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Economic and **Soc**ial Committee: Topic 2

Providing Quality Education in a Time of Physical Distancing - SDG 4

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Background:

The first case of COVID-19 was reported in Wuhan City, China in December 2019. Those infected by the virus experience respiratory issues, fever, headaches, and possible loss of taste and smell. While for most, with special treatment, the virus does little to no damage, for older people and those with underlying medical conditions, this can become a serious illness that can lead to complications and death. It is spread through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes. As nations around the globe reported COVID-19 cases, government officials took part in creating regulations in order to avoid further transmission of the virus. In most nations, these adjustments were established to reduce close contact between its citizens including regulations such as wearing masks, maintaining a two-meter distance from others when possible and, in extreme cases, to remain at home and avoid leaving if not for strictly necessary activities. Locations where people would normally gather such as bars, restaurants and gyms were the first to be shut down. Although most countries attempted to maintain schools open for as long as possible, to avoid harming the educations of its younger generations, they found themselves having to shut them down as they were inevitably high risk places as keeping the required distance became increasingly hard.

The Covid-19 pandemic created a large disruption in education systems affecting 1.6 billion learners in over 190 countries. 94% of the world's student population was affected by the closure of schools, 99% of them being in low or lower-middle income countries. This highlighted the disparities already present among students. Those living in poor or rural areas, girls, refugees and people with disabilities were those who struggled the most, either as a result of not having access to online schooling or having a greater necessity of in-person aid. It is particularly worsening the situation in Sub-Saharan African countries that hold 47% of the world's out-of-school children. The closing of schools not only impacts the students and their future in learning, but also hampers other aspects of life such as their access to nutritious food (for many poor children the cafeteria meal is the highest quality of the day), the ability of parents to work due to childcare, and a risk of violence against women required to stay home.

In an attempt to continue the school curriculum, third-world country governments asked that, where possible, learning proceed in other forms. This has stimulated innovation in the education sector, which was obliged to reinvent itself on online platforms as well as radio and televisions. Many students engaged in online schooling using platforms such as Zoom, GoogleMeet and Teams to virtually interact with their teachers and classmates. Nevertheless, the increasing time spent in front of computer screens and the inability to interact with people outside of one's family circle has proven to fatigue and demotivate students that find themselves more distracted and underperforming online. Overall, Covid-19 has had a drastic effect on school systems worldwide making education even more faulty and inaccessible than it was prior to the pandemic.

Current Situation:

Over 100 countries have not yet announced a date in which they will be reopening schools. Although many nations are working on the creation of the vaccine, the situation does not look like it will return to a normal state for almost a year. Economically and socially, it will take even longer to be able to recover fully. UNESCO estimates that as a result of the pandemic, 23.8 million children may drop out or not have access to school next year. Many who drop out might never return as they find other jobs or ways to occupy their time, missing out of the education that would open better future opportunities.

In high income countries 80% of students are using distanced learning but this drops to 50% in low income countries. This is a result of the digital divide which does not supply students and teachers with the correct devices to be able to access or create content.

Important bloc positions:

- *Sub-Saharan and Low-Income Countries:* The pandemic has highlighted the already present digital divide. Returning to school is crucial as it is very hard for students to continue with their curriculum online as they do not have access to the tools they need to do so. Having an under-educated generation would set these countries even further back in the global community, not helping with their pre-existing social and economic problems.

- *European Union (EU):* Bringing students back into the classrooms is crucial as the setbacks of distance learning do show on students. Nevertheless, most students have access to the internet and most schools were able to organize themselves in online format. Although this is not considered optimal and there is great urgency to bring students back into classrooms, there is a higher focus on safety.

Possible solutions:

- Create a UN fund to distribute aid to schooling systems most in need.
- Ensure a safety plan in which students are subdivided into groups that show up to school on alternate days in order to maintain physical distancing.
- National financing of schools in order to provide better content and platforms for its students.
- Create the necessary tools for learners with disabilities and their families.
- Provide psychological support to students who are struggling with isolation and overwhelmed by the situation.
- Provide students and schools with access to only learning platforms for free.

Further reading:

- How covid-19 is interrupting children's education
- Educational technology is coming of age during the pandemic
- UN Briefing of Education during COVID
- Unesco Solutions for Distance Learning
- European Data Portal
- Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development

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