REGIONAL FORUM ON EDUCATION POLICY 2021:

How to use information systems in education policymaking

Virtual edition, 3-5 November 2021

1. Background and context

The general objective of the **Regional Forum on Education Policy** is to create each year a space for policy debate, consultation and reflection among education policymakers of the Latin American and Caribbean countries, focusing on the policy implications of the Education 2030 Agenda and on effective strategies for its implementation, in order to strengthen the capacities of UNESCO Member States in the region.

In May 2015, UNESCO, together with UNICEF, the World Bank, UNFPA, UNDP, UN Women and UNHCR, organized the **World Education Forum 2015** in Incheon, Republic of Korea. More than 1,600 participants from 160 countries – including 120 ministers, heads and members of delegations, heads of agencies, officials of multilateral and bilateral organizations, and representatives of civil society, the teaching profession, youth, and the private sector – adopted the **Incheon Declaration for Education 2030**, which presented a new vision for education for the next 15 years.

In September of that same year, the UN General Assembly adopted the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**, which set out 17 goals with 169 integrated and indivisible targets related to the economy, society, and environment. These 17 **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs) were developed over the course of more than two years of public consultations, interaction with civil society, and negotiations among Member States.

Considering the interconnected nature of the 17 SDGs, success in achieving them depends to a large extent on educational outcomes. The importance of education within the 2030 Agenda is manifested in the existence of a specific goal, **SDG 4,** to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. Furthermore, the SDGs include education-related targets within other goals concerning

health, economic growth and employment, consumption and sustainable production, and climate change. Together with SDG 4, these targets constitute the **Education 2030 Agenda**.

For the purpose of developing a roadmap for the implementation of SDG 4, in November 2015, 184 UNESCO Member States adopted the [Education 2030 Framework for Action](#) in Paris, which in turn was the product of a collective process of broad, in-depth consultations driven and led by the countries themselves and facilitated by UNESCO and other partners.

The Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) countries reasserted this global commitment in the [Buenos Aires Declaration](#) of January 2017, which addressed the main socio-economic and educational challenges of the region, described the governing principles and strategic objectives for the achievement of SDG 4 and the Education 2030 Agenda, and provided an action-oriented guide for Member States and the education community. These commitments were confirmed in July 2018, in the [Cochabamba Agreements](#) and the [Roadmap for the implementation of SDG4-Education 2030](#), during the Second Regional Meeting of Ministers of Education of the region.

The LAC countries made significant advances towards the achievement of the Education 2030 Agenda in those early years. However, since the beginning of 2020, our region, along with the rest of the world, has been devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused an unprecedented health crisis and the consequent closure (partial or total, depending on the location) of schools and other educational centres. Although the impact on education of the prolonged suspension of face-to-face classes, and the economic crises related to the health emergency are still not fully known, it is very likely that there has been a slowdown in progress towards achieving Education 2030 Agenda and SDG 4 ([UNESCO, 2020](#)). Furthermore, the human, social and economic impact of the pandemic has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable and marginalized populations, further accentuating pre-existing inequalities ([UN, 2020](#)).

Recent estimates from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) conclude that around 165 million students in the LAC region were affected by the interruption of classes at the height of the pandemic ([ECLAC-UNESCO, 2020](#)). According to the same institute, in 2019, about 12 million school-aged people in the region were out of school, and it is estimated that this figure may have increased by 2 million between 2020 and 2021 ([UNICEF LACRO](#)).

To address this global challenge, the **Global Education Meeting** (GEM 2020) was held in October 2020. It was organized by UNESCO with the purpose of boosting education as a catalytic force for an inclusive recovery and sustainable development after the ravages of the pandemic. Representatives of Member States, as well as other actors of the international education community, agreed to 'protect the financing of the education sector and the implementation of priority actions necessary to build societies and education systems that are more resilient, flexible, inclusive and sensitive to gender issues' (*GEM 2020 Declaration*, p.1).

