

## Education for children and the new pandemic reality

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic impacts most on the well-being of families and children all over the world. The study analyses the main consequences on the Romanian educational system, also mirroring the long-lasting social and economic outcomes. Possible social protection measures are identified at the local, national and civil level, as immediate responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and for long-term recovery. A coordinated approach is needed to implement policies, programs and interventions for the poor and vulnerable, as well as marginalized groups. There is already a wide range of sectoral policies, programs and interventions aimed at reducing poverty and social exclusion, and the experience and tools needed to identify people and areas affected by poverty have been improved in the last years. The societal ideas, concepts, rules, policies have to change because our present and future changed. We now face another major humanitarian crisis: "We the Adults" (paraphrasing Kofi Annan's reference) now face the future of our Children and it will take a joined effort from all of us – from national governments, agencies and NGOs to local communities and caregivers. Promises are not enough, even the world has the necessary resources to back it up, unless the whole society will come together to secure a safe environment through special protection measures for Our Children.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; pandemic; children; vulnerability; Romanian educational system.

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Hope is not enough to ensure peace, to bring a better world, to end starvation and poverty, to provide decent education for all children, or to prevent nuclear holocaust. Hope is not enough to end the pandemic threat. Hope is not enough to... Yet it is a critical starting point for building a better and brighter future. All of us are challenged to connect hope to action until we have created a mighty river that will carve a new path to the future. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's "We the Children", an essential reference for children's rights and future, anticipated in 2001, that "the pressing needs of children affected by the pandemic – who may have lost parents, become destitute or been left without access to school and health services – should be a priority on every agenda" (Annan 2001: p. 47).

The pandemic threat of COVID-19 disturbs the well-being of families and children all over the world. Due to the world-wide pandemic, the virus attacks not only individual's health, but also the economy, communities, social values and democracies. Furthermore, the new context generated by the pandemic also has consequences for family and social relationships. Children's physical health is the least directly affected by the virus. Indirectly, however, the virus leads to serious risks for children, which must be recognized, monitored and addressed.

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David Beasley, the head of the United Nations World Food Program, warns that over 270 million people are "marching to starvation" and that in some countries, famine is "on the horizon." The global effort to minimize the impact of coronavirus pandemic may not be enough as "2021 will be literally catastrophic, based on what we see at this stage of the game. That's because we spent \$ 19 trillion, the money may not be, and most likely won't be available by 2021" (WFP 2020). Meanwhile, UNICEF predicted in May that in 118 low- and middle-income countries, 1.2 million children under the age of five could die in the next six months due to limited access to health care. A study by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health reveals that, "if routine health care is disrupted and access to food is decreased (as a result of unavoidable shocks, health system collapse, or intentional choices made in responding to the pandemic), the increase in child and maternal deaths will be devastating" (Robertson, T., Carter, E. D., Chou, V. B. et al. 2020).

The last century included three influenza viruses that caused major pandemics: the 1918 "Spanish flu" was the most deadly causing the death of up to 50 million people, while the 1957 "Hong Kong" viruses caused, individually, 2 million and 1 million related deaths. The statistics indicate that infants, young children and adolescents are "populations uniquely affected by influenza pandemics" (Griffiths, Maguire, Heggenhougen, et. al. 2010: p. 398), although they seem to be the least directly affected by the 2020's COVID-19 virus.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) provides for an ample directory of rights for children across the range and includes social, economic, cultural, civil and political rights. It also provides that children's best interests are to be a primary consideration for policy and decision maker and that the evolving capacity of children must also be factored into law and policy (Freeman 1996: p. 93).

Romania's children are among the most vulnerable citizens, both because they cannot exercise their rights autonomously, but also because of the social and economic conditions they live in as the social group with the highest rates of absolute risk of poverty.

Children depend on adults who care for them and who are responsible for them. As children growing up in poor households will cope in the future with a higher risk of poverty, to break the circle, the government must adopt programs that target both child poverty and poverty of adults in a household. Especially in the case of children facing persistent poverty and Roma children, the different dimensions of exclusion are generally interconnected and perpetuated from one generation to another. The circle of exclusion is perpetuated when low levels of education and poor health seriously limit the chances of access to the labour market for the next generation of children. Breaking the circle of poverty and exclusion will require targeted interventions to eliminate the multiple causes of inequality (Goian and Breaz 2020).

As the pandemic and economic crises deepen, children are even more at risk: social inequalities and discrimination become stronger, the risk of abuse, neglect or exploitation increases, and so does the risk of separating children from their families due to poverty.

