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FEATURED Q&A

How Much Has the Pandemic Reversed Education Gains?



The Covid-19 pandemic has worsened inequalities in education in Latin America and the Caribbean, according to a United Nations report. // File Photo: Colombian Government.

Q Prior to the pandemic, children from the wealthiest households in 21 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean were five times more likely to complete upper secondary school than those from the poorest households in those same countries, and Covid-19 exacerbated these inequalities, according to the most recent Global Education Monitoring Report published by UNESCO. What are the most significant implications of the growing education gap in Latin America and the Caribbean? To what extent has the pandemic reversed progress made in education in the last decades and heightened inequalities? In the years ahead, what should countries focus on in order to better rebuild the region's education systems and to guarantee a more equal access and quality learning for all children?

A Nora Lustig, Samuel Z. Stone professor of Latin American economics and founding director of the Commitment to Equity Institute at Tulane University and nonresident senior fellow at the Inter-American Dialogue: "Education may be Latin America's most lasting scar from Covid-19. Our research suggests that the likelihood of today's students to complete secondary education may soon drop from a regional average of 61 percent to 46 percent. This average, however, hides striking differences across socioeconomic groups. While schools shut their doors for children of all backgrounds, their ability to continue learning depends on their parents' income and educational level. Children in low parental education households find it difficult if not impossible to continue their education at home due to a lack of adequate equipment, connectivity and—above all—one-on-one coaching.

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TODAY'S NEWS

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Venezuelan Gov't-Allied Assembly to Be Seated Today

A new National Assembly, allied with President Nicolás Maduro, is to be seated today following last month's legislative elections, which were widely denounced as fraudulent.

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BUSINESS

Covid Vaccine From Oxford-AstraZeneca Gets Mexico's Approval

Mexico approved the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine for emergency use.

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POLITICAL

López Obrador Seeks to Offer Asylum to Assange

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said he is prepared to offer asylum to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. His comments came after a judge in Britain, where Assange is imprisoned, blocked his extradition to the United States.

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Assange // File Photo: Ecuadorean Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Venezuelan Gov't- Allied Assembly Taking Office Today

Venezuela's ruling socialist party today will install a new National Assembly stacked with allies of President Nicolás Maduro, at least symbolically ending the Venezuelan opposition's claim to power, Reuters reported. The new members of the National Assembly were elected on Dec. 6 in a vote widely denounced as fraudulent. The opposition, led by Juan Guaidó, boycotted the election and plans to seat a committee of legislators aimed at rivaling the now socialist-controlled National Assembly. Guaidó's claim to the interim presidency of the country was based on his position as president of parliament, and the United States and dozens of other countries recognize him as Venezuela's legitimate provisional president. The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump has also recognized the opposition-held assembly's one-year extension of its own term. On Monday, the Treasury Department issued a new license to allow certain transactions with the Guaidó-led government despite tough U.S. sanctions on Venezuela. The license allows some transactions with the National Assembly. However, other international allies of Guaidó, including the European Union, have remained silent on whether the opposition still rightfully holds the assembly. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Dec. 8 issue of the Advisor.]

López Obrador Seeks to Offer Asylum to Assange

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said Monday that he is prepared to offer asylum to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, Bloomberg News reported. López Obrador's comments came after a British judge blocked Assange's extradition to the United States, where he could face charges including alleged

violation of a spying law, Reuters reported. The judge said Assange's mental health problems could make him a suicide risk in a U.S. prison. "I'm going to ask the foreign minister ... to ask the government of the United Kingdom about the possibility of letting Mr. Assange be freed and for Mexico to offer political asylum," López Obrador told reporters. "Assange is a journalist and deserves a chance, I am in favor of pardoning him." Mexico is the world's deadliest country for journalists and accounted for nearly a third of the journalists killed worldwide in 2020, according to a report released last month by the Committee to Protect Journalists, The Guardian reported. Nine journalists were killed last year in Mexico. López Obrador called the British judge's decision on Monday a "triumph of justice." A year ago, López Obrador called Assange's imprisonment in Britain "torture," adding that leaked documents published by WikiLeaks showed the world's "authoritarian" workings, Reuters reported. Assange has spent most of the last 10 years either in prison or self-imposed confinement. Ecuador granted Assange asylum in June 2012 and allowed him to live in the country's embassy in London for nearly seven years until current President Lenín Moreno said in April 2019 that Assange had violated the terms of his asylum. Ecuador allowed London's Metropolitan Police into the embassy to arrest Assange. Following Monday's ruling, Assange's lawyers said they plan to return to court on Wednesday with what they said is their "strongest grounds to granting bail," Bloomberg News reported.

