reports, 20 May 2020).

According to UNDP, the Mankind has faced many crises over the last 30 years, including the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-2009. Each of them has generated serious negative consequences for Human Development, but overall, the Development has grown globally every year. According to the mentioned reports, COVID-19, with its triple negative action in terms of health, education and income, will change this trend. The decline in the fundamental areas of Human Development will be felt in most states - rich or poor - and in every region of the world. It is estimated that global per capita income in 2020 will decrease by 4% (United Nations Development Program, Human development reports, 20 May 2020).

UNDP refers to the negative impact on Education as being one of the severe consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and a reason for the decline of Global Human Development in 2020. For example, the report indicates that due to the decision to close schools, it is estimated that the rate of students actually left out of the primary school education process, due to the lack of Internet access, is of 60% worldwide, leading to unprecedented levels since the 1980s. At the same time, due to the deep discrepancies in terms of access to online education, UNDP estimates that 86% of primary school children were left out of the educational process in countries with low levels of human development, compared to only 20% in countries with very high levels of human development (United Nations Development Program, Human development reports, 20 May 2020).

It is certain that the post-pandemic recovery effort of the international society, including in the economic and social-educational plan will take several years, but the way in which the states will react in the short and medium term is decisive, because, for example, the quality at graduation of the generation of students in the final years of high schools, colleges and universities and the quality of the management of their education process at the peak of the pandemic, in a decisive year for their future professional career, will depend not only work and income individually, but also the performance, to a certain extent, of the employing companies and institutions and the GDP of their countries.

5. Risks and challenges for Education during the COVID-19 pandemic

As a result of a wide and severe spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the health of the population naturally constituted a priority compared to the economic or educational aspects of social life. For pupils, students and teachers, the pandemic meant the closure of schools and universities, which represented huge shifts in the educational process in a very short time, but also a huge loss of the time allocated to learning by many students, with potential negative consequences for their educational evolution and professional career in the years to come.

Various sources show that the pandemic has forced hundreds of millions of children to adapt very quickly to different new ways of learning, and not all of them succeeded, for various reasons, to achieve reasonable results in the new context.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), by April 2020 over 1.37 billion pupils and students have been affected, including in their work, by the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, 80% of all those who study in an educational system in the world are at risk of falling behind academically in the years to come, jeopardizing the future growth rates and income from their fields of activity (Wilkerson 2020).

Even if the estimated numbers of students who have been affected in the educational process are not identical (World Economic Forum -WEF- provides the figure of 1.2 billion students who have been left out of schools due to school closure), it is clear that the COVID -19 pandemic generated significant

costs and changes in the educational process. WEF experts even mention that the pandemic has changed education forever (Li and Lalani 2020).

The forced closure of schools has led to an abrupt shift to distance education, training and e-learning. The crisis has led to a massive shift in teaching and examination methods to online platforms and has given rise to new tools able to ensure the continued teaching and development of students' skills. With certain advantages and disadvantages.

It is premature to properly assess the immediate consequences of disrupting education by closing schools and in any case they continue to evolve as the pandemic generates new negative consequences. However, the long-term consequences are more predictable. For example, students who do not now receive support from teachers and school are much less likely to have a suitable job and build a quality professional relationship with their employer later in life.

A first conclusion may be drawn: it may seem paradoxical that in a world that moves online and uses more frequently digital services, Objectives 4 (Quality Education) and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals strategy will be more difficult to achieve (Onestini 2020).

Studies conducted by UNESCO and other international organizations' experts in recent months show that, beyond the beneficial effects of a rapid movement to an e-learning education system, there are several categories of *risks, challenges and inequities*.

The first category concerns the socio-economic disparities existing between different regions of the world and between states, respectively, and often even within the same state. The less developed countries have obviously been able to allocate fewer resources to ensure the transition to online and e-learning platforms necessary to ensure Internet access or to supply the disadvantaged people with adequate technical equipment. While 95% of students in Switzerland, Norway and Austria have their own computers for educational use, only 34% of students in Indonesia are in a similar position, according to OECD data (Li and Lalani 2020). In the United States, there is a significant discrepancy between those people with privileged status in society and the disadvantaged ones: while virtually all 15-year-old students coming from prosperous families say they have at least one computer for their own use, almost 25% of those socially disadvantaged are not in this position (Li and Lalani 2020).

