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# The pandemic further weakens Latin America's underperforming schools

Before covid-19 more children than in past decades were going to school. Too few were learning



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UNIVERSITY WAS always the plan for Camila Dantas, a 19-year-old high-school graduate from Cidade de Deus, a favela in Rio de Janeiro. Her father, who works in construction, was the first person in his family to go to university. Her mother irons clothes. Ms Dantas works in a nail salon and studies for the entrance exam at night. *Favelados*, or residents of informal settlements, are still a tiny minority of university students. Ms Dantas and her friends see higher education as a “necessary step” towards improving their lives.

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The pandemic, and the recession it has caused, threaten their plans. All but ten of the 50-odd students in Ms Dantas's online test-prep course have dropped out. Her boyfriend chose work in a tattoo parlour over a fine-arts degree to help his mother pay the bills. A survey published in June by American University in

Washington, DC, found that 84% of Latin American universities expect enrolment to fall this year, with half anticipating declines of 10-25%.

Latin America, with less than a tenth of the world's population, has a third of recorded deaths from covid-19.

Although the rate of new infections is slowing, most schools are closed in all but two countries, Uruguay and Nicaragua. More than 95% of the region's 150m pupils remain at home.

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Most countries have set no date for reopening. In many parts of Mexico schools may not reopen until a vaccine becomes available, leaving pupils to learn from a few hours of daily television programming. Bolivia will offer neither in-person nor remote learning until 2021. When schools in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's biggest cities, reopen next month, less than half of pupils will attend in person.

If schools stay closed for seven months from March this year, which looks certain in most places, and governments fail to compensate, children could lose the equivalent of an eighth of their years of schooling, estimates the World Bank. Lifetime earnings per pupil could fall by more than \$15,000 (adjusted for purchasing-power parity). The share who fail to meet proficiency standards in reading and maths could rise from 53% to 68%. The education interruption will worsen income inequality in the world's most unequal region. "It's a silent crisis," says Emanuela di Gropello, an education expert at the bank.

Rich families can make up for the enforced holiday. In Brazil they are hiring laid-off private-school teachers to tutor their children in small groups, or "learning pods". Poor ones lack computers and internet connections at home. Their children are also missing out on school meals, a lifeline in many countries. They would be completely isolated but for WhatsApp, which teachers across Latin America use to send assignments. Juliana Rohsner, the head of a school on the poor outskirts of Vitória, the capital of the Brazilian state of Espírito

Santo, oversees 37 chat groups, on which staff respond to messages from pupils and parents at all hours. She worries teachers will burn out.

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Although 74% of Brazilian pupils have taken part in some kind of distance learning during the pandemic, the share drops to 61% in the north and to 52% in the north-east. The rest are getting no instruction. Pupils from rural areas and those living in favelas are the most likely to miss out. Peru announced plans in April to buy 800,000 tablets for pupils in rural areas, but the first shipment will not arrive until October. Fiscal challenges exacerbate digital ones. In Brazil municipal revenues, which provide 40% of school funding, could fall by 20-30% because of the recession. Public schools across Latin America expect a jump in enrolment as middle-class parents become unable to pay private-school fees. That will further strain budgets.

The pandemic interrupts three decades of progress in education. As a commodities boom boosted economies, governments spent more on schooling. Primary-school enrolment is now nearly universal in most countries. In Mexico, the share of children who finish that stage doubled to two-thirds between 1990 and 2015. Higher primary-school attendance has led to higher enrolment in secondary schools, though graduation rates vary from around a quarter in poor countries, like Guatemala, to more than 80% in richer ones, like Chile.

Encouraged by economic growth and the rising expectations of lower-middle-class parents, the share of 18-to-24-year-olds in university doubled between 2000 and 2013 to 43%. That is a faster expansion than anywhere else in the world. While students from the poorer half of the population accounted for 16% of the total in 2000, they made up 25% in 2013. In Brazil, quotas for black and low-income students increased their representation.

Quality did not improve as enrolment expanded. PISA tests, which measure learning among 15-year-olds around the world, show Latin America near the bottom, though poorer regions are largely not measured (see chart). In 2018 Latin American youngsters were the three years behind their peers in OECD countries (ie, rich ones). The gap in proficiency between those at the top of the social pyramid and those at the bottom is wide.

In Brazil, Argentina, Peru and Uruguay, the poorest fifth of students are, on average, four years of schooling behind the richest fifth. Parents who can afford to almost always send their children to private schools. Latin America has the world's highest rate of enrolment in private primary schools.



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Since the well-off do not send their children to public schools (which teach four-fifths of pupils), they are not especially bothered about improving them. Government spending per student, relative to average incomes, is lower in Latin America than in the OECD.

Teacher training is neglected across the region. In Mexico, teachers are hired and promoted based on union connections rather than merit. Last year Mexico's populist president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, reversed a reform enacted in 2013 to improve their quality. A few places have sustained reforms. Chile has doubled its education budget since 2005. Its PISA scores are the highest in the region, though still below the OECD average. Ceará, a poor state in Brazil's north-east that outperforms richer states, has a record of reforms going back 15 years, including extending daily classroom hours in primary schools from four (the Latin American norm) to seven. It is an exception.

