Coronavirus Disease- COVID 19

Education and COVID-19 in the Republic of Moldova

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Education and COVID-19 in the Republic of Moldova:

Grasping the opportunity the learning crisis presents to build a more resilient education system

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This Paper ***"Education and COVID-19 in Moldova: Grasping the opportunity the learning crisis presents to build a more resilient education system"*** was prepared by the UN Coordinated Education Task Force for COVID-19 in Moldova (chaired by UNICEF, and with membership by WB, UNFPA, UNDP, OHCHR, UN Women, UNHCR, UNODC, UNESCO, FAO, and UN RCO), and highlights the Moldovan context, while also building upon the recommendations mentioned in the referred to UN Policy Brief document on "Education during COVID-19 and beyond".

I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on all levels of education and learning around the world. In early April 2020, the 194 country-wide school closures affected nearly 1.6 billion learners at pre-primary, primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary levels of education, which is over 90% of total enrolled learners[1]. For many students the academic year finished in early March 2020, meaning that significant parts of the earlier planned learning programmes were never completed. The "building blocks" approach to education where new knowledge is dependent on the understanding of more basic concepts, the transition to higher grades without compensating for this knowledge loss would mean that many students may never be able to catch up. Even before the crisis, students were completing an average of 11.2 years of schooling throughout their school-age lives. However, when adjusted for the quality of learning, that amounted to only 7.9 years of schooling[2]. Schools closures negatively impact student learning outcomes[3], and as many exams and assessments cannot take place, it will be hard to fully quantify the exact loss of academic progress. Recent attempts to do this, indicate that 5 months of school closures will result in an immediate loss of 0.6 years of schooling adjusted for quality, bringing the effective learning that a student can achieve down from 7.9 years to 7.3 years[4].

Remote learning using internet, television, radio and other technologies was only partially able to replace the learning that takes place in school settings. On-line learning has become a critical lifeline for education, as institutions seek to minimize the potential for community transmission. Countries resorting to on-line learning alternatives have done so with varying degrees of success and in line with their capacities. UNESCO has issued specific recommendations[5] for countries to plan and implement distance learning, but it is hard to imagine even those well-off countries abiding by all of these. A real concern is that lack of access to technology, or good internet connectivity is an obstacle to continued learning, especially for students from disadvantaged families.

The pandemic is very likely going to exacerbate existing inequalities in access and quality of education between countries and people.[6] The rift between the rich and the poor, for example, may become even greater. In OECD countries, the 10% most socioeconomically advantaged students outperformed their 10% most disadvantaged counterparts in reading by 141 score points before the pandemic. In Moldova, that gap was smaller (102 points), but still significant. Disparities between girls and boys, children with and without disabilities, Roma and non-Roma children, the rural and the urban, the connected and the disconnected could further widen considerably between and within countries.

One can reasonably assume that on-line learning at such a mass scale is an imperfect substitute for face-to-face education with consequences for different groups of learners.

[1] UNESCO. (2020, July 31)
[2] World Bank Group. (2018, September)
[3] UNESCO. (2020, March 10)
[4] World Bank Group. (2020, June 18)
[5] UNESCO. (2020, March 6)
[6] UNESCO. (2020, March 4)

On-line learning particularly limits the pedagogical tools available to educators[7], placing an extra burden on students and caretakers, especially in the case of younger students and those with disabilities. With schools closed, parents are asked to play to some extent the role of teachers, a task few of them are prepared for, or able to take on. This is especially true for parents with limited education and resources, or parents of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), or younger children. Children with disabilities are least, especially children with sensory and intellectual disabilities and learning difficulties, likely to benefit from distance learning solutions. Remote education not only requires access to adequate information technology (IT) equipment and internet connectivity, availability of books and other adapted learning materials but also, access to specific assistive devices or adapted curricula to allow the participation of learners with disabilities and accommodate their learning needs. Young people are additionally affected by the closure of non-formal education opportunities for which fewer on-line substitutes are available. This can potentially further derail their career prospects and delay entry into the job market.

Going to school is about so much more than just going to a place to learn new things. For many children, schools also provide access to food, an escape from dysfunctional families, or the sole opportunity to socialize and reduce screen time[8], to interact with others, and to build relationships. Schools are places where teachers can early identify problems linked to family, including domestic violence, health, behavioural and other issues, thus giving children the support needed early.