To the situation generated by the mentioned socio-economic disparities, one must add the actual situation existing in rural communities compared to the urban ones, even in European states.

A second category of negative consequences, deriving from the discrepancy of resources available to a state to manage the pandemic and the different level of human development of national societies, includes: teachers and instructors who are insufficiently trained and prepared to teach online courses, including due to age and unfamiliarity with new technologies; difficulties in adapting the syllabus for education and technical and vocational training by using appropriate formulas for online platforms; lack of access to Internet or of proper technological equipment for teaching e-learning courses; novice apprentices ready to be assessed, but whose examination process could not be completed due to difficulties resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic or students who could not access available technological resources as they were unacquainted with the operation of online platforms (Sanchez 2020).

A third category of challenges posed by school closures and the transition to the distance education system is related to the *mass inequities* affecting large categories of students, with all the negative consequences for their future. *The issue of discrimination* is fully relevant in this case.

For a concise theoretical basis of our analysis, we recall that the specialized literature mentions that the fundamental principle of equality of all human beings, set out in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, gave rise to the principle of non-discrimination set out by the international law (De Schutter 2015, 632). According to the international doctrine, *discrimination* constitutes a difference in treatment which does not have an objective and reasonable justification or which artificially separates similar situations (Besteliu and Brumar 2010, 187). International documents of a political or legal nature enshrine the principle of non-discrimination as a fundamental human right, as for example the UN Charter (art. 1 para. 3), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (art. 2 and 7),

the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (art. 2) or the European Convention on Human Rights (art. 14 and Protocol 12 to the Convention).

A fourth category concerns the fact that the impact of COVID-19 has intensified older issues of *racial and gender discrimination* in society and in schools. Consequently, under-represented student groups - young women and students of colour in particular - are more disadvantaged and discriminated against, due to the elimination of their possibilities for personal evolution towards a successful professional career, while companies and public institutions lose the opportunity to take over and promote young and talented human resources. This is self-evident especially for schools with students under 16 years of age living in geographically disadvantaged areas (Wilkerson 2020).

The closure of schools and jobs in order to limit and subsequently stop the pandemic has meant *exposing millions of girls and women to serious risks*, especially in less economically advanced countries. In these areas of the world, the closure of schools has generated additional household and family chores for girls, requiring physical work and long-time allocated for it (International Institute for Educational Planning - UNESCO, 2020a). Consequently, too little or no time allocated to education, without mentioning the absence of material and technical resources for online education.

The risks arising from the closure of schools - a safety space for children, intended for education - are not limited to the COVID-19 virus. Reports from international organizations and agencies reveal the increase in *domestic violence* against girls and women in countries from different geographical areas, such as African states or countries such as Argentina, France or Singapore (International Institute for Educational Planning - UNESCO, 2020a).

A number of other dangers are reported for young girls, due to the closure of schools, in economically underdeveloped areas of the world, including *forced genital mutilation* (FGM), *early forced marriage* and *sexual violence* (Grant, The Guardian, 1 June 2020). The Dutch humanitarian organization Terre des Hommes, which owns houses to shelter and educate Tanzanian girls and protects them against FGM, has already reported that, taking advantage of school closures, the local communities of the country have taken girls from these establishments and have already resorted to forced genital mutilation, some of them managing to escape in time and take refuge in the shelters of the mentioned humanitarian organization (Grant 2020). According to international experts, after the pandemic period ends, statistics will confirm a substantial increase in *school dropout* caused by *forced marriages* and *early pregnancy* in adolescence (Darso 2020). African humanitarian experts make reference to the case of Kenya, where due to the schools closure and students remaining at home, the older practice of local communities according to which parents sell their daughters for early forced marriages took advantage of both the pandemic, the impossibility of serious control by the authorities, and the traditional months of marriages, respectively March, April and September (Darso 2020). Consequently, the many forced marriages concluded during this period will cause a high rate of dropout and early pregnancies.