The Romanian rural environment does not offer the security of the future: with the closure of schools, most children do not have access to education due to the lack of devices and favourable study conditions. There are also many families living in one room, without access to a heating system or running water, without hygiene measures and all these elements represent an inappropriate environment for children. In the last year, the reality of many people has changed dramatically. Many of us are adapting to the new reality, but according to Diana Podaru, general manager of SOS Children's Villages Romania, "for

hundreds of thousands of children, the new normal means less warm meals or less wood for the fire, it means to be completely separated from the educational system and more isolated than ever before” (SOS Satele Copiilor România 2020).

Education, as a fundamental component of modern society, is essential for child development and the prosperity of society and, at the individual level, is conceived as a key means for children to advance themselves (UNICEF 2009).

The COVID-19 pandemic increases the risks for Romania’s vulnerable children and their families by limited access to social services, inequalities in access to education, poverty, according to a report by UNICEF in Romania in partnership with Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development, Terre des Hommes, the Center for Health Policy and Services and the Council for Institutionalized Youth (2020). The categories most affected by COVID-19 prevention measures are:

- children from families living in poverty;
- Roma children (limited circulation reduced the income of Roma families);
- children whose parents have gone to work abroad;
- children living in overcrowded housing;
- children with disabilities and the elderly, affected by the reduction of the activity of family doctors in communities, but also by the decrease of social contacts (UNICEF 2020).

The report also highlights that the COVID-19 crisis affected the provision of medical services in local communities, especially in the component of services provided in family medicine practices. The report recommends better involvement of family medicine staff in the community, in conjunction with the development of complementary telemedicine services; increasing cooperation between medical staff, social workers and other categories of administrative staff. The online teaching increases the inequalities in access to education for children from disadvantaged families, who do not always manage to provide the necessary technological equipment, nor do they have access to the Internet.

The solution could be to implement programs for the distribution of free electronic equipment or to facilitate their purchase at subsidized prices for children from low-income families, as well as to provide this equipment for teachers. Recommendations also include the development of a national distance education plan, including online teaching, and the creation of support networks between parents, children and teachers to support compensating for existing inequalities in the use of electronic means in education (Breaz 2020)

The issues social services confront include reducing or even suspending the activity of day centres and limiting the mobility of workers in the field, especially in view of the lack of adequate protective materials. Possible solutions include the provision of appropriate equipment to existing staff, in particular protective materials; implementing a strategy of detailed procedures for the provision of social services and special protection services (UNICEF 2020).

The essential importance of education on a child’s life outreaches the individual level, playing a significant role in securing sustainable development and contributing to the development of human capital and social foundations (Heymann, Sherr and Kidman 2012: p. 95). Because of COVID-19 related disability, the already stressed Romanian educational system includes a large proportion of unproductive workforce and lacks efficiency and quality (Breaz 2019).

The traumas caused by COVID-19 reflect on the main aspects of life from financial pressures on families, the impact of the closure of services on children’s lives, to

the inequality of online education, with devastating threats and outcomes for every child, adult or senior (Resource Centre 2020: p. 5). The reach of the pandemic in Romania produced cascading consequences on the communities and on individual level, also mirrored by the long-lasting social and economic outcomes:

- **the financial effects on families:** the economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic affects families with children who are already struggling financially, due to temporary or permanently unemployment or reduced work schedule. In Romania, many families have suddenly found themselves in economic crisis; it is estimated that “between March and May 2020, more than 1 million employment contracts were suspended (595.672) or terminated (429.585)” (Resource Centre 2020: p. 5) increasing the risk of poverty or social exclusion among children.

- **the closure of services:** the capacity of healthcare services to support and assist children, including primary health care, have been dramatically reduced since numerous hospitals were closed or “reduced their scheduled admissions by 50-80%” (Resource Centre, 2020, p. 5). Furthermore, the lack of personal protective equipment for the medical personnel, including family doctors, led to a decrease of medical consultations, inability to purchase medicines, or even no access to a physician.

- **the school closure and online education inequality:** no school, no equal ability to participate in online education. A study conducted by the Romanian Institute of Evaluation and Strategy (IRES) in April 2020 indicates that the number of students without access or with limited access to laptop, tablet or desktop is over 900,000, 3.6 times higher than the evaluation of the Romanian Ministry of Education (EduPedu 2020). Furthermore, the research indicates the following conclusions:

- 32% of children attending the pre-university education in Romania do not have individual access to a specific functional device (i.e. laptop, tablet, desktop) for online schooling;

- 12% of children in Romania do not have a powerful enough internet connection to be able to support online courses;

- More than a ¼ parents who do not have a device for every child they can use for online school, would not pay at all to purchase such equipment;

- Only two-thirds of parents said that during the emergency period, online lessons were taught daily;

- Only 50% pupils had contact with teachers for all subjects during the state of emergency;

- More than a 1/4 of Romanian pupils spent at least 4 hours a day doing homework during emergency period;

- Over 1/4 of parents considers their child receives little or no support from teachers during emergency period;

- Almost 4 out of 10 parents spend time with their children in order to support them with learning activities for 3 hours or more during a day.

