

Education International Asia-Pacific Regional Committee

Statement on the COVID-19 Pandemic

The year 2020 will be marked as a year that shook humankind to its core. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) global pandemic is the most significant crisis the world has experienced since the 1918 Spanish flu that claimed an estimated 50 million lives. As of 4 May 2020, COVID-19 has infected over 3.5 million people and has led to the death of close to 250,000.

To contain COVID-19, governments globally have put in place measures, including amongst others complete lockdowns, closure of borders, restrictions in internal movement, imposition of social distancing, widespread testing for the disease, and isolation and quarantine of infected persons. The impact on the economy is projected to continue to be severe with massive unemployment, which will disproportionately affect marginalised sectors the hardest and will further deepen existing inequalities.

COVID-19 is not just a health or economic crisis but an education crisis as well. Schools in over 190 countries have closed which means 1.7 billion students, equivalent to more than 90% of the world's registered student population, and out of this total more than 1 billion live in the Asia-Pacific region. Over 63 million teachers and education support personnel have also been affected by the pandemic.

As we are grappling with the pandemic in this first phase, in the Asia-Pacific region, every effort is channelled towards the health sector, and the education sector, while significantly impacted, is being sidelined. The situation varies from country to country but three distinct national approaches and results are evident. The first cluster includes countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Mongolia, Taiwan and South Korea and the Pacific Islands, which managed to contain the mass spread of the virus and were able to take preliminary and immediate measures to protect the population by introducing massive testing, implementing social distancing, promoting hygiene and the use of masks, and limiting non-essential gatherings. These countries were able to curb the virus without imposing strict lockdown measures.

The second cluster includes countries such as India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Iraq, Bahrain and Nepal where strict measures of movement control and curfew were imposed, and adequate testing is yet to be conducted.

The third cluster includes countries such as Japan, Cambodia, Vanuatu and the Philippines where, on the pretext of containing the pandemic, states of emergency were declared thereby giving indefinite power and freedom to the Presidents/Prime Ministers to make unilateral decisions without consulting Parliaments or any relevant part of the government.



All these government measures have resulted in the closure of education institutions, disrupting learning and in the immediate term pushing educators to implement distant learning without necessary preparations and consultations, in turn exacerbating digital, rural-urban and gender divides.

While governments claim to encourage the use of digital tools to ensure that teaching-learning is not affected, the public education systems in most of the countries in the region have poor infrastructure for such initiatives. Teachers and students have insufficient access to online platforms, teachers have not been adequately trained in the use of technology, and students particularly from the marginalised groups and in the rural areas do not have access to the internet or to any electronic device in most cases. In addition, the teachers have been subjected to tremendous stress to adapt to new platforms, teaching methods and workload to ensure that students are not lagging behind. Another worrying trend being reported is that the most precarious education workers, contract teachers, teachers in private schools, and the ECE sector in several countries have not been paid their salaries, if they are not out of their jobs.

The educators and education unions across the region have been leading the fight against the pandemic by providing financial support, raising awareness, supporting students and parents, and making efforts to continue the teaching-learning process remotely. However, the majority of governments have failed to engage and consult educators and their unions on the decisions regarding the pedagogy for distant learning.

For its part, Education International has at the onset of the pandemic provided [guiding principles](#) for education unions and governments towards a comprehensive response that takes into account the education sector, followed by a [resolution](#) by the Executive Board calling on governments and international institutions for global solidarity and the formulation and implementation of a human-centred response, and most recently a [guidance](#) to reopening schools and education institutions.

The deterioration of education quality, widening of inequalities in access to quality education, reduction in education funding and loss of education resources amid the pandemic will result in further slowing down the progress of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 and may further encourage the rise of private, for-profit players in education.

While much remains uncertain in terms of the actual impact, duration and lasting effects of the crisis, it is definite that the crisis will drastically affect the low-income countries, in particular the most vulnerable and marginalised populations; increase gender disparities in education, especially disadvantaging girls; and intensify the divides among students.

In response, the Education International Asia-Pacific Regional Committee notes with urgent priority that it is the time to turn this global crisis into an opportunity to rethink the existing education policies, whose inadequacies are now being exposed and worsened, and to envision how the future



of education and the teaching profession should look like after the pandemic. The Committee recommends:

Education International:

- to be at the forefront to guide and support member organisations with concrete policy recommendations to minimize the impact of the pandemic on learning;
- to continue facilitating the sharing among member organisations of good practices and knowledge in responding to the present challenges;
- to intensify its advocacy of upholding the rights of educators and all workers and the protection of fundamental human rights;
- to develop policy guidelines on the use and integration of distance learning, ICTs and alternative delivery modes in teaching and learning during and after the pandemic, and on the importance of incorporating healthcare personnel in education institutions; and
- to closely cooperate with the international community in preparing and planning for the future of education and the profession post-COVID-19.

Member Organisations:

- to continue in leading the fight against the impact of COVID-19 on education and in supporting teachers, students and parents in navigating the present conditions;
- to stand for the protection of the terms, working conditions and rights of educators and education support personnel in all settings;
- to monitor the impact of the pandemic on the access to quality education and the rights of women and members of the LGBTI community, children, and vulnerable and marginalised sectors and to advocate for the protection of their rights and well-being in the relevant forums; and
- to remain vigilant against any funding cuts to education and to push for adequate and increased education funding to address the lost times and to bridge existing gaps among learners.

Governments:

- to ensure the safety, health and total well-being of students, teachers and education support personnel during the pandemic and to provide appropriate facilities and infrastructure for this purpose, including mental health support services such as counselling to ease the stress and uneasiness of students, teachers and education support personnel;



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- to take effective measures to minimize the impact of school closures by instituting distance or alternative learning modes, in consultation with educators and education unions and with due consideration of resource deficiencies and existing inequalities among learners;
- to adequately fund the urgent needs to address the impact of the pandemic on learning and to increase the allocation for the education sector to keep on track in meeting SDG 4;
- to strongly exercise their regulatory powers to prevent the entry of for-profit actors in education, providing low quality education and gathering data on learners for commercial interests;
- to guarantee the recognition and protection of the rights and benefits of all education sector workers; and
- to establish social dialogue with educators and their unions in the implementation of education and teacher policies and to engage all sectors and professions in consultation to ensure that actions during and after the pandemic are holistic, comprehensive and inclusive.