From this perspective, UNICEF experts point out that prior to the pandemic the secondary level school constituted a major obstacle to early marriages. In the Central and West African region, 4 out of 10 girls are forced to marry before the age of 18. In states in the Sahel region, such as Mali, Niger or Burkina Faso, statistics show that 6 out of 10 girls are forced into marriage even before that age. Save the Children Africa experts also mention the same risks of sexual violence and early pregnancy for girls who no longer attend school. They make reference to previous experiences, when the Ebola crisis led to a mass school dropout among children, especially girls. The result was that 11,000 girls in Sierra Leone became pregnant, consequences which, according to the same experts, are likely in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic as well. (Grant 2020). It is sufficient to say that in Central and West Africa alone, 120 million children were sent home after school closure, so that one can get an overview of the phenomenon and its severity (Ibidem).

Last but not least, international experts, including those of the International Institute for Educational Planning - UNESCO, estimate that education will pay a significant price after the COVID-19 pandemic, due to a complex of factors, related to the severe economic crisis and declining budget revenues, the decrease in the quality of training of some young human resources, before their entry on the labour market and, last but not least, the different prioritization at the level of action strategies

adopted by the international society, which will be tempted for a certain period to concentrate resources and public policies to counter the effects of the pandemic on health and economics, respectively, which could affect the level of resources allocated to Education (International Institute for Educational Planning - UNESCO, 2020b). One can get a more accurate picture of the real need for funding for the post-pandemic education if we mention that only in Africa, prior to COVID-19, the estimated budget to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goal for inclusive quality education (SDG 4) by 2030 needed to overcome an estimated annual funding gap of USD 39 billion, which means 0.5 of global GDP (Azoulay and Zewde 2020).

6. Opportunities for Education during the COVID-19 pandemic

As mentioned above, the pandemic has a profound impact on the education system worldwide and on the way students are taught and examined. As a result of the schools closure, the education has changed dramatically, with an immense increase in the dynamics of using e-learning techniques, requiring that teaching be performed remotely and on digital platforms. In addition to the risks and negative consequences mentioned above, the new situation has generated a series of opportunities and potentially positive consequences, in the short, medium and long term, which can sustainably change the profile of education in the contemporary society.

The European Training Foundation (ETF), a European Union agency providing educational policy support to 29 non-EU states, has conducted an analysis of the impact of the pandemic on the education system. ETF presents the manner in which the states have reacted to the challenges of COVID-19, recalling the “change curve”: from denial (this will not take long), to social confusion, a situation in which states have taken rapid decisions to prevent chaos in their systems, to the “letting go” phase and, finally, to the search for ideas, innovative practical solutions for crisis management (Onestini 2020). Usually, the latter phase generates “a new beginning”. This is the essence of the ETF’s analysis conclusions regarding the current and post-pandemic developments.

A first observation resulting from the mentioned study refers to the way in which Education has changed during this period. Certain positive consequences have been noticed, respectively gains resulting from the *acceleration of the teachers and students training*, but also for those who learn in general, of all ages (including parents) and an acceleration of the *production of new didactic and teaching materials, educational tools and methods*.

A second observation concerns the gains generated by *new collaborations and partnerships*. *Private sector operators* got involved in Education not only in relation to the content of syllabuses and certifications, but also by a combined effort to find solutions, build platforms and provide connectivity and equipment to students and teachers or even families, for a better management both educational and related to workplace needs (Onestini 2020). For example, experts from the World Economic Forum (WEF) mention Alibaba’s distance learning platform, DingTalk, which had to provide solutions for a huge flow of users in a very short time. In order to support large-scale remote operation, the Alibaba Cloud platform had to implement more than 100,000 new Cloud servers in just two hours in March 2020, setting a new record for rapid expansion capacity (Li and Lalani 2020).

A third observation resulting from the ETF study refers to the gradual identification of innovative solutions related to the challenges concerning the classical education formulas, such as training based on practical activity, apprenticeship and internships. These solutions are based on maximizing the learning experience through new technological formulas, providing previously unexplored possibilities.

A fourth observation refers to the *remodelling of the mentality and reaction methods* of the parties directly interested in the educational process, both of those having authority, which had to go beyond the traditional conservative paradigm, and of the subjects of the learning process.

The fifth observation refers to the *conduct and involvement of the authorities*, which in a number of privileged cases have invested substantial budgetary resources. WEF experts quote the Chinese example, specifically the “Tencent classroom” model, which has been widely used since mid-February 2020, after the Chinese government ordered a quarter of a billion full-time pupils and students to resume studies through online platforms. This resulted in the largest “online movement” in the history of

education, with approximately 730,000 users, namely 81% of primary and secondary school students, including high school, taking virtual classes using the “Tencent K-12 online school” in Wuhan (Ibidem).

