

# Introduction



# One Billion Voices

#OneBillionVoices



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Even before the outbreak of COVID-19 in Spring 2020, some **258 million boys, girls and teenagers were out of school around the world.** Moreover, not all those that went to school were learning as much as they should have. According to information from UNESCO, half of children aged 10 from medium and low-income countries lacked basic reading and writing skills (unable to understand a simple written sentence).<sup>1</sup>

**The pandemic has served to worsen the challenge of accessing equitable, inclusive and quality education for all.**

It is estimated that at the most critical peak of the first wave of the pandemic (late March to mid-April 2020), school closures affected nearly 90% of the world's student population (almost 1.5 billion girls, boys and young people around the world).

More than **one billion students, over one billion voices** with a story that deserves to be heard, which we want to share through these materials. Despite the restrictions imposed in the pandemic affecting everyone, it is also clear that this situation has not hit each person or country equally.

**Some 40% of the poorest countries did not support at-risk students during the peak of the crisis,<sup>2</sup>** meaning that the children in those countries missed out on almost four months of schooling, compared to the six-week average of high-income countries.<sup>3</sup> In turn, by late 2020 there were still countries (all medium or low income) that had not yet set a date for school re-opening. Likewise, according to a joint report by UNESCO, UNICEF and the World

Bank,<sup>4</sup> the number of children out of school around the world may increase by at least 24 million people due to the pandemic.

We can therefore say that the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened the economic, social and educational inequality gap that was already in place; for example, UNESCO's latest Global Education Monitoring report (GEM) indicated considerable differences in school attendance, school leaving level, and learning opportunities depending on family income levels, concluding that poorer students were more likely to repeat school years and leave school early.

This situation has been exacerbated with the closure of school centres, which has highlighted other issues such as the digital divide, not only risking advances in accessing a quality education on a global level, but also suggesting we are on the brink of an unprecedented educational crisis in Spain, as well as in Southern countries, which may take decades to recover from.

1 GEM Report 2020. UNESCO. [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373721\\_spa](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373721_spa)

2 <https://es.unesco.org/news/unesco-muestra-que-40-paises-mas-pobres-no-apoyaron-alumnos-situacion riesgo-durante-crisis-del>

3 [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374711\\_spa](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374711_spa)

4 [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374711\\_spa](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374711_spa)



In the words of the General Director of UNESCO on 5th October, World Teachers Day: “If urgent measures are not adopted, and investment is not increased, the learning crisis could turn into an educational catastrophe”.<sup>5</sup>

Just as in other spheres, the impacts of the pandemic on education are even harder hitting on more vulnerable individuals, communities and countries.

This educational divide materialises in highly specific issues, such as an increased risk of leaving school early; the loss of school as a space for protection and socialisation, with the subsequent risk of social isolation; an increased gender gap resulting from the greater care workload taken on by girls and young people; and increased pressure on education systems in general, particularly on teachers.

In turn, it has been envisaged that the pandemic will worsen the educational funding deficit precisely at a time when this investment is needed most.

**It has been calculated that 40% of the poorest countries have already undergone, or are set to suffer, cuts in educational budgets** for the 2021-2022 tax years. It is therefore more important than ever for rich countries to reinforce their commitment to solidarity via cooperation policies, particularly regarding Official Development Aid (ODA) allocated to support the education systems in the countries that need it the most.

In the case of Spain, ODA allocated to education was cut by more than 80% between 2008 and 2018, and despite a slight increase foreseen for the coming year, we fear it is far from sufficient.



## “One Billion Voices”: Life stories

The aim of #TheBestLesson was to generate a space for reflection about the lessons learned in educational communities within the context of the pandemic and the lockdown, highlighting the important role of education in the framework of possible ways of emerging stronger from this crisis.

The objective of **“One Billion Voices”** is to give a face and a voice to almost 1.5 billion **students** whose educational processes have been affected by the COVID-19 in highly specific aspects with which other children can feel identified.

Behind all these numbers and statistics are real people, whose futures, hopes and dreams may be destroyed unless decisive and efficient measures and policies to face the educational divide are adopted and funded, and the most vulnerable communities are protected. In short, **“leaving no one behind”**.

Now more than ever, Governments must double their efforts to fulfil the commitments taken on within the 2030 Agenda framework, specifically Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which establishes the

obligation to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.

Below we explain some of the specific educational challenges that have been exacerbated with the pandemic, in the words of those who understand the issue better than anyone: the children affected. Children and teenagers who, just like other millions in the world, have been prevented from exercising their right to an education, which could have a severe impact on their lives and futures.

5 <https://es.unesco.org/news/63-millones-maestros-afectados-crisis-covid-19-dia-mundial-docentes-unesco-exhorta-que-se>



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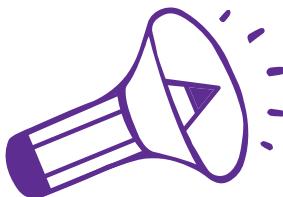
The aim is for students participating in these activities to be able **to put themselves in another person's shoes**, identify shared issues and strengthen their empathy, critical awareness, and their vision of the world we live

in, with challenges that do not recognise borders, and that do not affect every individual and every country in the same way.

