

LEFT BEHIND: MIGRANT CHILDREN, SDG 4 AND PANDEMIC RECOVERY

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The key ‘promise’ of the United Nations’ (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is that in the process of development as actioned by governments, they would ‘leave no one behind’ (LNOB). All of the United Nations’ member states signed up to the principle which holds that strategic engagement around policy formation would ensure that poverty and its multiform systems would be mitigated, inequality tackled and the marginalised included in human development in its broadest sense. The lifting of those in vulnerable environments to the point of empowerment and equality has been a struggle from day one, with the SDGs (arguably the only meaningful *global* development strategy) faltering and invariably the most vulnerable have been, in fact, left behind. The UN is blunt in its analysis:

“It is time to sound the alarm. At the midpoint on our way to 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals are in deep trouble.... Shockingly, the world is back at hunger levels not seen since 2005, and food prices remain higher in more countries than in the period 2015–2019. The way things are going, it will take 286 years to close gender gaps in legal protection and remove discriminatory laws. And in education, the impacts of years of underinvestment and learning losses are such that, by 2030, some 84 million children will be out of school and 300 million children or young people attending school will leave unable to read and write.” (United Nations, 2023: 4)

Global inequality has reached such a point of disequilibrium that those in the richest regions both locally and globally have come through COVID-19 with wealth enhanced and power relations highly skewed. Indeed, with post-pandemic political and socioeconomic adjustments, the governments of the global North have come to habitually and blatantly discriminate against the most vulnerable, deliberately excluding large numbers on a global scale by restricting access to public services, limiting education provision and in many countries

forcefully detaining migrants (Carmody and McCann, 2022: 104-115). This dissonance and the othering of migrants that has occurred, has further accentuated the difficulties faced by families and individuals who are precariously living on the periphery of society. From a social justice lens, we need to look hard at socioeconomic inequality as the source of many of our current global issues, from fiscal mismanagement, climate injustice and conflict, to chronic power imbalances. The plight of migrant children in particular remains a scar on the global development landscape, yet it is a scar that is addressable.

Looking at the various meaningful indicators monitoring inequality, the Human Development Index (HDI) (2024) and the World Inequality Database (WID) (2024) to name a few, the divergence between the endowed/empowered and the impoverished/disempowered is at a historically high rate (Human Development Index, 2024). With this has come a distance not only in our understanding of what global poverty is doing to poor societies in the global South but also how it has been debasing the communities in the global North as well. The acceleration of this process is cross cutting in its discrimination, leaving many of the most vulnerable excluded while permitting a political mix that cynically denies rights, disenfranchises large sections of the population (usually the poor and unregistered) and voices justification for actions - such as genocide - that would be unthinkable not ten years ago (Hickel, 2020; Jackson 2017; Chancel, 2020; Piketty, 2014; 2021).

The hegemonic shifts over the pre- and post- pandemic periods are quite notable, where there has evidently been a recalibration in power relations, filtered through either populism or indeed a fear of populism in many countries. The targeting of migrant communities and families seems to have become an outworking of this process; ‘othering’ - and in some cases blatant dehumanisation - has become the normative means of political engagement. In the pre-pandemic scenario, the United Nations’ (2017) document *Leaving No One Behind: Equality and Non-Discrimination at the Heart of Sustainable Development* had provided a roadmap to policymaking and action, instructing:

“...equality (the imperative of moving towards substantive equality of opportunity and outcomes for all groups), non-discrimination (the

prohibition of discrimination against individuals and groups on the grounds identified in international human rights treaties) and the broader concept of equity (understood as fairness in the distribution of costs, benefits and opportunities). It addresses both horizontal inequalities (between social groups) and vertical inequalities (e.g. income) as well as inequalities of both opportunities and outcomes. Intergenerational equity is also addressed, as are inequalities among countries” (United Nations, 2017: 4; also see 16-18).

The societal systemic shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the obvious and unashamed resort to global inequality to protect the global North and its wealthier communities, seem to have facilitated a sea-change in attitudes towards marginalised and vulnerable groups. This has been registered with growing levels of racism and xenophobia across the global North and as evidenced by electorally surging anti-migrant political parties. Compounded with conflicts breaking out across the globe and pre-judicial genocidal interventions across the Middle East, Central Europe and the Sahel, the global rights agenda and the drive for equality of lived experience as envisaged through the SDGs has been, arguably, fundamentally compromised.