Amid the fog of rather despair, there are rays of hope that can point us in the right direction. As many countries find themselves in a similar situation, there are efforts to deal with the fallout from COVID-19, presenting an opportunity to learn from each other, adopt and adapt best practices to the local context, revisit policies, standards, approaches, beliefs and priorities[9] to ensure provisions are in place to deal with this and prevent future similar crises[10]. Governments, donor countries, development agencies, philanthropic organizations, local stakeholders and others may have the means and the chance to turn this crisis into an opportunity. Failing to do so would mean that the gaping hole left by COVID-19 in children's education and development may never be closed.

II. The situation in Moldova – facts and consequences

On 11 March'20, Moldovan authorities closed all schools in response to the COVID-19 outbreak.[11] Approximately 434,000 students[12] in all academic institutions at all levels were asked to stay at home, and schools were mandated to provide distance learning opportunities.

[7] UNFPA & IFRC. (2020, May)
[8] Twenge, J. M. (2018, September 4)
[9] Hargreaves, A. (2020, April 16)
[10] World Economic Forum. (2020, March 13)
[11] Ministry of Education, Culture and Research. (2020, March 10)
[12] National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova. (2020)

The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to ensure continuity of distance learning became the main priority of the education system in Moldova. With internet penetration in Moldova standing around 79.9% in 2019[13] (which is considerably lower than the EU penetration rate of 90% in 2019), remote learning proved to be a tall order for about 16,000 students (4.8% of total), and 3000 teachers (10.6% of total) who do not have access to ICT technology (laptop, tablet or access to internet).[14] This made it impossible to deliver or receive instruction (let alone organize lessons and monitor/ assess learning progress) for a substantial share of students and teachers. The potentially most affected families with school aged children are the ones living in areas where internet connectivity rates are lower, for instance those in rural areas (74.5% household internet connection in rural areas versus 86.1% in urban areas), families with lower level of education (64.7% internet connection rate among people with secondary incomplete education, compared to 94% among those with higher education), and households with low income level (56.7% internet connectivity among those with an income under 3,000 lei, compared to 96.5% in households with over 6,000 lei/month).[15]

Providing support to students using existing computers was a challenge too, due to the limited number of available computers, their condition, logistics associated with such an exercise, and others. For example, according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, schools around the country are endowed with circa 32,501 computers, out of which 28,500 are used for teaching purposes.[16] However, around 24,000 of them are over 5 years old and needed to be replaced to conform to the standards adopted by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research (MECR) in 2015.[17] Many of these computers are intended and adapted for in-class use and not to be distributed to students and teachers and used outside the classroom, and providing IT and other technical support would also be challenging.

Quality of teaching and interaction is arguably the most important factor in determining education outcomes and impacting in the quality of education overall. According to UNESCO[18], within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a tendency to rush towards the use of ICTs to ensure continuity of learning. However, more consideration is needed around the qualitative approach if the objective is for students to be engaged, motivated and supported to learn during this period. Continuity of learning outside school requires special provisions that must allow:

- **Students** to benefit from well thought-out, quality and accessible teaching and learning resources as well as social and emotional support, such as through teachers' and parents' confidence and understanding;
- **Teachers** to support learners in acquiring, developing and applying their knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours, all underpinned by values, such as those related to life skills,

[13] E-Government Agency. (2020, June 9)
[14] National Pupils Council. (2020, June)
[15] E-Government Agency. (2020, June 9)
[16] National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova. (2020)
[17] Ministry of Education, Culture and Research. (2015, June 24)
[18] UNESCO. (2020, April)

safe and healthy behaviours, civic engagement and participation, sustainable development;
- **Families** to help contribute to the education of their children through support, encouragement and equipment;
- The **education** system to adapt to new requirements by revising learning provisions and requirements, and taking the necessary regulatory actions, as appropriate.

Remote learning, even where readily available, is not a perfect substitute for face-to-face learning. Limited teacher-student interaction and feedback to students renders the student-centred approach to learning all but impossible. Almost 50% of students in Vocational Education and Training (VET) system report limited constructive feedback from the teachers, out of them 16% report very limited feedback and other 7% report even lack of any feedback which demotivates students and increases the level of uncertainty and frustration[19]. The point of internal assessments is to gauge the student's progress and help parents and teachers to provide support to those lagging behind, among others. The lack of this information can have harmful long-term consequences for the students.[20]

Learning remotely also poses organizational and time-management challenges that are hard to manage particularly for students, but also for the teachers. The pressure of distance learning is high due to complexity and the multitude of tasks that students receive daily. About 35% of students report limited or lack of free time or time for rest, with accentuated gender disparity (40% girls comparing to 29% boys)[21]. Coupled with the uncertainty and unpredictability of the pandemic's duration, this can, in turn, lead to increased stress levels and have consequences beyond education. This is true not just for the students but also for teachers, parents and caregivers.

