Ensuring the right to quality inclusive education for persons with disabilities:

From commitment to action

Virtual Symposium co-hosted by UNESCO, Leonard Cheshire and the Ministry of Education of Portugal on the occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

Date

25-27 November 2020

Format

This virtual symposium will run over 2.5 days and will follow a blended approach to enhance participation and involvement. It will include panellists from selected countries and organizations around the world.

Background

Addressing inclusive education is of utmost priority if we want to meet the targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This is even more urgent in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is considerably hampering equal opportunities for educational progress and lifelong learning. We are a long way from ensuring that all people, irrespective of their sex, age, race or ethnicity, ability, location, or other social characteristics, have equal rights to access and benefit from quality education.

Out of all vulnerable groups, persons with disabilities are most at risk of exclusion and marginalisation within society and more specifically in educational settings. For persons with disabilities of all ages, the main challenge is the lack of opportunity to attend educational institutions and schools in their home communities, together with their peers without disabilities. This is deemed important, first and foremost since it provides learners with the fullest realisation of their right to education. It is also the most efficient and cost-effective means to ensuring the fulfilment of this right and to laying the basis for an inclusive society.

The UNESCO 2020 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report on Inclusion and Education highlights that "in the case of students with disabilities, laws in 25% of countries (but over 40% in Asia and in Latin America and the Caribbean) make provisions for education in separate settings, 10% for integration and 17% for inclusion, the remainder opting for combinations of segregation and mainstreaming."[1]

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[1] Inclusion and education: all means all, Global Education Monitoring Report, UNESCO, 2020

A Background Paper on Disability and Inclusive Education also indicates that "the road to inclusive education is congested with challenges, from weak governance to lack of resources, from privatization to the proliferation of separate education systems in the name of quality education".[2]

Large-scale exclusion of children with disabilities remains the reality in many UNESCO Member States. An estimated 32 million, or 1 in 3 children, with disabilities are out of school.

In 2020, the large-scale exclusion of children with disabilities has been exacerbated by COVID-19. In many countries the pandemic has further reduced access to education and learning opportunities and, as schools start to reopen, there is significant cause for concern that children with disabilities will be left behind again.

COVID-19, however, can also be seen as an opportunity for increased inclusion of children with disabilities as students, parents, teachers and schools have had to adapt by finding innovative ways to address the learning needs of out-of-school learners. These positive dimensions must be harnessed to increase the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream educational settings.

The seminar is organized on the occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (3 December) and in follow up to the International Forum on inclusion and equity in education - Every learner matters (Cali, Colombia, September 2019). It will focus on the reasons for continued exclusion and inequitable educational provision experienced by children with disabilities. Emphasis will be placed on the impacts of distance learning for children with disabilities during COVID-19 as well as their transition back to the classrooms after an extended period of time at home. It will also explore how the inclusion of learners with disabilities in inclusive settings can be more effectively addressed by governments with regards to the commitments of Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the CRPD General Comment 4 on Article 24, and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.'

Objectives

The objectives of the virtual symposium are to:

- Review persisting as well as new challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic that are hindering the fulfilment of the right to inclusive education for learners with disabilities;

- Exchange experience on factors influencing successful inclusive policies and practices for learners with disabilities; and

- Strengthen dialogue and cooperation amongst stakeholders at policy and practice levels.

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[2] Inclusive education: children with disabilities, Hunt, 2020

Key symposium themes

The virtual symposium will engage participants to address the following key themes:

Theme 1: From Legislation to Inclusive Practice: Re-designing policy frameworks, funding and monitoring arrangements across sectors for inclusive education for learners with disabilities

- Equitable access to inclusive education for children with disabilities require more than an add-on to existing systems. It requires re-designing existing education laws, policy frameworks, organizational design and financing systems across sectors involved in education provision.

- How can we ensure that the rights and needs of learners with disabilities are taken into account when they return to school after COVID-19?

Theme 2: Revisiting the teaching and learning process to ensure access and participation of learners with disabilities

- How to ensure curriculum access and participation for learners with disabilities in inclusive settings by changing school cultures, policies and practices and teaching methodologies and materials?

- How do we accelerate the introduction of digital technology and distance learning to enhance equitable access for all children?

Theme 3: Moving towards inclusive and safe learning environments, including by addressing violence and bullying against learners with disabilities

- What do we know about violence and bullying affecting learners with disabilities and what measures are required to create safe inclusive learning environments?

- How do we foster the involvement of all stakeholders in the school community including children and parents, and inter-sectoral collaboration to to build inclusive and safe learning environments?

In addition, the virtual symposium will address two essential cross-cutting themes:

a) Applying lessons learnt from COVID-19 in ensuring equitable access and support for all children to education, including through inclusive distance learning platforms, and monitoring return to school.

b) Fostering cooperation, civil society engagement, community and parent consultation and inter-sectoral collaboration to ensure the full inclusion of learners with disabilities in all levels of education.

Participants

The virtual symposium will bring together a range of key stakeholders who are drivers of change to explore global progress towards inclusive education, or lack thereof, the successes achieved and learnings observed. Online participants may include: ministries of education and other senior government officials (ensuring participation by planners and finance departments); education practitioners and educators; researchers and experts; bilateral, multilateral and other development partners; private sector stakeholders; representatives of youth organizations; representatives of

organisations of persons with disabilities; youth/learners with disabilities; representatives of parents and teachers; representatives of media and representatives of inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations supporting inclusive education.

Technical platform and interpretation

The symposium will be held in English, French and Spanish with simultaneous interpretation, also into international sign language. The symposium will be conducted through the Zoom webinar platform. The link will be provided in due time.

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