Furthermore, an additional effect of schools' closure was that poorer children, who had been receiving meals at school, now find themselves without this supply of daily nutrition (Resource Centre, 2020, p. 5).

Thus, initiating and implementing the proper social protection measures by the local and national authorities, as well as the civil society, play a crucial role in facilitating educational adaptation mechanisms for the poor and vulnerable children and their families as immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic and for long-term recovery, as specified in Table no. 1, based on the studied references:

Table no. 1. Potential instant and long-term response for local and national authorities and civil societies

<b>Instant Response</b>	<b>Long-Term Response</b>
<p><b>1. for local authorities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Providing low-income families with food, based on an assessment of the consequences of COVID-19 on the family situation (disposable income, support network, etc.);</li> <li>- Providing personal protective equipment to prevent COVID-19 infection;</li> <li>- Organizing tutoring classes for children from families who did not have access to online education by teachers in educational institutions;</li> <li>- Prioritizing the enrolment in kindergarten of children from single-parent families and those with many children;</li> <li>- Providing children with equipment (laptop, computer, tablet) to give them access to online education;</li> <li>- Implementation of case management adjusted to the COVID period, in compliance with protection measures;</li> </ul>	<p><b>1. for local authorities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Creation of an emergency fund for crisis/emergency situations for emergency control and assistance to the most vulnerable families during exceptional situations;</li> <li>- Mapping and evaluation of families with associated vulnerability factors (number of children, type of family, income level, health status, etc.) in order to distribute material aid as a priority, in conditions of limited resources;</li> <li>- Resuming the process of providing social and educational services access that was limited by the pandemic, e.g. rehabilitation services, day services, educational services;</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. for national authorities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identification of financial resources for emergency interventions;</li> <li>- Elaboration of methodological records for the employees of the social, medical and educational assistance system in order to ensure a coherent and effective approach during the pandemic and to avoid loss of time;</li> <li>- Development of an action plan to reduce the negative impact of COVID-19;</li> <li>- Providing teachers with the necessary equipment and internet access in the online training process;</li> </ul>	<p><b>2. for national authorities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Regulation of the psychological assistance and counselling service for children and adults, affected by the trauma caused by isolation, loss of income and danger to health;</li> <li>- Teacher training for providing quality online educational services;</li> <li>- Providing children from vulnerable families with the necessary equipment for online education and internet access;</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. for civil society:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Coordinating efforts (i.e. planning, consultation), ensuring a</li> </ul>	<p><b>3. for civil society:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adjusting intervention plans to integrate COVID-19 prevention</li> </ul>

<p>coherent approach and avoiding duplication of effort;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identification of financial resources for the assistance of families affected by COVID-19 in order to overcome the negative consequences;</li> <li>- Assistance to families in crisis, based on the needs assessment and in terms of available financial resources;</li> </ul>	<p>actions and mitigate the consequences of the pandemic on the most vulnerable children and families with children;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Development of new programs (i.e. psychological assistance for families and children affected by trauma);</li> <li>- Initiation of the process of collecting financial resources to support families affected by COVID-19.</li> </ul>
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Sources: Resource Centre 2020; UNICEF 2020; EduPedu.ro 2020.

Worldwide research on the impact of COVID-19 on children's education is vital today because education is a primary strategy for protecting children and securing their future. Further research are to be conducted with the primary objective of documenting interventions that show some promise of helping children achieve their educational goals. Case studies are to be analysed and possible solutions are to be emphasized to point to future good practice.

A coordinated approach is needed to implement policies, programs and interventions for the poor and vulnerable, as well as marginalized groups. There is already a wide range of sectoral policies, programs and interventions aimed at reducing poverty and social exclusion, and the experience and tools needed to identify people and areas affected by poverty have been improved in the last years.

The key ingredient that is missing is coordinating these policies, programs and interventions. Researchers all over the world already indicate the negative effects of COVID-19 along with the unprecedented actions to contain it, on every individual.

The societal ideas, concepts, rules, policies have to change because our present and future changed. We now face another major humanitarian crisis: "We the Adults" (paraphrasing Kofi Annan's reference) now face the future of our Children and it will take a joined effort from all of us – from national governments, agencies and NGOs to local communities and caregivers. Promises are not enough, even the world has the necessary resources to back it up, unless the whole society will come together to secure a safe environment through special protection measures for Our Children.

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