The GEM 2020 participants ratified their commitment to the SDG Education 2030 Agenda. Similarly, the GEM 2020 opened a dialogue about the **Global Education Cooperation Mechanism** (better known by its acronym, GCM) to support countries in accelerating progress towards the achievement of SDG 4, within a context of recovery from the pandemic. This dialogue led to an extensive process of consultation, reflection, and analysis, as well as a proposal to strengthen the GCM through a reform of the **SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee**. The three main functions of this new committee will be the following:

- **To promote the development and implementation of evidence-based policies.** This function includes providing leadership to recommend priority actions to accelerate progress towards achieving SDG 4, based on evidence, knowledge and lessons learned, to overcome obstacles to achieving the SDG 4 targets. Likewise, it will foster the effective use of evidence to develop appropriate policies and implementation strategies at national level.
- **To monitor progress and improve the availability and use of data and information.** This function implies ensuring the supervision, follow-up and review of the provisions for the SDG 4-Education 2030 Agenda as well as supporting all actors involved to fulfil their commitments. Likewise, the creation of a Global Education Observatory is proposed and, with the support of UIS, the establishment of regional and national benchmarks, as a framework to identify and support national actions aimed at achieving SDG 4.
- **To boost finance mobilization and improve its alignment.** This function includes advocating for the mobilization and best use of national and international financing for education in pursuit of agreed priorities, by confirming renewed commitments, pressing for harmonization and alignment, advocating for innovative finance sources, and promoting efficiency and equity in education expenditure.

Alongside these advances, on 13 July 2021, the **2021 Global Education Meeting's Ministerial Segment** was held with the slogan 'from recovery to accelerating SDG 4 progress'. At this meeting, the alliances and innovations mobilized at a global scale by the education community in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were surveyed, in order to reinforce a sustainable, resilient and inclusive recovery in pursuit of the Education 2030 Agenda.

Aligned with the global education priorities of UNESCO and the international community, the 2021 edition of **the Regional Forum for Education Policy** will seek to support the countries of the region in deepening the use of education information systems to improve the planning and management of education policy, accelerating the recovery from the pandemic and the achievement of the Education 2030 Agenda goals.

2. The use of information systems in education policymaking

By ratifying SDG 4, the countries of the world made a commitment to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Over the past two decades, the Latin American and the Caribbean region has made important advances in this regard. The reforms carried out in the first

decades of the 21st century promoted the extension of the compulsory education cycle from preschool to upper secondary school. These were complemented by social policies that mainly benefitted historically neglected and excluded sectors. In all the countries of the region, significant improvements were achieved in almost all education indicators, which showed progress for women, Afro-descendants, indigenous people, migrants, and people from rural areas, people with disabilities, and those living in poverty.

Indeed, there was, during those two decades, a significant expansion of the universalisation of schooling, a necessary – but hardly sufficient – condition to ensure the right to education. In this context, the challenge of continuing to expand access to education is compounded by the need to address the various gaps and inequalities that persist in Latin America, which were exacerbated by the pandemic and imply an unequal distribution of opportunities to access education and to sustain educational pathways.

The crisis in education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted and deepened the need for information as a critical input for planning in crisis contexts. The new emergency scenario created new demands and tensions in information systems, which had to produce and expand their survey and analysis dimensions. Therefore, it is imperative to contemplate the lessons learned from this experience and asses the integration challenges of the information systems dynamics that were in place before the pandemic.

At this point, **Educational Management Information Systems** (EMIS) take on particular relevance as instruments to ensure the right to education for the entire population. Many countries of the region have various information systems on education that often have different origins. The very definition of EMS in each country acquires different criteria and categories and includes different types of information on various dimensions of the education system. Usually, these types of information are produced within the Ministries of Education, but they are also produced elsewhere, and present different levels of integration with each other. Based on this premise, in the Regional Forum the concept of SIGEd will be understood in its broadest possible sense.

Decision-makers in education systems will find, in in the use of such information, fundamental inputs to shape pertinent, sustainable and evidence-based education policies. These policies can provide adequate accountability and essential contributions to enrich knowledge and identify key areas for intervention and innovation. Empirical evidence is an essential tool to understand the factors that cause and influence inequities in education, as well as to analyse them and provide reflective elements that allow their interpretation and modification. Furthermore, the production of information makes it possible to follow up and assess the progress of national, regional and global goals – especially those established by SDG 4 – and it is an indispensable resource for the modernization of management processes in education systems.

The importance of EMIS invites us to reflect upon a series of challenges that these systems are currently facing in Latin America and the Caribbean, and encourages us to develop actions to achieve improvements towards their development, strengthening and use for informed decision-making.

The **first challenge** for the region is to improve the production of information. This stems from the realization that, although most of the countries in the region have some sort of educational information system, progress is very heterogeneous in terms of information production, data sources, frequency, scope and quality, and security of the information. In addition, we find challenges in terms of pertinence, periodicity, availability, relevance and timely dissemination of the available data. The latter becomes an important challenge given the difficulty for information systems to keep pace with management educational systems. In some cases, the resulting lag and mismatch leads to the information not being used, followed by an arbitrary decision-making process.

