Forum: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

Issue: Combatting the growing 'learning crisis'

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Introduction:

"The pandemic has exacerbated this learning crisis and children in almost every country have fallen behind in their learning. Without urgent action, millions of students will have fallen so far behind in their learning that they will be left behind.
It is not enough simply to reopen schools. We need a global effort to tackle the learning crisis head on. Our goal? A world where every child has equal access to quality education." This is a long standing goal of UNICEF that has become more complicated due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which changed policies regarding learning across the world. As the world recovers from the pandemic, there are a variety of different situations, and recovery between developed and not so developed countries do not look the same. This learning crisis is a cause of the disruption to the education system seen in 2020, that is yet to resolve itself. The learning crisis was a cause of a variety of issues, including supply chain disruptions, lack of funding for nonprofits, lack of access to technology in LEDCs. The lack of equity over the vaccination and medication for Covid-19 is also exacerbating the learning issue, given that it is prolonging the wealth divide caused by the pandemic.

On a micro level there are many students who have had their own education placed on hold due to issues with Covid-19. Specifically the situation often referred to as 'long covid', in which students develop difficulties in learning topics, therefore impacting their ability to receive an education. To a certain extent, this issue is attributed to the gap in education seen in 2020 that is yet to be closed in many countries, including MEDCs, to a smaller extent than LEDCs.

In order to correct the learning divide for the short term one must consider preparing schools to survive in the post-pandemic world, which includes bridging the digital divide. The digital divide is a term that began to be used in the mid-1990s to explain the inequality between households that have access to the internet to those who don't. This term originally referred to the gaps in access to computers, however, the term encloses gaps in internet access when the internet became widely accessible in society. The concept of the digital divide comes from a different perspective of social and inequality information, considering the benefits regarding ICT access and usage. Countries realized after a long time that the digital divide potentially reduces labor force and innovation. Information and communication technologies were part of a growth sector in the economy. Between 2000 and 2004, the concerns of the digital divide became huge but the attention to this matter declined in 2005 and 2005. The UN came to a solution that almost solved the problem as a rapid majority of their inhabitants obtained access to computers (refer to UN involvement - Health InterNetwork). However after the onsent of the pandmeic and the series of lockdown and restrictions that followed, their was a resurgence of the digital divide, as it became clearer then ever the impacts of such a divide on the right to education, therefore reigniting calls by member nations to denote resources to address this growing concern.

Definition of Key Terms:

1. **Key Term:** please define any key terms here.
2. ***Digital Divide***: refers to the gap between those who can benefit from the internet and those who are not.
3. ***Gender Equality***: access to rights or opportunities is unaffected by gender.
4. ***ICT***: Information and Communication Technology is a term for the integration of telecommunications and computers.
5. ***Marginalized***: the process of making a group less important to a secondary position.

6. ***Supply Chain Disruptions***: refers to the lack of coherence in the global supply chain as an effect of the pandemic.
7. ***Domino-effect***: the way in which an event can have resultant impacts that continue long after the event has taken place.
8. ***Learning Gap***: this is a gap between the information that an average child has in a learning system at a certain age, against the expected information that an average child is expected to have in that learning system at that age.
9. ***Long-Covid***: this refers to an effect of Covid-19 seen amongst certain patients of Covid in which they see effects of Covid-19 long after their sickness.

Background Information

Online Education

Online education has emerged as a successful occurrence in the year 2020 with continuous growth. According to UNESCO, 850 million students are not attending schools owing to COVID-19. However, the education sector remains unharmed due to online education. Digital devices such as smartphones have made our lives more convenient.

Despite the learning, an occurrence of a huge digital divide has affected the online learners and college students who are deprived of basic facilities (to access online classes). The people who are at social and economic disadvantage are facing financial issues because they can't afford tools like the internet. Online education is widely available to many privileged families who have money and power to enroll their children. However, when enrolling children for online education, low-income families face many issues. According to UNICEF's recent data, 360 million youngsters lack access to the internet. With already such a huge education gap, the unequal distribution of online learning speaks volumes of many unfairnesses that low-income families have to deal with. If electronic learning becomes compulsory, socioeconomically challenged students will not have the opportunity to progress academically and graduate, which can hinder

their future success. Hence, this issue relies on the government, educational institutes to overcome gaps in e-learning. There are many consequences of the digital divide, for example, lack of communication and isolation, barriers to studies and knowledge, accentuates social differences, and gender discrimination.

Learning Gap

The pandemic resulted in many children staying at home, and with the aforementioned lack of infrastructure surrounding online education some countries have seen the ability to transition into an online version of education without too many difficulties whilst others have found it largely impossible to transition to online learning. This resultantly causes a situation in which certain countries have seen several months in which students did not receive any education. Even though most countries have returned to education in-person at this time the education levels still remain largely behind where it is expected to be. This is attributed to the gap in education seen in 2020. Whilst this is very common in LEDCs the same situation is seen in MEDECs often to a smaller extent. There are also a number of individual cases in which students have suffered from the effects of long covid. Long covid has resulted in many students missing months of school.