There is a challenge with unequal access to remote learning and children and youth left behind. In the 2018/2019 academic year, 7,693 children with SEN and 1,464 children with disabilities were enrolled in the mainstream education system.[22] This is a group that is especially hard to be served through distance programs, putting them at a much higher risk of being excluded from the education process. This is because, in addition to trained teachers and support teaching staff, adapted curriculum and teaching methods, these children require access to special assistive technologies and devices, which is rather limited. Furthermore, these students also need continued access to rehabilitation programmes that are also in short supply in times of COVID-19. There are further challenges for children with intellectual and psycho-emotional disability, as it is more difficult to provide remotely the support they need for learning.

Children in rural areas, where reported internet access, and specifically access to broadband is more limited than in urban areas, are another vulnerable group. Rural households with more than one child, and especially those with several children enrolled in school

[19] National Pupils Council. (2020, June)
[20] Burgess & Sievertsen. (2020, April 1)
[21] National Pupils Council. (2020, June)
[22] National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova. (2020, May 29)

and living in rural areas are also potentially more affected than their urban counterparts, as these households already spend less on communication (telephone and internet), have less disposable income[23], and are unlikely to have access to multiple IT devices. This would invariably mean that children would be unable to follow classes simultaneously, do homework or regularly interact with their teachers. This is also relevant for children from the Roma community. In Moldova they are already more prone to drop-out of school in favour of household works; the lack of adequate equipment, like a computer or connection to internet, high illiteracy among their parents, creates additional obstacles to benefiting from distance learning.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic the issues of children out-of-school, drop-out and absenteeism need even more attention than before. Overall, in 2018/2019 school year, in Moldova, 10% of primary school age children and 15% of lower secondary school age children were out of school. Only 60% of adolescents of 16-18 years old are enrolled in non-compulsory upper secondary education.[24]

Pupils whose parents have a lower level of education are also disproportionately affected. As mentioned above access to internet in families with lower education level is considerably lower (64.7%) than for families with higher education level (94%), which placed the children from the first type of families in a more vulnerable situation. Studies suggest there is a link between parental education level and academic success of students,[25] the students whose parents have higher education level perform better at school tests. If so, the school success of children in families with a lower level of education are impacted twice in the period of distance learning.

As stated earlier, for children, going to school is so much more than an opportunity to learn. For children and youth from the Republic of Moldova, it is also access to food, friends and fun and an opportunity to socialize. For many children school feeding programmes were an important part of their daily food intake. School closure, coupled with the likely threat of job loss or reduced income or flow of remittances might mean that one is probably going to experience a worsening of the country's malnutrition rates. Before the crisis, it was reported that every 8th teenager had excess body weight and every 5th was underweight, and only half of the adolescents had breakfast every day, and every 10th had no breakfast at all[26] .

As also shown in the context of the current crisis, going digital may trigger teachers, students and parents feeling overloaded, confused and stressed, which can result in more mental health issues, and increased levels of domestic violence. Learners may be flooded with homework that they and their families cannot handle. For parents, having the children out of school contributes to increased stress levels either because they are unable to provide their children with the learning support they need, or they struggle to balance the challenges of working remotely, dealing with a job loss, or providing full-time care. Most children and parents felt stressed and disconnected from their usual sources of support and unable to organize learning

[23] National Burau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova. (2020, June)
[24] National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova. (2019)
[25] See for example: Young, B. A. & Smith., T. M (1997); or Hushak, L. J. (1973)
[26] United Nations Moldova. (2016, August 15)

and relaxation activities at home. Working parents could not help reduce children's stress levels as they themselves faced stressful situations, having to manage work and childcare. This is further exacerbated by the absence of policies that regulate flexible working arrangements. As a result of these circumstances, the incidence of domestic violence and abuse is likely to rise. Specialists state that in April 2020 the number of women who requested support in cases of violence from their partners increased by 35 per cent in comparison to March 2020.[27] The MECR data shows that in the first semester of 2020, 3363 cases of violence against children were reported (a modest number due to low reporting rate the Ministry says). The most common form of violence is bullying which is constantly increasing. Physical violence represents about 40%, and psychological counts 27%. Cyberbullying has become a major problem in distance learning.

