The world post-COVID might be the world pre-Incheon—or even pre-Dakar

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Post-COVID-19, the world will never be the same. "Never" may be too strong a word, but certainly it will not be the same for a very long time. It fact, there might not even be a post-COVID-19 world in the sense of ever returning to any form of "normalcy"   Life may be so different -- given the nature of COVID-19 and the magnitude of its impact on the world and its people -- that even imagining what the world will look like in (say) 2030 is an almost impossible task.

Across the development sectors, considerable progress has been made over the last decades: poverty has been much reduced, average life spans increased, maternal and child mortality significantly decreased, gender disparities reduced, and enrolment rates at all levels – including in early childhood development programmes -- increased, usually with concomitant increases in quality. Progress has been -- and is meant to be -- accelerated through the Sustainable Development Goal and their targets, and foundations have been laid since 2015 – some strong, some less strong – for the achievement of many of these targets by many countries of the world.

And then comes COVID-19. The pandemic and all of its impacts -- many still unknown – will have at least four major effects with implications for education:

First, **achievements in virtually all sectors of development will be reversed and even lost.** Maternal, child, and infant mortality will increase; immunisation rates will decrease; food security will be threatened; many families will fall (back) into poverty, no matter what level of basic income is chosen to measure it; and enrolment and completion rates in ECD programmes and schools will fall. Parents may no longer be able to afford to educate their children, and these children may also be needed to supplement their family's income. Parent may also decide to prolong home schooling in face of successive waves of COVID-19 or other pandemics while students may decide themselves not to return to school after their extended break. The only question is whether these losses will take the world back to where it was at the beginning or the end of the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) – or, in the case of education, back to Incheon (2015) or even to Dakar (2000). The hard-won gains, the momentum towards enhanced development, and the strengthened commitments of many governments towards achieving the SDGs are at high risk of being lost.

Second, among survivors, **young children will likely be the most harmed by the pandemic**. With greater vulnerabilities, less resilience, and fewer immunities in the case of health, their nutritional status will be damaged, their sense of security threatened, their health compromised, and their cognitive and social-emotional development seriously disrupted. They will also be more often exposed to toxic home environments -- the result of increased domestic violence and poverty -- in which many of them will not thrive.

Third, **existing disparities in access to social services will be exacerbated by COVID-19**. In health, for example, fewer caregivers and children living in extreme poverty will have access to health care and nutrition programmes. The quality of these programmes will also be reduced due to less government funding, the loss of trained personnel, and the inability of families to pay even the minimal costs of accessing these programmes. And in education:

- **Children with delays and disabilities**, who often had extra support and targeted services in their ECD programmes and primary schools, will not find them at home and so will fall further behind their "abled" peers.

- **Children living in poverty and those living in rural and remote communities** already have less access to the tools required to benefit from online learning/distance education than their richer, more urban peers; in the post-COVID-19 world, their families will be less able to afford the costs of (re-)enrolling them in school and ECD programmes.

- **Girls** will likely be more disadvantaged as well – less likely to go back to school, especially from poor families, with heavier domestic responsibilities and increased chances of pregnancy and early marriage.

- **Children of refugees and migrants** will find a range of challenges – greater stigmatisation as "bearers" of the virus, less access to technology, and learning in programmes even less well-funded than before the pandemic. Children of refugees may be less welcome in schools, and the schools available to them will likely have fewer resources and be of lower quality. Children of migrants who return to their communities with their now unemployed and impoverished parents or who have been "left behind" with extended family members in their home communities will find that whatever education routines they previously had are now disrupted and the quality of education provided to them reduced.

- **Children of ethnic and linguistic minorities** will also suffer. Those who have been trying to learn in classes taught in the national language will fall further behind their national language-speaking peers, and those who have been taught in their mother tongue will likely have neither online lessons nor printed material in this language for use at home.

Fourth**, early childhood education and development will suffer more than other levels of education.** This sub-sector is already fragile in many countries of the world, and the pandemic will only increase its fragility. Government-supported schools and kindergartens will likely keep their teachers (though perhaps with less pay) during the pandemic and re-open after. But many non-elite private schools and community-based ECD programmes have already closed; without a salary, their staff have left and the ECD workforce capacity, enhanced over many years, will be seriously eroded by the pandemic.