Latin American schools do not equip pupils for work, says Miguel Székely, a former education official in Mexico. Unprepared for university, half of students drop out, which makes the region's expansion of enrolment less impressive. Students who complete university earn large salaries. Those with just a secondary education tend not to. A Brazilian aged 25 to 34 with a bachelor's degree makes 2.3 times as much as a high-school graduate of the same age (in the United States the ratio is 1.7).

If students are not to lose a whole year of learning, governments will have to adapt curriculums and train teachers to help their charges catch up. So far, they have done little. Brazil's federal government spent the first six months of the pandemic lobbying states to reopen schools. It has failed to present a single policy to counter covid-induced learning loss. Two education ministers resigned in June, the second after five days in the job.

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The country's more distant future may be a bit brighter. Last month its Congress approved a revamp of Fundeb, a mechanism that provides a large share of state schools' financing and to which the federal government contributes. Under the new law, the federal government will raise its contribution (from 10% to 23% by 2026). The law sets a minimum level for spending per pupil, which is more than 50% higher than the current average. Fundeb will funnel more money to poor districts. This may help reduce educational inequality.

But it will not immediately help pupils locked out of their classrooms. Many will join Ms Dantas's boyfriend in choosing work over study. Some may turn to crime, worries Cláudia Costin, who was education secretary in the city of Rio de Janeiro from 2009 to 2014. She remembers "competing with militias" (organised-crime outfits) for high-schoolers' attention.

Ms Dantas hopes that the pandemic will delay her dream, not destroy it. She still plans to start studying journalism in 2021. Her three-year-old brother is waiting to return to nursery school. One day, perhaps, he'll make it to university, too. ■

This article appeared in the The Americas section of the print edition under the headline "Home truths"

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# Helping informal women workers is key to jump-starting recovery

MELINDA FRENCH GATES

Years ago, I visited a rural province in India and met a group of women farmers who were part of what economists call “the informal workforce”. They were the economic backbone of their community. These women had pooled their money and purchased seeds, so they could support their families and one another. Their hard work contributed a great deal to their country’s economy — as does the labour of the other 2bn informal workers worldwide.

These farmers weren’t employed by any company and didn’t earn a regular pay cheque. They probably didn’t show up in government labour statistics. When Covid-19 hit, many such informal women workers used their skills to help their communities and countries get through the pandemic. But as is often the case, governments frequently overlooked and undervalued their contributions. Economically, they lost more than nearly anyone. In a 2020 analysis of 10 countries, job losses were two to three times higher among informal workers than those formally employed. And they have no safety net to fall back on — no paid sick leave, no unemployment insurance.

The world now has a big opportunity to do better. If leaders — including the finance ministers participating in this week’s World Bank and IMF meetings — put informal women workers at the centre of their economic recovery plans, they will repay an enormous debt. What is more, they will also be able to get their economies growing more quickly.

When the women working in fields, markets and homes around the world lose their livelihoods, of course they and their families suffer. But economies do, too. Informal work accounts for 60 per cent of all global employment. In Africa and India, as many as nine in 10 working women are in informal jobs.

Right now, thanks to \$93bn mobilised recently by the World Bank’s International Development Association, governments in low-income

countries have the opportunity to take decisive action to support these women and jump-start their economies.

First, countries should invest in childcare. This is just common sense: when their children are safely looked after, more women can return to the workforce or start a new business. All told, the Eurasia Group estimates that expanding access to childcare for families who don't currently have it could increase global gross domestic product by more than \$3tn. At the Gates Foundation, we are investing in the World Bank Childcare Incentive Fund, which will help governments fund promising models.

Second, countries should direct financial resources, including cash transfers, to women, many of whose assets were wiped out in the pandemic. To support economic growth, countries need to increase access to affordable credit for women, who often can't get the financing they need to start and grow businesses. Expanding bank lending and directing funds to collective enterprises like the one I saw in India can turn this story around, by providing liquidity, rebuilding assets and encouraging growth, especially in the private sector.

Third, countries should use data better to track challenges and progress. To solve a problem, you have to be able to see it. Too often, leaders don't understand how women are suffering disproportionately and how that affects economies, because that's not how they break down their data. By consistently disaggregating economic and development data by sex and other key characteristics, countries can gain a fuller picture, and ultimately devise more effective policies. In Mexico, information gathered over several years from the financial sector and surveys of citizens allowed leaders to see, and then narrow, gaps in women's access to financial services.

When Afghan girls desperate to learn are banned from school and pregnant Ukrainian women are stumbling out of bombed maternity hospitals, it is hard to think of anything else. These are grave atrocities. And they are not totally disconnected from the economic neglect of women. When we build a world where those furthest from economic opportunity have an equal chance to thrive and lead, we build a world that's more peaceful and more resistant to shocks.

As global leaders seek solutions to the mounting financial, health and security challenges, they must not overlook the informal women workers who hold up their societies in innumerable and often invisible ways. These individuals can be the engine of our global recovery. We must see them. But more than that, we must support them — with action, not just words.

*The writer is co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation*

**Leaders must not overlook those who hold up their societies in innumerable and often invisible ways**