Education for All

The outcome of the World Education Forum, held in Incheon South Korea in May 2015, gave a sense of the global state of education vis-à-vis the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals at that point. The *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration* (UNESCO, 2015), together with the *Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4*, aimed to bring forward a strategy to improve on the disparate inequalities in education with respect to what was available for the richest and poorest communities around the world. Working from an encompassing action point, to ‘Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (UN, 2015), the educational and governmental Forum proposed the *Education 2030* agenda and the *Framework for Action* with priorities and strategies for actual achievement. The Incheon Declaration was, at that point in history, quite clear:

“Inclusion and equity in and through education is the cornerstone of a transformative education agenda, and we therefore commit to addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation and learning outcomes. No education target should be considered met unless met by all” (UNESCO, 2015: 7).

Taking part in this Forum, 160 countries stood by a commitment to dedicate 15-20 per cent of their public expenditures to improve education. Going into the pandemic, one-third of the countries had not moved on this action or indeed had decreased educational budgets in real terms. Coming out of the pandemic, the consensus around education budgets and policies seemed broken.

The pandemic had a disintegrating effect on education provision in the most vulnerable regions with almost 1.6 billion students being subjected to education institution shutdowns and catastrophically cut budgets, as public resources were redirected towards virus contagion mitigation, vaccines, public health resourcing, and personal protective equipment (PPE). For example, between 11 March 2020 and 5 May 2023 - the official World Health Organization (WHO) dates for the pandemic - 94 per cent of school aged children globally lost an average of almost a year's worth of education (United Nations, 2020: 5). While children in wealthier communities, particularly in the global North, were provided online, blended, hybrid, synchronous or asynchronous teaching and learning methods, in the global South it was more common to see lockdowns with little to no educational provision whatsoever. The impact of this on children and young people globally is still being felt and the recovery to pre-pandemic levels of provision has still a long way to go. 'By mid-April 2020, 94 per cent of learners worldwide were affected by the pandemic, representing 1.58 billion children and youth, from pre-primary to higher education, in 200 countries' (Ibid.: 5).

The effects of the pandemic alone, coupled with sporadic wars, will be adverse and generational on many societies, with the most disadvantaged and marginalised children caught further outside meaningful strategies for educational recovery (Lennox, Reuge and Benavides, 2021). The impact is multifaceted and will substantially affect the quality of life and opportunities that children may otherwise have had. Wellbeing and safety are key to this and in situations where

these cannot be provided, the vulnerability of the children is exacerbated and can at times be life threatening. Migrant children remain globally the most exposed to these dangers, particularly those who are caught outside familial and community support networks or are isolated and caught within state institutions or systems which cannot mobilise the support needs of these children. For others, the exclusion can include homelessness, exploitation, trafficking, child labour, imprisonment in camps or being disappeared. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) is absolutely clear on what is needed and expected by state agencies in their responsibilities to protecting children. Its so-called General Principles form the basis for action in realising the rights of children: 1. Non-discrimination (Article 2); 2. Best interest of the child (Article 3); 3. Right to life survival and development (Article 6); and 4. Right to be heard (Article 12) (Ibid.). In reality, for many, and particularly those in the cycle of forced migration and its transitory lifestyle or those detained in camps, these Principles are not being applied.

Education can and does provide a structure for developmental inclusion. It gives a safeguarding framework within which children can belong and thrive even in difficult circumstances. Without protective environments such as schools and the professionals behind them, children can be subject to life limiting circumstances. The Convention stipulates the absolute need for the fabric and culture of education as a means of protecting children. Caught outside, there is the likelihood of a cycle of impoverishment and the co-relators of diminished access to health provision, bad nutrition, and susceptibility to disadvantage at every point of personal development. The implications are social/familial as well as personal, with dependency becoming a notable feature of communities lacking adequate educational provision. Drilling into this further to look at refugee children, the *Refugee Education Report* (UNHCR, 2023) sets out the problem in stark terms and highlights those who are left behind at all levels of state and societal intervention - with over half of the world's 14.8 million refugee children out of formal education (Ibid.: 6).