Data show that violence against children in the Republic of Moldova is pervasive and requires immediate attention.[28] In many instances, those who are supposed to protect children (e.g., parents and guardians, other family members, and teachers and other adults in the community) are the ones committing violence against children. Globally, violence against women and children is on the rise amid the COVID-19 lockdown.[29] Experts say a lack of social activities and financial pressures are increasing rifts within families.

Moreover, COVID-19 may result in further widening of education outcomes for Moldovan students depending on their access and ability to continue to learn remotely. For example, in the 2018 PISA assessment, Moldova's average score in reading was 63 points lower than in the OECD countries; in mathematics, this was 68 points and in science 61 points lower. OECD countries are, on average, better prepared to provide distance learning to their population, meaning that Moldova can expect this gap, which has been gradually reducing over the years, to widen in the next round of assessments. Within Moldova, existing learning gaps that existed already prior to the crisis are also at risk of increasing. Students from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds scored 90 points higher in all the three domains (reading, mathematics and science) than students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. The gap is particularly wide in the *Reading* domain, 102 points. As the latter are less likely to access on-line learning, continued school closure can potentially further widen this gap.

Linked to this, the World Bank estimates that, assuming that a student gains 40 PISA points of learning in a year, that schools are closed for around four months on average, and that remote learning in any country is half as effective as face to face learning, learning in Moldova will drop by the equivalent of 8 PISA points, i.e. from 424 to 416, which represents 20% of the expected learning gain, eroding some of the progress made over the past few years. Moreover, continued school closure can potentially further widen the performance gap between the different socio-economic groups of students. [30]

[27] TVR Moldova. (2020, May 20)
[28] See for example: Violence Against Children in the Republic of Moldova, UNICEF 2007; Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey UNICEF 2012; Violence against Children and Adolescent Study, USAID 2019
[29] Graham-Harrison, Giuffrida, Smith & Ford. (2020, March 28)
[30] World Bank Group. (2020, June 18)

III. Country and development partners' response

Although caught by rather surprise and relatively unprepared for the overnight transformation of the education system, the country's leaders, aided by external partners on the ground, moved quickly to address the challenge. The MECR undertook many activities to ensure that learning continued under the new conditions. MECR, supported by national and international partners, developed a COVID-19 preparedness and response plan, as well as methodologies and regulations for remote education. MECR also launched teachers' training on remote education, positive parenting[31] and video and TV tutorials for the preparation for the national examinations.

MECR also developed an "*Instruction on the organization of psychological assistance for children/pupils, parents and teachers during the suspension of the educational process*"[32], methodological guidelines on healthy lifestyle during quarantine, and subsequently launched an educational programme for psychological assistance for young people, parents, teachers and psycho-pedagogues. To deal with the lack of appropriate IT equipment and connectivity to internet, MECR distributed educational packages for children with disabilities and for children with no access to technologies and on-line informational materials on free on-line resources for distance learning and positive parenting during pandemics and recovery period.[33]

Several initiatives were put in place regarding the digitalization of the education by the public and private sectors. For instance, with the support of Orange Moldova, MECR launched the campaign 'Connecting Teachers'[34]. Moldtelecom[35] and Moldcell[36], in cooperation with MECR provided free internet to teachers for two months. Furthermore, www.educatieonline.md, under the leadership of the Mayoralty of Chisinau and https://invat.online, under the leadership of the Association of ICT Companies are the two examples of education content digitization to facilitate the distance teaching process. The https://studii.md platform, developed prior to the pandemic in 2019 by the private company *Simpals*, and with the support of the UN and the Association of ICT Companies, provides a solution not only for organizing the distance learning but also serves as an instrument for education process management, serving as an example for the digitization of governance in education. By July 2020, over 70 public schools with 77,000 users utilized the platform for learning, evaluation, management, and reporting.