BUSINESS NEWS

Mexico Approves Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid-19 Vaccine

Mexico on Monday approved the Covid-19 vaccine developed by Oxford University and AstraZeneca, the Associated Press reported. Before the approval, Pfizer's Covid-19 vaccine had been the only one approved for use in Mexico. "The emergency approval for the Astra-

NEWS BRIEFS

At Least Four Killed in Flash Floods in Bolivian City of Sucre

Flash floods in the Bolivian city of Sucre have left at least four people dead, according to local police, BBC News reported today. The city's streets were filled with fast-flowing water, dragging along cars, buses and market stalls, following a heavy hailstorm that lasted for about a half hour on Monday. Interior Minister Eduardo del Castillo said three children and three adults were missing, and seven others were injured, as a result of the flooding.

Honduras Sees 17% Decline in Coffee Exports in December

Honduras' coffee exports dropped 17.2 percent in December as compared to a year earlier, following a plunge in global demand as economies around the world closed in an attempt to contain the spread of Covid-19, an industry executive said Monday, Reuters reported. "The drop in sales in December is due to lower demand for the bean on the world market due to confinements in the buying countries, especially in Europe," said Miguel Pon, the executive director of the Honduran association of coffee exporters, AHDECAFE.

Colombian Regulator Says Companies May Buy Bitcoin

Colombia's Superintendency of Corporations said in an official note that companies in the country can legally buy cryptocurrencies, including Bitcoin, Bitcoin.com reported Monday. The regulator said companies can buy the cryptocurrencies in order to inject capital as long as they follow local regulations. The superintendency also warned companies that handle cryptocurrencies about the "high risks" of the practice and "the lack of regulation that surrounds it."

Zeneca vaccine is very good news ... with this, production will begin very soon in Mexico!" Foreign Relations Secretary Marcelo Ebrard wrote in a posting on Twitter. Mexican officials hope the approval of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine will accelerate vaccination efforts in the country, where approximately 44,000 shots have been administered since the third week of December, the AP reported. That amounts to 82 percent of the doses Mexico has received. Mexico's assistant health secretary and Covid-19 czar, Hugo López-Gatell, said he mistakenly reported that Mexico had approved the vaccine developed by China-based CanSino, adding that the company's vaccine had not yet submitted its complete study results for efficacy and safety. Mexico has recorded more than 1.4 million cases of Covid-19 and more than 127,000 deaths from the disease, according to Johns Hopkins University.

J. Safra Sarasin Acquires BMO Private Banking Units

Switzerland-based private bank J. Safra Sarasin, a unit of Brazil's Safra Group, announced today that it has acquired Bank of Montreal's private banking units in Hong Kong and Singapore. "BMO's well-diversified and attractive client base of ultra high-net worth individuals is an excellent fit with the group's existing private banking business and its comprehensive offering in investments, trading, credit and wealth planning," J. Safra Sarasin said in a statement. "This acquisition marks another step in the implementation of the group's international growth strategy and will allow the group to further enhance its successful presence in Asia." In the statement, Jacob J. Safra, the chairman of J. Safra Sarasin Group, said the transaction shows the importance of Asia to the organization. "We are delighted and believe that BMO's private banking business in Asia will fit extremely well with our strategy," he said. The acquisition is expected to be completed during the first half of this year, subject to regulatory approvals, said J. Safra Sarasin, which did not disclose the financial terms of the transaction.

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The probability of completing secondary school for these children could fall by almost 20 percentage points, from 52 percent to 32 percent. This low level of educational attainment for children of disadvantaged families was last reported for cohorts born in the 1960s (!). In contrast, children from highly educated families are hardly affected. The growing educational gap will cause devastating damage to social mobility and equality of opportunity for years to come unless we take the warning signs seriously and act fast. There will be a need to make up for the losses by increasing both the amount and quality of learning time. School systems will need to contemplate extended schedules, summer and after-school programs, and more personalized instruction. Efforts should also be geared to developing online and offline resources available for free and expanding connectivity. Governments should avoid cutting education spending when they face the inevitable need to rein in fiscal deficits. In fact, if anything, fiscal resources devoted to education may need to rise."