In terms of the *reaction capacity of pupils and students*, the rapid adaptation to profound changes and general use of new e-learning technologies, which do not always guarantee a high and homogeneous level of quality education, has allowed those who have had access to quality technology to be more efficient in the learning process through online education methods. A number of studies have shown that on average students retain 25-60% more information when learning online compared to only 8-10% in the classroom. This is because students are able to learn faster when they learn online. E-learning requires 40-60% less time for learning than in a traditional classroom, a process that gives them the opportunity to learn at their own pace, to reread, skip some paragraphs or accelerate the learning of certain concepts of their choice (Ibidem).

Overall, the development of new technologies, including more inclusive technological formulas of education, more accessible to a wider category of students, the development of new teaching methods, the adaptation of the school syllabus, the improvement of individual human technical capacities for teaching and learning, respectively, constitute *positive consequences* of the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Speaking about the impact of COVID-19 and the future of Education, there are opinions of some experts according to which the integration of information technology in Education will accelerate in the future and that the online learning will eventually become an integrated component of school education (Ibidem).

Last but not least, the conclusion of partnerships that previously seemed difficult to achieve, the collaboration of the public sector, including local authorities, with the private one, the exchange of good practices and the rapid performance of new, more inclusive technologies, *indicate the importance of cross-border dissemination between public and private players, companies, civil society, of knowledge and information, innovative solutions, capable of overcoming the crisis and generating progress*. Mankind has previously experienced such a turning point through the explosive growth of e-commerce in the post-SARS period.

7. Longer term implications; conclusions

Speaking about Human Development, on a larger scale, the UNDP made reference to the importance of equity in the United Nations’ framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19 crisis, which sets out a green, gender-equal, good governance baseline from which to build a “new normal” (UNDP 2020). It recommends “five priority steps to tackle the complexity of the crisis: protecting and developing health systems and services; reinforcing the social protection; protecting jobs, small and medium-sized businesses and informal sector workers; making macroeconomic policies work for everyone; promoting peace, good governance and trust to build social cohesion” (Ibidem).

It is very easy to notice the fact that none of these five priorities are possible to be fulfilled without the solid foundation of a good quality education. That means the three SDG goals, first of all no. 4 (quality education), plus no. 2 (good health and well-being) and no. 8 (decent work and economic growth), as consecrated by United Nations during “peace times” (The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, United Nations, 2015), remain even more necessary during COVID-19 and post pandemic times. Just helping for having a clear picture, it is worth mentioning that “even before COVID-19, there was already a high growth in education technology, with global *edtech* investments reaching USD 18.66 billion in 2019 and the overall market for online education projected to reach USD 350 billion by 2025. Whether it is the language apps, virtual tutoring, video conferencing tools, or online learning software, there has been a significant surge in usage since COVID-19” (Li and Lalani 2020). It is easy to understand that in the aftermath of the pandemic the needs for investing in good quality education and innovative technological solutions are a must. Nevertheless, this will depend mostly on the political will and vision of the world governments.

This period of time showed the willingness of the countries to find proper answers to issues such as teacher involvement, digital materials produced, and new teaching and learning methods. At this stage, according to international experts there are “three critical issues:

- I. Ensuring that scenarios on future education are developed, building on lessons
- II. learned during the emergency and in particular collecting evidence in a transparent way and using it to inform policy choices and actions on future education and training;
- III. Focusing on the sustainability of actions and measures adopted, including the
- IV. maintenance of equipment and updating of portals and materials produced, and the continued commitment to ensuring accessibility and coverage for all students and teachers;
- V. Addressing the shortcomings of education and training systems highlighted by
- VI. the crises, in particular the question of equity and access, the need to strengthen competence-based learning, and the specificity of practice-based learning” (Onestini 2020).

From this perspective, an obvious question became relevant: will the current pandemic actually be the trigger for transformation? The answer will depend on the solutions to these three critical issues. Re-establishing international cooperation, including crowdsourcing, and sharing of resources could speed up and support, according to European experts in Education, this profound transformation (Ibidem). As mentioned previously, this will imply political will and vision, a proper prioritization, budgetary resources, partnerships, good use of the innovative human intelligence, international solidarity and a non-discriminatory approach, ensuring that learning is accessible to all.

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