With the evolution of the epidemiological situation, as well as our knowledge and understanding of the nature of COVID-19, its transmission, consequences and how to protect the spread of the disease, there have been growing calls for reopening schools. The response to these calls has varied in different countries. Still, in Moldova, the MECR has developed and proposed seven models for the organization of the education process in the new 2020-2021 school year. Each

[31] Ministry of Education, Culture and Research. (2020, April 21)
[32] Ministry of Education, Culture and Research. (2020, March 27)
[33] Ministry of Education, Culture and Research. (2020, July)
[34] Ministry of Education, Culture and Research. (2020, April 2)
[35] Ministry of Education, Culture and Research. (2020, April 13)
[36] Ministry of Education, Culture and Research. (2020, April 10)

school is advised to select from the proposed models in consultation with the Local Education Authorities and the school community, including parents, teachers and students.[37]

IV. The way forward

One particularly relevant process that will guide the way forward is the elaboration of the 2021-2030 Education Sector Strategy and mid-term Action Plan (2021-2025), which has just been initiated by MECR with support by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and the UN. These important exercises will be based on the findings and recommendations from the Education Sector Analysis completed in 2019 and linked to the National Development Strategy "Moldova 2030", SDG nationalized agenda and the EU Association Agreement. The Strategy will set out a long-term vision for the development of the education sector, covering early childhood education, primary, secondary, higher and vocational education, and including also non-formal education, as well as adult literacy and life-long learning. The Strategy will also build on the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it will devote attention to the aspects of remote learning, preparedness, the capacity of the system and the actors in it, including learners, teachers, parents and all stakeholders.

While acknowledging the considerable number of measures and actions taken by the government, civil society and development partners, there are several gaps that need to be further addressed to deal with the consequences of the learning crisis in an effective way. Below is a list of the most challenging ones, which is not intended to be exhaustive, but addressing all, or at least most of these challenges, would be key if Moldova is to limit the negative consequences of the learning crisis and build back a better education system. These measures also need to take into consideration that schools may possibly remain closed for a longer time, or that even after they open, some may need to close in response to emerging sporadic, localized outbreaks. Whatever the scenario, the response must be agile, effective and resolute, and backed up by adequate resources.

- **IT equipment and infrastructure.** The education system still lacks sufficient equipment and adequate IT infrastructure to deal with problems of such magnitude. An immediate, large scale capital investment in ICT technology and connectivity to ensure full coverage of students and teachers at all levels is essential. Financing such an endeavour is challenging. Hence there is a need for a broad mobilization of donors, international financial institutions, private sector and innovative financing schemes. The proper endowment of all classrooms, with IT equipment and internet connection, is important in order to ensure that what is learned in lockdown is applied in classrooms. Adoption of electronic learning management platforms by schools is a way to make the education process more organized, collaborative and transparent.

[37] For more detailed description of the 7 models please refer to Ministry of Education, Culture and Research website (2020, July 13)

- **Teachers' capacity to apply ICT.** Improved infrastructure and internet access should be coupled with an appropriate investment in developing e-learning tools and strengthening the capacities of everyone involved to maximize learning under these conditions. Teachers and support teaching staff (ex. support teachers, psychologists) need to be equipped with knowledge, not merely technology, to implement the curriculum, monitor student progress and adequately assess performance. A mechanism of coordination among teachers of the curricula and learning tasks in each institution with the aim to optimize the volume of tasks given to a student each day will balance the wellbeing for both students and teachers. Furthermore, teachers should be trained to identify students at risk of non-returning to school and provide catch-up and second chance programmes.

- **Diversifying teaching and learning options**. It is important to remember that a systemic approach to the curriculum will further enhance the diversification of educational provision beyond traditional teaching and learning approaches. Digital learning, through e-learning platforms and tools, is certainly the most advocated choice. Digital content should though be accompanied by other types of media, such as TV, radio and social media to reach out to all students including those lacking e-tools and connectivity

- **Students' assessment**. Appropriate methods should be used to evaluate and validate learning outcomes. Among the resources and courses to be offered remotely, it is important to integrate evaluation at several levels including through: a) immediate, relevant and constructive feedback to learners; b) formative evaluation based on observations, interactions, group discussions, strategic questioning, creative projects and other stimulating evaluation tasks for students; c) graded evaluations; and d) summative evaluations such as end-of-year exams.

- **Expanding the spectrum of skills development among children and youth.** Learners require skills beyond those related to IT, but also how to manage time, adopt healthy and safe behaviours, deal with stress, isolation and anxiety. Without addressing these issues, learning cannot be effective or lasting.

