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Population, education and sustainable development

Statement submitted by Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council[1]

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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[1] The present statement is issued without formal editing.

Statement

The Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW), welcomes the theme of the 56th session of the Commission on Population and Development "Population, Education and Sustainable Development". The theme is pertinent given that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a major disruption and crisis in education within Asia and the Pacific countries, as well as globally. More than one academic year has been lost for many children, adolescents and young people, with life-changing negative consequences, including an increase in gender-based violence and harmful traditional practices such as child marriages, especially among marginalised communities.

According to UNESCO estimates, about 12 million children from pre-primary to university level will drop out from school in South and West Asia as a result of the pandemic, with pre-primary affected most profoundly. In the East Asia and Pacific region, almost 1.2 million girls are at risk of not returning to school. Across the region, girls, children with disabilities, and pre-primary children, especially those with no or limited access to technology, were particularly disadvantaged by the move to remote learning (UNESCO and UNICEF 2021).

The adaptation to varied modes of remote learning, such as digital, blended and hybrid, has further affected marginalised groups due to the digital divide. The provision of such education did not reach everyone. The extended period of school closures has contributed to potentially increasing the number of drop-outs across the region. This has impacted learning levels, with vulnerable children, adolescents and young people at a further disadvantage as a result of heightening pre-existing inequalities.

Furthermore, education seekers were deprived of services associated with schools, such as for children with disabilities, feeding, and immunization programmes. (UNESCO and UNICEF, 2021). Additionally, across the region, the level of disruption to essential services was uneven. Lack of access to services, including routine immunization, diagnosis and treatment of noncommunicable disease (NCD), provision of sexual and reproductive health services, and treatment for mental health disorders have further aggravated poor access to education.

Findings from a study with 3,304 respondents in India including, groups such as young mothers from low-income migrant communities, young people including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer, intersex, asexual (LGBTIQA) youth, youth living with HIV (YPLWHIV) and young people living with disabilities, pointed to 56 per cent of the respondents losing interest in education. A total of 16 per cent dropped out of school, and 25 per cent changed their career paths and/or plans for higher education. Almost 30 per cent of the respondents shared that during the COVID-19 lockdown they did not have access to digital learning platforms to ensure the continuity of their learning. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, most young people did not have access to comprehensive sexuality education in school, and COVID-19 has worsened this further. (Pravah & Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women, 2022).

It is more important than ever now to reaffirm our commitment to education, including comprehensive sexuality education, as a fundamental human right, and reaffirm our commitment to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality and holistic education. There is an urgent need to reimagine and transform education and its systems to become more equitable, inclusive, relevant, flexible, and resilient, and address the current learning crisis, build more peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable societies, and realise Sustainable Development Goal 4 with meaningful youth participation. (APREMC, 2022).

Our Recommendations

Education and its systems must be transformed to become resilient and prepared for future shocks, address inequalities and the learning crisis, and contribute to peaceful, inclusive, equitable and sustainable futures for humanity and the planet. Such transformation requires a holistic and systemic reform that entails the review and strengthening of its interlinked components across policy, planning, financing, and implementation through consultative and participatory processes. Such education should address all forms of exclusion, disparity, and inequality in access to education and learning, based on age, sex, gender, socio-economic status, language, nationality, religion, caste, geographical location, disability, culture, citizenship status and health status, among others (APREMC-II.2022). Barriers to accessing education and learning for persons with disabilities, ethnic and linguistic minorities, girls, and children living in extreme poverty and/or in remote locations and those from refugee and migrant families must be eliminated.

Curricula must be re-designed to provide learners with foundational, digital, 21st century and socioemotional competencies, and the delivery of education for sustainable development, global citizenship and comprehensive sexuality education must be strengthened.

Digital learning opportunities need to be improved, especially for people who have less access. Internet access, technological devices and other needs of students and teachers need to be fulfilled to ensure that nobody is left behind. Also, protection and security for the online community is needed. Rights-based laws and regulations need to be promoted to regulate data privacy and ensure digital security for young people of all ages (APFSD Youth Call to Action 2022).

Various mechanisms and networks that can help people go back to normal life, especially children and youth who grew used to online communication and therefore lack in-person communication skills, must be strengthened. Help is needed from educational institutions in order to accelerate social and emotional recovery, with a mental health focus, as we build back better from the pandemic. (APFSD Youth Call to Action. 2022).

Comprehensive sexuality education should be incorporated into school curricula. It must be funded and should address comprehensive topics in a more open and free manner. To implement more quality gender and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) education, society as a whole has to create a safe and healthy space for discussions on gender and SRHR. (APFSD Youth Call to Action. 2022).

Prioritise and protect financing of public education in national budgets and progressively increase financing of education to adhere to the minimum benchmark of 4-6 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product and/or 15-20 per cent of total public expenditure according to the country context. Strengthen social protection measures to enable children of vulnerable and poor families (including single parents and families with persons with disabilities) through financial assistance, social programmes and labour flexibility and support so that the children are able to achieve quality education. (APFSD Youth Call to Action, 2022)

Increase financial investment in quality education for all and deploy adequate resources to enable the following:

(a).   Strengthening of contingency plans for education systems by:

      a.   encouraging the hybrid mode of teaching and examination.

      b.   introducing systems that monitor the functionality of the introduced concepts and solutions.

(b).   Curriculum changes need to be made so that they include courses relating to sustainable development, gender and climate education so as to foster an innovative young generation. In this regard, separate budgetary allocations can be made for electronic devices and resources.

(c).   Multilingual education and accessible education for students with disabilities should be provided and this must be accommodated while giving virtual classes so that classes can be organized in local languages.

(d).   Introduction of incentive programmes to bring children back to school, like the Mid Day Meal Schemes (currently in practice in some countries) and incentives to promote education of girls, young people from indigenous communities, and other marginalised communities.

Strengthen legal frameworks and ensure that education sector plans, policies and strategies are inclusive, equitable and gender-transformative, coupled with equity-based budget allocations;

Establish flexible learning pathways with multiple re-entry points at all ages and educational levels, and the recognition, accreditation and validation of alternative education, in particular for out-of-school children, adolescents and adults.

Enhance cross-sectoral collaboration between health, education and other relevant ministries, local governments, communities, and parents to ensure inclusive and protective learning environments in and around schools, delivering adequate services and preparing for future risks, including climate change and other humanitarian disasters.

Empower local-level decision-making and planning and improve capacity to develop and implement local contextualised responses, in particular in emergency situations and to support school quality improvement and resilience.

Promote education for sustainable development throughout education levels, harnessing local and indigenous knowledge in educational programmes to respond to climate change, and facilitate sustainable development and peace building. Develop safe, inclusive, gender-just, climate-protective and stimulating learning environments which foster learners' health and psycho-social well-being so that all children and young people have the required conditions to learn and thrive.

Develop regulations and safeguards regarding learning technologies so that education remains a public good, accessible to all learners, with safe and secure use of digital technology and protection of their privacy.

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