Núria Pedrós Barnils

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Distance learning and the various limitations and consequences it entails

Due to the containment measures that have been taken in most countries of the world, it is estimated that 1.598 million children and young people have had to stop going to school from 2 weeks to 3 months (UNESCO, 2020). The alternative taken from schools and high schools has been distance education, however, does everyone have access to distance education and are the consequences the same everywhere?

The following map depicts the situation to date regarding the closure of schools, high schools and universities worldwide (UNESCO, 2020). As can be seen, some European countries have already started to open schools partially or fully while the vast majority of African and Latin American countries have not.
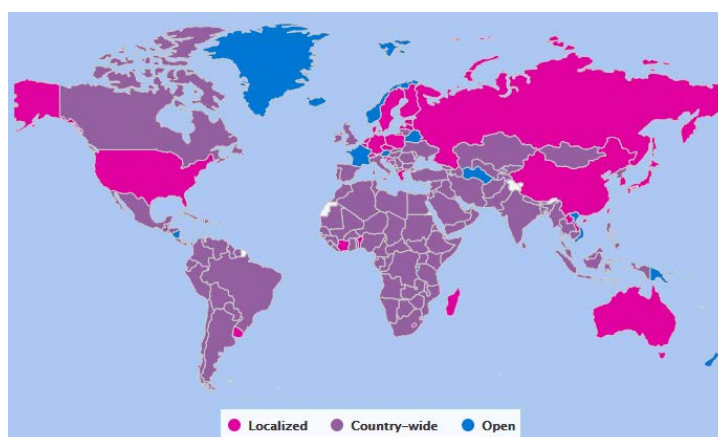

Figure 1. Global situation as of 30 May 2020 on school closures. Source: UNESCO, 2020

In this report we begin by talking about the educational situation in our closest context, Catalonia, which currently still has closed schools. In addition, as the title of this series of reports indicates, we follow up on the covid-19 pandemic in countries and regions of the Global South, thus including poor socioeconomic situations in Northern countries.

Catalonia, like most regions of the Northern Mediterranean, was not prepared for distance education. Since the first days of the confinement, it has been necessary to improvise educative methodologies and its success has been closely related to two factors: the availability of appropriate technology and the existence of family support when carrying out school work.

Although there are no official statistics yet, there have been several cases of lack of computers or internet connection at home. Also, digital gaps in the use of ICT tools in

society have been evidenced: in the case of families, it has been observed that the use of mobile phones is often for leisure purposes and sometimes the skills for other uses were lacking (such as registering for next school year or using online platforms); in the case of teachers, not all had previously used online learning platforms so the resources used to contact students have been of a wide range (e-mail, *moodle*, several online platforms) generating in some cases confusion among students.

Although the closure of schools and online education has generated and continues generating situations of stress for many families, the *Department of Education*, the high schools and schools have tried to alleviate some consequences. This has been done through distribution of computers, promotion of educational content in the Radio and Television and, following Royal Decree 7/2020, the distribution of 144,000 food vouchers for children in vulnerable situations who can no longer eat in the school canteen.

If we move to Latin American countries, the General Secretary of the *Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture*, Mariano Jabonero, explains in the newspaper *La Prensa* of Panama that since the beginning of the confinement 180 million children and young people have had to follow their learning online. Of these, it is estimated that 40%, 72 million, do not have access to digital tools because of economic reasons. The Secretary explains that as a result, the level of school dropouts could increase, especially among students in the last stage of schooling. Currently, in the region there are already 10.7 million teenagers who should be studying but are working and the Secretary fears that this number will increase.

In Colombia, the *Ministry of Education* and the *Javeirana University* estimate that only half of the inhabitants have access to mobile or fixed Internet. Moreover, this access is especially limited in rural areas: of the 2,400,000 students of basic and secondary education only 17% have access to Internet. Regions such as the Colombian Amazon and Vaupés have the lowest numbers with 9% and 5%, respectively. This number contrasts with 68% in the city of Bogotá. The *Ministry of Education* is developing strategies such as schooling paper-made material delivered door to door or educational programs on television and radio. They aim to reduce what they consider difficult to avoid: school dropout. The lack of access to digital tools as well as the current economic crisis in the country may encourage teenagers to seek work to improve their family's economic situation. It may also encourage children to stay home in order to help in the fields and with domestic chores. At last, another difficulty that the country has encountered in dealing with distance education falls on the teachers. Francisco Cajiao, advisor of the *Ministry of Education*, explains in the newspaper *El Tiempo* that only 30% of teachers have the necessary knowledge to work with digital tools and that most of them are located in the big cities.