In addition, because parents already have, and will continue to have, less money than before the pandemic, they will be less likely in the future to enroll their children in fee-paying ECD programmes even if they understand their advantages. Thus, disparities between children continuing to participate in good quality ECD programmes and living in supportive and stimulating home environments and children are not enrolled and who spend their days at home without constructive interaction and learning will continue – and perhaps accelerate -- into the future. The slow but steady increase in enrollment in ECD programmes around the world over the last two decades will be halted and even reversed when life returns to "normal", returning the sub-sector to the low status and multiple challenges it faced a decade and more ago.

One of the reasons for the expected downward trend in enrolment and the quality of education – even more pronounced in terms of early childhood development – is that Ministries of Education may well be satisfied when the closures are over and think that the problem has been solved – when, in fact, they have only begun. In other words, when some sense of normalcy is regained, many policy makers and politicians will act as if it is business as usual. And, of course, it won't be. Facilities and systems will have suffered from disuse, children's learning will have been disrupted, and teachers will be demoralised and demotivated and perhaps have even left the profession. The challenge will therefore be to return formal education

and ECD programmes to where they were pre-COVID-19 and to make them strong enough to improve even further in the future (e.g., achieving the targets of SDG4).

The possible solutions to these dramatic challenges must necessarily be equally dramatic. The problem is that the discourse around the impact of the pandemic on education focuses largely on immediate responses (e.g., the need for online teaching and the development of distance learning materials) and not on addressing the longer-term impacts of the pandemic on access to, and the quality of, education – especially in relation to reversing the development gains of the last decades and exacerbating the disparities which currently exist. When there is a discussion on how to re-open and manage schools, the main focus has largely been on the mechanics and logistics of re-opening – which grades return first, how to handle grading and examinations, how to keep some kind of social distancing in the classroom, etc. There has been virtually no discussion of solutions to the challenges mentioned above.

But some solutions can be imagined; for example –

- **moving the discourse around the opening of schools** away from logistical issues to its larger challenges, especially those related to the increasing inequities and exclusion resulting from COVID-19

- **assessing more exactly the nature and magnitude of the pandemic's impacts** on achieving the SDGs and, in relation to SDG4, each of its targets (with special reference to 4.2 on early childhood development)

- **ensuring that those most disadvantaged – most subject to increased disparities in education --- are given high priority** in any preparation for and management of the re-opening of schools and ECD programmes; thus, priority should be given (1) to community-based schools and ECD programmes to ensure that they do re-open and that they can attract back the workforce that previously supported them and (2) to the most affected families to ensure that they (re)enroll their children in these programmes and keep them there

- **promoting educational activities that have be proven to be effective with disadvantaged and vulnerable children** during the pandemic; e.g., home based learning kits, supplementary reading materials and exercise books for children without internet access, photos of homework sent to teachers by mobile phone, free educational programme streaming, apps for home based testing and exams, etc.

- **designing programmes for specific groups of disadvantaged and excluded children** (1) to guarantee that they not only resume their education but also can make up for the developmental and educational disruption that they

have suffered and (2) to address the gaps that have increased in relation to their advantaged and "included" peers; that is:

- o extra support to children with delays and disabilities upon re-entering ECD programmes and schools to help ensure that they quickly return to – and then go beyond – their developmental and educational attainments pre-COVID-19 in order to negate the gap between them and their abled peers

- o extra academic support to ensure that students who have not been able to follow mandated online and distance education programmes – particularly children in remote areas, living in poverty, and as refugees and migrants -- catch up to students who have had access to such technology

- o extra efforts to ensure that girls return to their ECD programmes and schools

- o psycho-social support to help children better handle the stress, anxiety, and trauma resulting from the restrictions demanded by COVID-19

- **ensuring strong support to teachers** in recognition of the challenges they have faced (often with no or reduced pay) and encouraging them, in regard to the post-COVID-19 transition back to school, to give attention to the most disadvantaged children whose development and education will have been disrupted more than that of their older and more advantaged peers

- **providing support to school leaders** who will play an essential role in managing the re-opening of schools with special attention to those managing the transition problems of schools in poor/remote/disadvantaged areas

- **adjusting government budgets for ECD programmes and schools** to meet the needs of those children who have been particularly affected by the pandemic. Providing funds to reach the hard-to-reach in "normal" times is already difficult – providing more funds to ensure that disadvantaged children do not fall further behind will be essential.

- **ensuring that any additional funds for re-opening schools are not simply per capita/student but rather are based on the** needs of different locations and groups. In fact, it could be argued that in any phased approach to re-opening schools and ECD programmes, disadvantaged children should return first – a return therefore based not on students' grade levels or examination status but rather on the nature and urgency of their needs.

Sheldon Shaeffer

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