This learning gap has been difficult to solve due to the recurring outbreaks as those seen in China in 2022. These outbreaks result in another round of restrictions where policies are enforced that close schools and further increase the gap in learning. This makes it more difficult to correct this issue and unfortunately has the opposite effect. This learning gap is starting to be seen participating in the quality of the labor force, as many countries are seeing laborers equipped with an, in many cases, unsatisfactory education that does not well prepare them for jobs that go beyond menial labor. This results in a perpetuation of the poverty cycle that doesn't fuel economic growth or achieve the first UN SGD.

Current Situation

Isolation

People in distant areas and urban residents are disconnected because they don't have access to the internet. This causes social isolation as people are not able to communicate with each other. This impacts their academic participation significantly because students who feel lonely and isolated tend to spend their time without any effort and don't thrive in academic environments. This idea is supported by figured collected by the University of Deleware which found correlation between increased loneliness and the onsent of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The barrier to studies and knowledge

Due to the coronavirus, many countries lack sufficient technology and digital skills, which potentially increases lack of knowledge by limiting access to comprehension. Teachers and students are affected as both may not have the resources at home. According to USA Facts, more than 4.4 million students lack consistent access to a computer. This would be very hard for them to perform well during online classes/school.

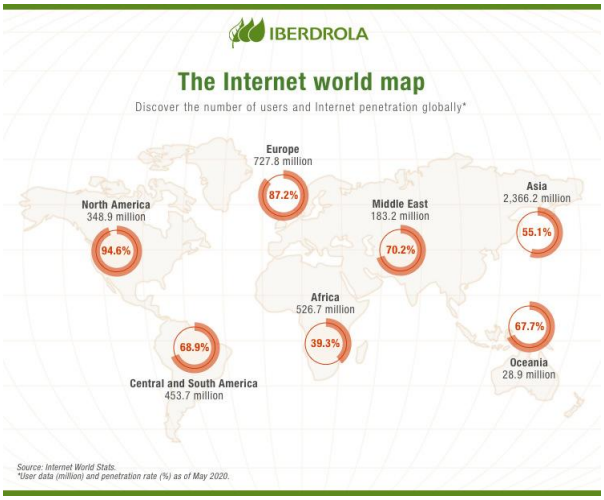

Figure 1 - Access to the internet around the world, IBERDROLA

Accentuates social differences

Digital illiteracy reduces opportunities for finding jobs and access to quality employment. As seen in Figure 1, out of Africa's population of 526 million people, there is only 39% available internet. This is because poverty is a big issue there. More than 82% of middle-skill jobs require technology, which is a 4% increase since 2014. It is important to provide opportunities to employees in order for them to build a career path towards their goal and salary.

The digital divide has affected 52% of women and 42% of men worldwide. The gender digital divide is most noticeable in Southeast Asia where women are 26% less likely to own a mobile phone than men. This is most likely to be started in developing countries, where stereotypes around technology being 'for boys' became a huge issue. The fear of being discriminated against stops girls from using digital tools. Girls and women are not able to equally participate because of the unequal access to technology for them. The issue of gender technology gap also affects countries' economic growth, for example, if 600 million more women are digitally connected in 3 years, this would translate to a global GDP of between US$13 billion. This issue of the digital divide transfers over to the learning crisis given the challenged brought on by the pandemic, further propagating the inequality that women experience in the education sector.

Long Term Economic Damage

Education can affect not just an individual's future earnings and well-being but also a country's economic growth and vitality. Research suggests higher levels of education lead to increased labor productivity and enhance an economy's capacity for innovation. Unless the pandemic's impact on student learning can be mitigated and students can be supported to catch up on missed learning, the global economy could experience lower GDP growth over the lifetime of this generation. According to McKinsey "(They) estimate (that) by 2040, unfinished learning related to COVID-19 could translate to

annual losses of $1.6 trillion to the global economy, or 0.9 percent of predicted total GDP", thus displaying the need to address the issue quickly

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Singapore

The People's Action Party Government aims to ensure all Singaporeans have a baseline level of affordability to digital access and skills. Singapore offers the most favorable business and innovative environment in the world. The latest Household Expenditure Survey 2017/18 tells us that 81% of resident households have a personal computer, while 87% have internet access. According to the Straits Times, the minister of education has loaned around 20,000 laptops and tablets. This has helped a vast majority of low-income families who don't have internet connectivity. This shows that at least one in 10 households in Singapore has not been part of the digital community.