We want to place emotions and psycho-social aspects at the core, because undoubtedly the exceptional situation we have experienced and are still facing, has had an unprecedented impact on children and young people on a social, psychological and emotional level.

This is precisely what the lessons learned during the #TheBestLesson campaign revealed, as most of them were linked to these issues:

**perceptions and emotions felt during lockdown; missing teachers and classmates; and feelings of empathy towards others.**



## Lack of protection

As our 2018 campaign "Education, the pathway to peace. Leave your mark!" analysed, **schools and educational spaces are key elements in sheltering childhood** from different types of violence, including specific threats that particularly affect minors in situations of conflict and emergency - such as child trafficking, the recruitment of child soldiers, prostitution, slavery or child marriage.

Before the pandemic, millions of girls and boys were already living in emergency situations in which accessing education was complex; this is the case, for example, for **child refugees**, who make up more than half the refugee population and who were already twice as likely not to attend school than children not in their position.

Figures suggest that **their situation is set to worsen**.

As well as already existing emergency situations (conflict, natural catastrophes, forced displacements, etc.), it could be said that COVID-19 has placed every one of us - to a greater or lesser degree - in an emergency situation.

For this reason, it is also worth highlighting that education is a vital factor in normalising the life of children and teenagers, acting, in this respect, as a lifeline that helps them overcome stress, providing them with a space for play and leisure where they can develop an appropriate social life with other children of their age.

Furthermore, school routine offers stability and order, giving these individuals the strength to face uncertainty.

School can also be a valuable source of learning about health and risk prevention; and, in collaboration with families,



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**it can help channel the emotions of children that have been exposed to information that is not appropriate to their age (information they are not mature enough to process and that can generate anxiety, fears or uncertainties).**



## Early schools leavers

As we have already highlighted, **school failure and early leaving are intricately linked to poverty and family income levels.**

In accordance with UNESCO's latest GEM report, the poorest are more likely to repeat school years and leave school early, and even greater differences have been observed in the rates of finishing studies based on wealth.<sup>6</sup>

However, leaving school early is not exclusive to Southern countries: in fact, Spain continues to be (despite advances made in this respect), the country with the highest number of early school leavers in the EU, with a rate 17.3% compared to the 10.2% European average, far removed from the target of 10% or below set by the EU for 2020.<sup>7</sup>

**If measures are not taken to reach the most vulnerable people - especially those affected by the digital divide - we run the risk of these figures getting even worse.**



## Risk of social isolation

Educational centres are where basic and fundamental socialisation and human interaction take place. **A space for forging friendships, for playing, for happiness.**

With school closures, many children and young people have lost this enriching social contact, which is fundamental for their learning and development processes. This situation extrapolates to the sphere of informal education. A lack of socialisation and learning could end up constituting a serious problem in the long-term, psychologically affecting children and young people, particularly those who are unable to keep in

contact with their friends via the Internet (a tool which in turn, is causing problems due to cyber-bullying).

On the other hand, confinement has been more difficult and has had a harder impact on children and young people with special educational needs or with learning difficulties, who require additional support to adapt to this new situation.



## Gender inequality in education

Last April, the General Secretary of the United Nations stated that "**the scarce advances in gender equality and women's rights achieved over the decades is at risk of backtracking as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.**"<sup>8</sup> Women and girls do not only bear the brunt of this pandemic, but they are also the backbone of recovery in communities, which is why they should be placed at the heart of public policies.

<sup>6</sup> Poverty impacts attendance levels, finishing education, and learning opportunities. In all regions, except for Europe and North America, for every 100 teenagers from the richest 20% of households, 87 teenagers from the poorest 20% completed the first cycle of secondary school, and only 37 finished their studies. Of the latter, for every 100 teenagers from the richest 20% of households, around 50 completed the minimum level of competency in reading and mathematics. [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373721\\_spa](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373721_spa)

<sup>7</sup> Latest data published in April 2020 with data from 2019. The EU is set to update this data in May 2021. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Early\\_leavers\\_from\\_education\\_and\\_training#Overview](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Early_leavers_from_education_and_training#Overview)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/es/gender-equality/>



In terms of education, the lockdown has meant girls and teenagers have been forced to spend more time performing care duties, which have increased over this period, with repercussions on their educational processes and making the return to the classroom after lockdown even more difficult. For example, according to information from the Malala Fund, it has been estimated that half of refugee girls attending secondary education will not return to school once centres reopen.

In countries where the gross registration rate of refugee girls in secondary school was already below 10%, **all these girls run the risk of leaving their studies definitively**, an alarming prediction that would have an impact on generations to come.



## The key role of teachers

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 and the subsequent closure of education centres has placed major pressure on the collection of education systems in all countries, and specifically on teachers, whose efforts **to maintain the quality of teaching** throughout this extraordinarily difficult situation **deserve acknowledgement**.



to perform their duties. Moreover, there are still considerable variations between regions, meaning that many teachers are ill-prepared to address the problems they are facing". Specifically, in Sub Saharan Africa, just 65% of primary teachers and 51% of secondary teachers have the minimum required qualifications, a percentage that exceeds 70% in southern Asia.