In addition, it is crucial to make greater efforts in coordinating various information systems and existing data-bases to obtain a more comprehensive and heterogeneous diagnosis of the society in general and the education system in particular, with the purpose of better responding to multidimensional problems. The combination or interoperability between education information systems and other information systems related to health, social protection or living conditions is key for addressing problems that require a comprehensive view of different social dimensions, especially in the case of excluded populations. Information systems should be capable of raising awareness of historically excluded population groups and, in turn, account for the different forms that social inequality and cultural diversity take in each territory, in order to understand, monitor, and intervene on the causes of these inequities.

A **second challenge** is to ensure the necessary (or at least propitious) conditions for functional and effective EMIS. Although these may vary, it is essential to consider the following key factors: an educational data policy or legal framework, technological infrastructure and capabilities, digital platforms and processing methods, and technical and financial human resources. Likewise, protection, privacy and security should be at the heart of the efforts to increase data sharing, availability, and accessibility, to promote accountability and feedback loops, while protecting the interest and safety of the communities (UNESCO, 2021).

A **third challenge** is the need to strengthen strategies for the use of information. The growth and increasing sophistication of information systems has not always been accompanied by greater or better use of the out-comes. There is a growing discussion about the underuse of information for policymaking, but also, to nurture research projects that, ultimately, also feed policy decision making. Finally, a better production and management of the information will strengthen the monitoring of the progress of Agenda 2030, establish regional and national interim targets (benchmarks), and produce knowledge from and for the region. This challenge takes on particular relevance in a context of scarce resources, where education systems require solid arguments based on quantitative and qualitative information for a better use in terms of equity and efficiency.

3. The Regional Forum on Education Policy 2021

In view of these complex challenges faced by ministries of education and other regulatory institutions of the countries of the region, UNESCO, through its co-organizing offices, seeks to provide a platform to *enrich the*

debate on the role of information systems in education policymaking to fight exclusion in education and promote fairer and more equitable societies.

The 2021 edition of the **Regional Forum** will provide participants with a timely and necessary platform to rethink and improve the link between information systems and the formulation, management, monitoring and assessment of policies. The Forum will offer a virtual space for dialogue and reflection with the aim of fostering the generation of strategies towards the achievement of the Education 2030 Agenda. To increase participant accessibility, simultaneous interpretation in Spanish, Portuguese and English will be provided.

The Forum will open with an **inaugural conference**, which will summarize UNESCO's position regarding the importance of EMIS for the fulfilment of the Education 2030 Agenda. Subsequently, the event will be structured around two main types of activities: **panels and workshops**.

During the **panels**, the axes defined as thematic cores will be addressed. Panels will be led by specialists, and in some cases, will include the participation of representatives of other international organizations or, in exceptional cases, of ministries of education in Latin American and Caribbean countries.

The **first panel** will reflect on the **current state of the information systems in the region's ministries of education**. The focus will be a diagnosis of the production of information. What kind of information is available in the ministries of education? Is there a good articulation or a fluid dialogue between the various types of information? In which aspects were there improvements and in which do weaknesses need to be identified? Likewise, the focus will be **on the need to build sensitive information systems that give visibility to and allow the diagnosis of exclusion phenomena** in the educational systems of the region, as well as their capacity for resilience, flexibility and adaptation to crises.

A **second panel** will focus on **how to establish propitious conditions so that information systems for educational management are functional and effective**. Although the countries of the region have information systems, these are sometimes comprised of fragmented, dispersed, barely digitized and automated information; insufficient technical human resources; and low-quality data. Likewise, there is a gap between information production times and the urgency of decision-makers to access this information to keep up with the management of educational systems. What are the recommendations to strengthen these information systems, to make them solid, relevant and effective?

The **third panel** will be essential to dive deeper into the main objective of the Regional Forum: the use of EMIS for the planning and management of education policies. The effective use of the produced information, its scope, and its limitations will be addressed. The focus will be on questions such as: **How are educational information, and other types of information, used?** And **what types of information are used and to what end?** In this space, we will reflect on the need for the EMIS to inform the decision making process, emphasizing their importance in crisis contexts, such as the one caused by COVID-19.

The second part of the Forum will involve a series of workshops. These will collect what was discussed in the panels, and will be organized to allow reflection and debate on the specific challenges posed by the use of EMIS in the process of education policymaking.

Workshops will focus on recommendations with the purpose of promoting a better use of information in the planning and management of educational systems**. How to strengthen the education policymaking cycle in its different stages through the use of EMIS?** This point is of great relevance, given that EMIS can be very useful for identifying existing problems as well as for designing and formulating public policies. Moreover, the use of data can inform Member States' implementation of policies while supporting their monitoring and evaluation.