A Leonardo Garnier, former education minister of Costa Rica: "In recent decades, Costa Rica has managed to significantly increase high school enrollment, reducing both urban/rural and high/low income educational gaps. However, as in many Latin American countries, the impact of the pandemic could reverse such advances, especially for those students from rural areas, where Internet connectivity is lowest, and for those whose families have been hit hardest by the pandemic. As in-person classes had to be suspended for all of 2020, the Ministry of Education had to resort to a combination of distance-learning instruments, including virtual classes via the Internet, televised lessons, telephone and chat communications. At the same time, a strategy was developed to guide both teachers and students as to how best to achieve and evaluate the priority learning objectives that were established.

There is no doubt that this is not an ideal situation, and it will have a negative and unequal impact on our education. However, at the same time, the crisis might work as an opportunity and as a catalyst for change. It has become obvious that a combination of

“The crisis might work as an opportunity and as a catalyst for change.”

— Leonardo Garnier

pedagogical and technological tools were already available to promote learning, even in the most distant or disadvantaged regions of the country, and to offer real learning options to those students who most need it. The crisis could accelerate national efforts to fully implement such reforms and to guarantee improved access to education both through effective connectivity and adequate teacher training on how to best use these resources."

A Sarah Stanton, senior associate in the Education Program of the Inter-American Dialogue: "Although governments in Latin America and the Caribbean should be commended for their efforts to ensure learning continuity since March, when more than 165 million students stopped attending in-person classes, the education landscape was already marked by inequality. We do not yet have a full picture of the impact of school closures and remote instruction on student learning outcomes, but emerging data show widespread learning losses, most acutely for students who are poor, marginalized or otherwise vulnerable. Projections from the World Bank suggest that seven months of school closures—a benchmark that most countries have already passed—could result in a year of learning loss and, longer-term,

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up to \$1.2 trillion in foregone earnings. This trend is unsurprising given the significant regional connectivity gaps and the resulting struggle to keep students engaged and learning. To prevent compounding these inequalities, governments should target those most at risk, first, to meet basic connectivity and access needs, and in the longer term, through policies expanding access to quality teachers and adequate resources. Students at either end of the formal schooling spectrum may well be the most affected by this pandemic. Early grades are critical for building foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Many secondary students face a combination of sustained time away from school and economic pressures to contribute to family income, which may thwart their return to the classroom. To address these challenges, education ministries should set and communicate priorities emphasizing foundational knowledge and skills, so that teachers have clear curricular guidelines and student outcomes are protected.”

A **Debra Gittler and Zoila Recinos, co-founders of ConTextos in El Salvador:** “As the more affluent continue to advance in their schooling, the impoverished have become ever more marginalized. We have seen reversals in areas where we were seeing progress, namely school abandonment and desertion, returning to traditional patriarchal roles in home and community, physical and emotional violence and ongoing trauma. Without school, our youth are returning to ‘traditional’ roles, especially through girls tending home and family and boys’ hypermasculinization. This is coupled with increased anxiety as well as abuse and assault, which will have devastating long-term

impacts that are not easily resolved. We’ve seen potential in solutions that are hyper-local—smaller organizations with community roots are able to step in, build trust and foster real grassroots solutions that go beyond ‘schooling’ to finally make strides away from the copying, dictation and memorization

“**As the more affluent continue to advance in their schooling, the impoverished have become ever more marginalized.”**

— Debra Gittler & Zoila Recinos

methods that have been so hard to dispel. This is an opportunity to widen our circle of wise teachers, to engage children and youth in learning beyond the traditional canon, and to integrate technology in new ways. With ConTextos, teachers have been meeting regularly via small digital learning pods and ubiquitous technologies such as WhatsApp. Transforming how teachers learn will have an immediate influence on how they teach. We can amplify professional development networks, while going hyper-local for educational innovation and using technology to create cross-border affinity groups. Perhaps the most exciting opportunity is to finally integrate trauma-sensitive programming, to rebuild our curriculum to emphasize socioemotional and socioaffective communication, and address generational cycles of trauma and disenfranchisement.”

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