The *Refugee Education Report* looked at 70 'refugee-hosting countries' and uses the data to get a measure of the level of access to education that the children within refugee communities in these countries have. Admittedly, it does

not have an adequate survey of those not in formal refugee regimes, such as asylum-seeking children, those who are undocumented or unaccompanied migratory children. The point of closure for the Report is December 2022 - which predates the ongoing forced movement of people across Central Europe, the Sahel and as a result of the conflict in Palestine - but the report notes that:

“the number of school-aged refugees jumped nearly 50 per cent from 10 million a year earlier, driven mostly by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. An estimated 51 per cent – more than 7 million children – are not enrolled in school” (UNHCR, 8 September 2023).

Within the report, the gender-based inequalities were also highlighted, causing further complications for girls’ development and societal inclusivity in general. The problem of increasing child marginalisation is global and can be seen in varying measures to be affecting migrant children in the global North as well as the global South. Reports of children sleeping rough on the streets of the United Kingdom and Ireland or forced into sleeping arrangements with strange adults in detention camps run by the state, or children being refused schooling in some of the wealthiest countries on earth, is an indictment of political intent, a complete disregard for child safeguarding and legally defined rights under the *Convention of the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989).

SDG 4, in principle, offers a means of lifting migrant children out of the cycle of poverty and exploitation that they can fall into. This is dependent on governmental agencies and civil society providing the appropriate safety nets and mechanisms for levelling up in a meaningful manner, creating equitable and quality educational provision. Having room for opportunity and support to bring migrant children into educational environments is critical. In practice, it starts with political will and runs throughout education to the classroom and the professionalism of teaching staff. It can mean additional educational support through language classes, mainstreaming migrant children’s integration, meal provision, wellbeing initiatives and documenting the young people to put them onto a similar footing as their peers. It can also mean upskilling for teachers or professional development in the formal sense.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is well aware of the ongoing needs for achieving equitable provision but has struggled to get governments to acknowledge their responsibilities to vulnerable children under international law. Indeed, the Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR, 2018), affirmed by the UN General Assembly on 17 December 2018, also gives specific direction on the urgency of linking the rights of migrant children to education provision and opportunity. This had brought together stakeholders in refugee protection and highlighted the actions necessary for a comprehensive transnational and intersectoral response to the forced movement of people, including children. Checking through various drafts towards the final document, it was evident that momentum on the importance of education grew with consultation and governmental commentary at that time, and a mission in respect to funded provision. In the years prior to the pandemic there was an acknowledgement of the scale of need. This can be seen in that in a document of 60 pages, education for refugee children is mentioned no less than 28 times (Ibid.). It comes out in the thematic discussions and the numerous written contributions. Indeed, the Lebanese government even complements the UNHCR for doubling down on the point. The drive was evidently towards ‘a tangible mechanism for burden- and responsibility-sharing and a demonstration of solidarity’ (Ibid.: 36). Article 69 is advanced enough to show that there was - in that pre-pandemic period - the wherewithal and competence in international development practice to specify action:

“Additional areas for support include efforts to meet the specific education needs of refugees (including through “safe schools” and innovative methods such as online education) and over-come obstacles to their enrolment and attendance, including through flexible certified learning programmes, especially for girls, as well as persons with disabilities and psychosocial trauma. Support will be provided for the development and implementation of national education sector plans that include refugees” (UNHCR, 2018: Article 69).

In this and other complementary strategies, applying international law with authentic policymaking commitments, there remains the possibility of revisiting SDG 4 and prioritising those who have been through the pandemic in

the most challenging of circumstances and have been left behind. One obstacle remains and it is a formidable one indeed, political will. With the understanding that properly managed and supported migration policies can substantially benefit host communities as well as those who are arriving, there can indeed be tangible benefits from the processes of accommodation, solidarity and integration. The role of education in building a positive migration experience is critical to this, but invariably needs investment and governmental shifts which favour processes that go beyond borders to act without prejudice.

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