New Zealand

New Zealand's digital divide has been solved by children being given digital devices due to the Coronavirus. According to the Ministry of Education, 33,000 extra houses were connected to the internet and more than 25,000 students now have access to devices. The Government of New Zealand had helped out by providing 36 million dollars to help students access devices and the internet. For families to afford the internet, work had to be done in schools. Currently, families pay less than $4 a week for access. Schools have built a wireless network to enable households easy access to an internet connection.

United States of America

Americans expect to rely on internet access being available everywhere and anywhere they go. But the Federal Communications Commission estimates that more than 21

million people in the US don't have a connection to the internet. This is around 27%. Some US states have gotten creative with hotspots and mobile Wi-Fi buses.

UNICEF

Unicef and the International Telecommunication Union set in motion a global initiative to connect every school and nearby communities to the internet. According to UNICEF, the initiative has now been mapped at around 800,000 schools in 30 countries. The data helps this Giga to work with governments, and private sector partners to help fund and build the connectivity infrastructure needed for post-digital learning.

WHO

The WHO is cooperating with other UN governmental bodies such as the World Food Programme and the UN Children's Fund in order to find new ways to combat this issue, given that it is a cause of a variety of factors and will therefore require a coordinated approach alongside multiple governmental bodies. as well as funds, like the World Bank. The WHo is instrumental in addressing this issue given that the largest cause of the issue is the Covid-19 pandemic, and the reluctant policies which had caused the learning gap.

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

The United Nations is dedicated to creating a solution to solve the cause of economic and social development, a Health InterNetwork (www.healthinternetwork.net). It is led by the World Health Organisation where they are creating on-line sites in hospitals, clinics in the developing world. This helps bring high-quality information to facilitate communication in the public health community. The United Nations Information Technology Service (www.unites.org) is training people in developing countries in the

uses and opposites of information technology. This is held by the UN Volunteers program.

The United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force's function is to discuss private-public partnership solutions. The “World Summit on the Information Society” is hosted by the UN General Assembly under the leadership of the International Telecommunication Union to decide a long-term vision. The “World Summit on the Information Society” plans to create a platform addressing issues raised by communication technologies (ICT). Their goal is to “achieve a common vision, desire and commitment to building a people-centric, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information.” (United Nations)

In an effort to foster international collaboration and ensure that education never stops, UNESCO is mounting a response with a set of initiatives that include the global monitoring of national and localized school closures. To protect the well-being of children and ensure they have access to continued learning, UNESCO in March 2020 launched the COVID-19 Global Education Coalition, a multi-sector partnership between the UN family, civil society organizations, media and IT partners to design and deploy innovative solutions. Together they help countries tackle content and connectivity gaps, and facilitate inclusive learning opportunities for children and youth during this period of sudden and unprecedented educational disruption.

Specifically, the Global Education Coalition aims to:

- Help countries in mobilizing resources and implementing innovative and context-appropriate solutions to provide education remotely, leveraging hi-tech, low-tech and no-tech approaches;
- Seek equitable solutions and universal access;
- Ensure coordinated responses and avoid overlapping efforts;
- Facilitate the return of students to school when they reopen to avoid an upsurge in dropout rates.

UNICEF also scaled up its work in 145 low- and middle-income countries to support governments and education partners in developing plans for a rapid, system-wide response including alternative learning programmes and mental health support.

Possible Solutions

1. Increasing affordability for digital devices worldwide would be helpful. The internet barriers in developed and developing countries are affordability. One of the main reasons why the gap is huge is because of its high costs, despite the technology being a basic need. Offering financing to help low-income earners will support them to buy new technology. Governments can give tariff subsidies to encourage them to buy digital tools.
2. Expanding access in schools. Some students need to be reactivated in providing strong access during the school day, especially in schools with a high percentage of students without internet access. Internet connectivity is equally important to be available in schools and at homes. Possible solutions could be to offer wireless access in study halls, cafeteria, or the library. However, it is important to remember that the Childhood Internet Protection Act (CIPA) must follow all guidelines to avoid issues.
3. Improve the relevance of content. This includes having the content in your local or primary language so everyone can adapt to the internet. People in rural areas lack the necessary prerequisite education to understand the content, therefore having the local populace choose their language will enable them to understand the information. Besides, having local languages, privacy, and trust issues tend to worry about the users. So formulating several policy frameworks will ensure their users' data and activity are protected.
4. Create system to help students that have fallen back. A system that aims to help provide extra tuition to students who are completely underserved, as well as a

congressional replanning of the education system to ensure that it is still relevant in the modern context, given the changes brought upon by the pandemic.

Bibliography

Useful Links

- https://www.unicef.org/learning-crisis (useful for better understanding the learning crisis)
- https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/how-covid-19-caused-a-global-learning-crisis (useful for better understanding the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on education across a broad range of countries)
- https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1110402 (useful for better understanding what the UN is doing in order to adress the issue in question)

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