- **Resilient and coordinated educational system.** There is a limited capacity to act in times of crisis and educational emergencies that affect the whole country at once. Response systems and coordination mechanisms that have largely been set up to deal with issues at a smaller scale, now need to be further strengthened to ensure they are able and fully empowered to deal with this crisis and even possible new large scale crisis and educational emergencies in the future. Further guidance and support to reduce the learning gaps and losses are key, as these gaps will continue to widen with each passing day while schools remain closed. There need to be strategies and plans to recover the loss of knowledge, and ensure appropriate school transition, completion, assessments, etc. This is even more complex in the case of children with intellectual, psychosocial and sensory disabilities. Roma children also need special attention.

Preparations for the school reopening need to continue, including infrastructure and WASH conditions in the education institutions. Addressing issues of staff and student safety, protection against COVID-19, strengthened hygiene practices, improved testing and school protocols and standards are essential. But it is also important to note that protocols and norms are dependent, among others on infrastructure and WASH conditions in the education institutions. In the context of the pandemic, when more than ever sanitation and hygienic conditions are crucial, it is the right moment to invest in adapting at least to basic standards the toilets and washing facilities in Moldovan educational institutions. The data show that in half of those over 1,200 schools, children have to go to the toilets outside in the schoolyard. According to the National Public Health Agency in 20.7 percent of schools, the sanitary-technical condition of the toilet is unsatisfactory. More than 80 percent of village schools have toilets only in the yard. A 2016 study revealed that 50% of all pupils (39% of schools) were still exposed to water that was noncompliant with microbiological and chemical standards, 63% of schools (75% in rural areas vs 27% in urban areas) still had an external toilet. Handwashing facilities were generally present but were in the washrooms in only 16% of schools and in the canteen in 48%. They were generally used by a limited number of pupils (including some classes in primary schools).[38]

- **Strengthen the cooperation between the education system and parents' community.** This crisis is likely providing an opportunity for schools to strengthen their ties with families, and for teachers to further enhance the communication and cooperation with parents in the interest of learners. In the same vein, the crisis means teachers and parents may become more involved in decisions regarding curriculum appropriateness. A close cooperation between institutions, teachers, families and communities is crucial for ensuring that the needs of learners and their families are understood. This can support the development of a learner-centred, participative and inclusive learning paradigm that takes into account the interests of learners, as well as their environments and aspirations[39.] There are very limited resources and support mechanisms for families, to equip them and empower them to manage this learning crisis and effectively deal with a protracted school closure. Thus, mechanisms of closer cooperation between the educational system and parents' community should be in place. This is also, and especially true for parents of children with disabilities, parents of Roma children, families in a vulnerable situation and families with many children.

- **There is a need to protect parents financially during the crisis** as a means to reduce pressure on parents and caregivers, and prevent the increase in the incidence of domestic violence and abuse which typically surges in difficult economic times. Moldova's dependence on remittances presents an additional challenge, as it is estimated that about 150,000 labour migrants will return in 2020, which represents 10 per cent of the domestic Moldovan working population, contributing to a rise in unemployment up to 8.5 per cent by the end of 2020.[40] This issue can be addressed through strengthening the social protection mechanisms for these families, but also through the improvement of labour laws and support

38 World Health Organization. (2016)
39 UNESCO. (2020, April)
40 International Organization for Migration. (2020)

to employers who retain their workforce. MECR's further advocacy for that in relations with relevant governmental structures will be important.

- **Psychological wellbeing of students, teachers and parents should be on focus.** There is insufficient outreach through psychological and psychosocial support for children and youth, as well as for teachers and parents to respond to the uncertainty about the future and fear of the unknown. Mechanisms should be put in place for such activities to be scaled up and expanded to ensure a wide reach, not just of those traditionally perceived as high risk, but also to the wider population.

The list of tasks may look overwhelming and impossible to achieve. But as the crisis is truly global, there are significant opportunities to benefit from best practices and tested solutions to adopt and adapt them to the local conditions. These experiences don't only tell what needs to be done, but also how. Here are several to consider:

- **The ample availability of guidance materials** at a global level from expert organizations on the way forward for more resilient education systems. This means time and money can be saved to some extent, also linked to the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goal 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all, in particular targets 4.1 and 4.4.