The three workshop sessions will focus on the use of EMIS in the various stages of the education policymaking cycle:

1. *Diagnosis and formulation of education policies*
2. *Implementation and monitoring of education policies*
3. *Mid-term and impact assessment of education policies.*

Additionally, the Regional Forum will have a virtual space where participants will be able to watch videos recorded by those countries of the region that wish to share experiences related to the thematic axes of the Forum. This online repository of national initiatives will also allow participants to engage in dialogue with their peers through tools for asynchronous interaction (forum and comments).

The Regional Forum on Education Policy 2021 will conclude with a **plenary session**, to discuss the policy recommendations emerging from the panels and workshops, in order to propose possible priority lines of action to promote the production and use of data for the planning and management of educational systems in the region, and for monitoring progress in compliance with the 2030 Agenda.

4. Organizing entities and participants

The annual organization of the **Regional Forum on Education Policy** is part of UNESCO's effort to support the Member States of Latin America and the Caribbean in the implementation of the Education 2030 Agenda commitments. Consequently, the 2021 edition of the Regional Forum will be jointly organized by the Office for Latin America of UNESCO's **International Institute for Educational Planning** (IIEP), the UNESCO **Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean** (OREALC/UNESCO Santiago), the UNESCO **Institute for Statistics** (UIS), UNESCO's **Division for Education 2030** and UNESCO'S **Division for Policies and Lifelong Learning Systems**.

The Regional Forum aims to provide a space for dialogue between education policymakers and other actors in the region. The meeting will be open to:

- Education policymakers of the Latin American and Caribbean States.
- Specialists in education policy.
- Representatives and education specialists from UNESCO.
- Representatives and education specialists from other international organizations.
- Representatives and education specialists of sub-regional organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Representatives and education specialists from civil society organizations in the region.

5. Event dynamics

Due to travel restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 edition of the Regional Forum will be held virtually during three days, through a videoconferencing tool.

To balance other professional activities during this time, the Forum participants will be requested to devote a total of 10.15 hours to the event, distributed as follows:

- 1 1/2 hours on Wednesday, 3 November (to attend the opening remarks and the inaugural session).
- 4 1/2 hours on Thursday, 4 November (to attend the workshop session 1 and 2).
- 4.15 hours on Friday, 5 November (to attend workshop session 3, and a closing plenary session).

Additionally, all participants of the Regional Forum will be invited to join any of the three panels, which will take place on Wednesday, 3 November.

6. Preliminary agenda

Shaded areas correspond to optional activities.

Wednesday, November 3

GMT - 6	GMT - 5	GMT - 4	GMT - 3	Activities
8:00-8:30	9:00-9:30	10:00-10:30	11:00-11:30	**Opening remarks** - *(duration: 30 minutes)*
8:30-9:30	9:30-10:30	10:30-11:30	11:30-12:30	**Inaugural presentation** - How information systems contribute to the process of education policymaking around the world and in the region *(duration: 1 hour)*
10:00-11:30	11:00-12:30	12:00-13:30	13:00-14:30	**Panel 1** – How are the current information systems in education in Latin America and the Caribbean *(duration: 1.30 hours)*
12:00-13:00	13:00-14:00	14:00-15:00	15:00-16:00	**Panel 2** – Propitious conditions to build functional and effective information systems in education *(duration: 1 hour)*
13:30-15:00	14:30-16:00	15:30- 17:00	16:30-18:00	**Panel 3** – Uses of information systems for education policymaking *(duration: 1.30 h)*

Thursday, November 4

GMT - 6	GMT - 5	GMT - 4	GMT - 3	Activities
8:00-10: 15	9:00-11: 15	10:00-12:15	11:00-13:15	**Workshop session 1** – The use of information systems in the diagnosis of education systems, and in the design and formulation of education policies *(duration: 2.15 h)*
11:00-13: 15	12:00-14: 15	13:00-15:15	14:00-16:15	**Workshop session 2** – The use of information systems in the implementation and monitoring of education policies *(duration: 2.15 h)*

Friday, November 5

GMT - 6	GMT - 5	GMT - 4	GMT - 3	Activities
8:00-10:15	9:00-11:15	10:00-12:15	11:00-13:15	**Workshop session 3** – The use of information systems in the assessment of education policies *(duration: 2.15 h)*
11:00-13:00	12:00-14:00	13:00-15:00	14:00-16:00	**Plenary session and closing** – Final conclusions *(duration: 2 h)*