UNESCO estimates that **in order to fulfil SDG4 in 2030, 69 million more teachers are needed around the world** (more than 24 million in primary level and over 44 million in secondary level). This figure is equivalent to the global total of professionals that worked as teachers in 2019 in both educational levels.<sup>10</sup>

According to data from UNESCO, the COVID-19 crisis has affected over 63 million teachers and has highlighted the ongoing deficiencies in numerous educational systems. According to the recent joint report by UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank regarding the response to COVID-19 in the sphere of education,<sup>9</sup> **just half the countries analysed had provided teachers with additional skills for distance education**, and less than a third of these nations offered teachers psychosocial support to help them face the crisis. On the other hand, the latest figures from the UNESCO Statistics Institute revealed that "81% of primary teachers and 86% of secondary teachers barely had the minimum qualifications required

**For this reason, the EAC defends the urgent need for teacher support measures to be taken around the world, particularly when it comes to facing the over-exertion caused by the current situation and the difficulties posed by distance education, for which a large part of teaching staff are not prepared and/or do not have the necessary resources.**

9 [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374711\\_spa](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374711_spa)

10 <https://es.unesco.org/news/63-millones-maestros-afectados-crisis-covid-19-dia-mundial-docentes-unesco-exhorta-que-se>



## We know what is missing. Now, how do we achieve it?

The **demands that COVID-19 is placing on education**, and therefore on the present and future of millions of people - especially children and teenagers, who are finding it increasingly difficult to access equitable, inclusive and quality education - **require our societies and Governments to rise to the challenge.**



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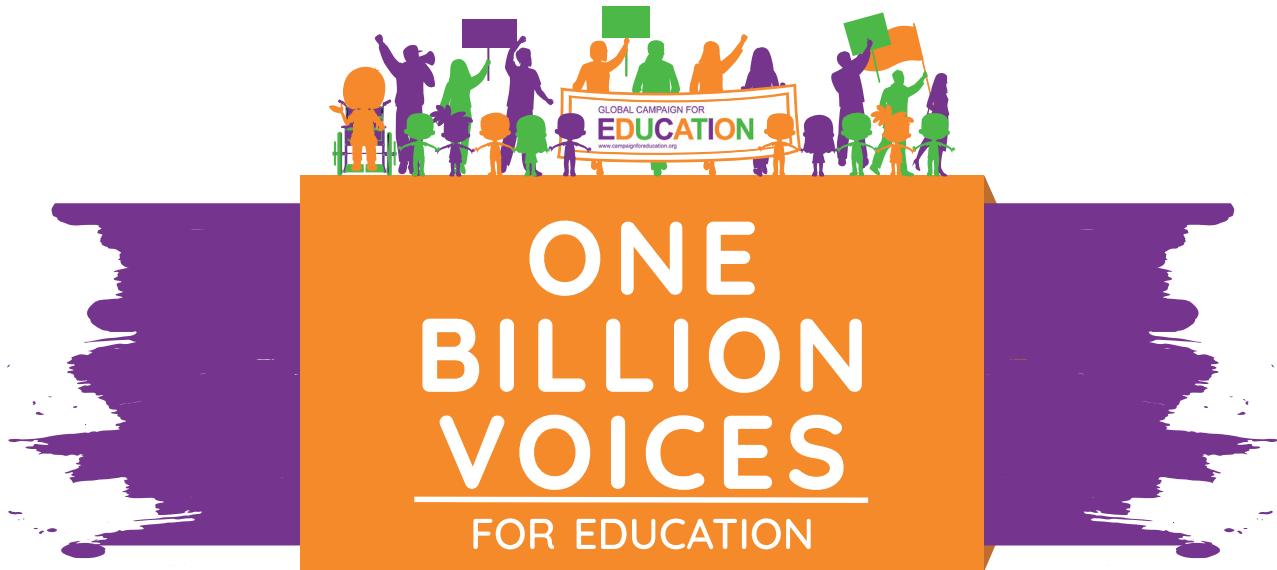
On the one hand, public policies are needed, which support the most vulnerable people and communities. However, these policies must be backed with sufficient investment for deployment in Spain and, above all, in the countries that need them the most. For a long time now, Spain has been an extremely committed donor of

the right to education: however, since the 2008 crisis, it has disproportionately reduced its volume of official development aid (ODA), and in 2019, for the 8th consecutive year, it continued to be one of the European countries to contribute the least in terms of cooperation. Specifically, regarding cooperation in education, ODA funds were cut by over 80% between 2008 and 2018.

In this legislature, the current Spanish Government has committed **to allocate 0.5% of its gross national income (GNI) to cooperation and has made education a priority issue**; for example, it is one of the “vertical axes” of the Spanish Joint Response Cooperation Strategy to the COVID-19 crisis.

However, we must increase awareness and take action to ensure this commitment is fulfilled, and more importantly for a major part of this rise to be channelled into an equitable, inclusive and quality education for all.

The happy ending of this life story - and many others - depends on it.



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