- **Making investments matter.** There are opportunities to rethink and re-organize the education system to ensure education continues anywhere, anytime. The ad-hoc investments made during the pandemic toward this goal can be the foundation on which more systematic, long-term and sustainable investments in education IT infrastructure, education content and digital infrastructure (system), equitable and inclusive access, quality of learning and physical environment, enhanced capacity of teaching staff, resilience and skills-based health education can be made. At the same time, this is a good opportunity to further upgrade the IT equipment in every school and set-up a scheme for a continuous equipment upgrade and recycling of the old computers (either monetize the value of the old ones, use them for innovative school projects or recycle). Once the equipment and internet connectivity are there, at home, as well as in schools, this shall be used as a prerequisite to automate the school administration process and release teachers from the administrative tasks, leaving more time for teaching. Also, this is a premise to start integrating digital education in the education offer, making it more aligned to the labour market needs.

- **Learning from (our) experience**. The past months may have been tough, but they are also where blueprints for the future can be found, in the experience of students, parents, teachers, administrators and everyone else involved. These experiences need to be harnessed, documented and built into a resilient model for the future, similar to what has been done in other countries experiences from Asia and Africa, where previous epidemics laid the way for quick reactions now.

- **Learning from others and capitalizing on existing solutions.** The fact that so many countries are facing this means that the wealth of experience and innovation that already

took place, and continues to take place elsewhere, can be tapped into, adapted and built upon without the sunk costs that usually go into such efforts. Similarly, we should explore innovative work and developed solutions at the local level, including in the private sector.

- **A task for everyone.** These opportunities need to be seized equally by government and development partners, CSOs, private sector, and all other relevant stakeholders. What is needed is to ensure that everyone's resources and know-how are leveraged in a coordinated way to maximize the benefit that such coordination can yield.

- **More information is needed:** Rapid data collection and analysis on the impact of COVID-19 on children and youth and needs of children and youth, including from vulnerable groups, their families and related professionals is necessary for ensuring evidence-driven programs and interventions. Numerous assessments have been conducted in other countries in the region and beyond, by development partners, including the United Nations and others. These approaches and methodologies should be leveraged and applied to the Moldovan context to accelerate the production of country analyses that are also comparable internationally. The use of equipment for learning and digitization of the education process generates data that can be used to better understand the education process, make correlations, thus supporting better policymaking.

- **Participation is important.** Everyone has the right to participate in decisions related to education, which is one of the key human rights principles. The voice of children, adolescents, youth, their families, legal representatives (individuals and organizations) should be consulted and taken into consideration in the process of shaping the necessary interventions. Frequently this speeds things up, rather than slowing them down. Wide consultations and participation yield ideas and produce solutions that small expert groups may fail to consider. As we are all in this together, everyone should be part of the solution.

V. Conclusion

The COVID-19 related school closure is likely to adversely affect not only learning but also other social aspects such as mental health, violence or deepening social inequalities. The response by the government, civil society and the development partners has been swift and resolute, but there are still gaps and challenges that remain to be addressed. Distance learning experiences so far have provided valuable lessons, including the criticality of the educational system to be able to quickly adapt to various realities. Traditional education should not only be adapted and reformed, but this reform process should embrace opportunities to innovate, and thereby become more open to respond to the current needs of children, young people, including those from vulnerable groups, and the society at large. The new Education Sector Strategy 2021-2030 currently under development and based on the lessons learnt reflected in the Education Sector Assessment (2019), is an excellent opportunity to build a more resilient, nimble and efficient education system that can effectively respond to crises without disruption to learning. The situation could become an opportunity to rethink curriculum, teaching-learning-assessment processes and the development of learners' competencies with a view to strengthening the eLearning skills and sustaining their motivation.

Subsequently, the decision and related investments to partially or fully reopen preschools and schools should be guided by:

- A risk informed approach to maximize the educational, developmental and health benefits for students, teachers, staff, and the wider community, and help prevent a new outbreak of COVID-19 in the community[41];
- A need to strike the right - contextualized - balance between on the one hand supporting the learning of students effectively, and on the other hand ensuring the health, hygiene and safety of students, staff and the community at large;
- A focus on building a resilient education system for the future that entails a system that is not only more robust and better equipped to be prepared to face potential new crises, yet that is also more flexible and agile, while providing a wider range of alternative learning modalities and technologies for all students to learn in safe environments with adequate support for their learning and wellbeing; and
- An effort to further address major divides (including the digital one), and placing a strong focus on flexibility, equity and inclusion, while also reinforcing capacities for risk management and application of innovative solutions.

[41] UNESCO, UNICEF, The World Bank & World Food Programme. (2020, April)

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