In the city of Rosario, Argentina, sources consulted by the authors of this report explained that at the beginning of the quarantine many teachers were still going to school so that the children could go there and eat lunch. In many cases, this was their only meal that day. However, now the schools are totally closed and the teachers are concerned on the helplessness situation that many children might be in.

The closure of the schools has therefore forced the use of the internet to continue with the educational process. However, as we can see on the following map, internet is not accessible for everyone. Indeed, there is no country in the African continent where half of its population has access to the internet. Moreover, in more than half of these countries less than 30% have access, being those with access in urban settings.
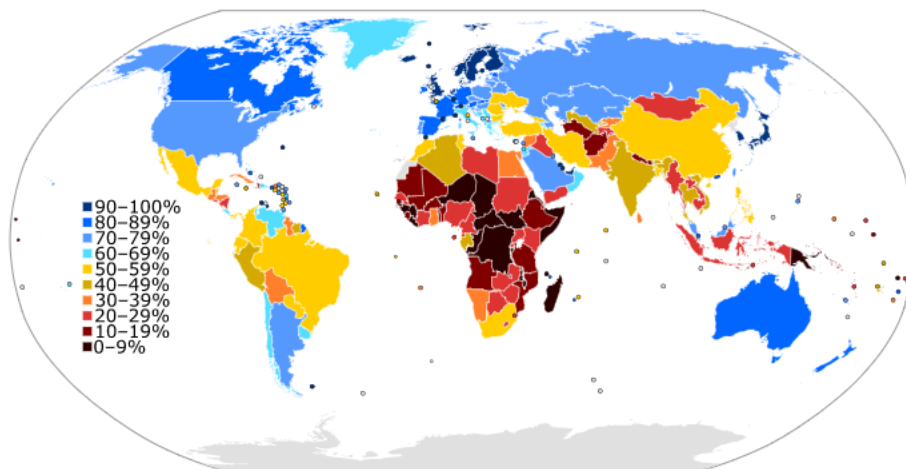

Figure 2. Percentage of Internet users by country in 2015. Source: ITU, 2015.

Also, in order to be able to upload information online or have access to this, a sufficiently powerful bandwidth is required. Europe, is the region of the world with the highest bandwidth, 211 kbit/second and the African continent is the region with the lowest average bandwidth, 31 kbit/second (ITU, 2019). Given the difficulties in accessing internet, different countries have developed radio and television programmes to broadcast educational content for children. Some examples are the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan where the respective national radios in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) have promoted daily educational broadcasts of 2 or 3 hours for primary school students. Another example is the Republic of Mauritius, which broadcasts primary school classes on its national television channel from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Teaching at secondary level seems to be a major challenge for teachers in several sub-Saharan countries. They try other resources aside from radio and television such as Whatsapp. In Namibia, high school teacher Martin Shilong told to the *The Namibian* newspaper that he uses his sister's mobile phone to create and send content to his students through Whatsapp but in many cases they do not have a mobile or if they do the internet connection is not enough to download the educational material. He also

expresses concerns about the situation that some of his students may have at home after spending so many hours with their families.

The closure of schools has forced many children, especially girls, to return to unsafe environments. This is the case of some girls studying at Naning'oi School in Kajiado, Kenya, who took refuge in this school while running away from suffering female genital mutilation or being married. The newspaper *The Nation* describes how, when schools were closed and the country gave priority to social distancing measures these girls were forced to return home, thus endangering their physical and psychological integrity. Once again, girls from the most impoverished areas are the most vulnerable and are those suffering the worst consequences of the present situation.

In conclusion, most countries have closed schools and high schools and education has become distance education. This change in the education system has clearly been a challenge for all, but the limitations and consequences of this transformation are disproportionately unequal between different countries.

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