Call for Inputs: Study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human rights of young people

Submission by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) welcomes the initiative of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to further examine the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the enjoyment of fundamental human rights by children and young people. IFLA is a global organisation for libraries and information professionals, and the submission below draws on the library field's experiences with providing services to children and young adults during the pandemic, and their support of the human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals.

We are grateful in particular to the *Libraries for Children and Young Adults* Section of IFLA for their work on this submission.

Many thanks for this opportunity to provide inputs for this consultation.
Because IFLA is a global organisation, we would like to highlight several insights from different regions which we hope may be useful for OHCHR's work on the upcoming report, and focus on sections 1 and 2 of the questionnaire.

The right to education - *the digital divide*

1) *Challenges.* As emphasised by innumerable stakeholders, the pandemic has had an enormous impact on education – the full extent of which is yet to be measured and quantified in its entirety. To begin with, it would of course be remiss not to mention the digital divide, which has emerged as one of the most prominent challenges during school closures.

Broadly speaking, a 2021 Human Rights Watch report has outlined several key categories comprising the digital divides in access to education. On the students' side, these include: a lack of electricity at home, lack of access to broadcasting channels such as TV or radio (which in some cases were used to roll out lessons substituting in-person education), no internet access (including due to internet shutdowns of unaffordability), unreliable internet access, lack of access to devices, inadequate devices or insufficient access to them, and under-utilisation of existing resources when the ICT infrastructure is in place.[1]

2) *Measures taken*. These inequalities have also been noted by libraries serving young patrons. Public access-based solutions are among the responses and measures taken to address such digital divides. In the USA alone, 93% of public libraries surveyed in 2020 indicated that they leave WiFi available when the library building is closed.[2] Such measures, in turn, saw numerous reports about library "parking lot" internet used extensively to help students close the homework internet gap. Other widespread measures adopted by libraries in different countries include free hotspot, laptop and tablet loans, and more free shared internet access spots installed in outdoor areas, or delivered through library bookmobiles.

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[1] https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/05/17/years-dont-wait-them/increased-inequalities-childrens-right-education-due-covid
[2] https://www.ala.org/pla/sites/ala.org.pla/files/content/advocacy/covid-19/PLA-Libraries-Respond-Survey_Aggregate-Results_FINAL2.pdf

Many such measures have been taken at a library level, while other policies and projects seek to systematically leverage public access solutions. This includes, for example, recent funding support to further expand the number of tablets, laptops and printers available in public libraries across Jamaica, aiming to enable more people to meaningfully participate in online learning. [3]

Such considerations continue to be relevant given the latest wave of (e.g. partial) school closures and class-level quarantines, and we encourage further support for these and other measures to address the digital divides among students.

The right to education - *access to learning materials*

1) *Challenges.* A related impact on the enjoyment of the right to education during the pandemic is linked to access to learning materials. Data gathered for a joint report by UNESCO and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) suggests that a "lack of learning materials for remote teaching" was reported as a limitation for remote learning by more than half of surveyed school principals in several of the 11 countries the report covers. [4]

A shift to digital remote learning in many parts of the world has also prompted an important discussion about the e-book and digital academic resources markets – particularly around affordability and usage terms and conditions (including copyright). Notable examples here include, for example, the #ebooksos campaigns in the UK and Ireland, which draw attention to these pressing challenges. [5]

The importance of these policy dialogues in light of the right to education continues alongside the demand for digital learning resources. In a 2021 survey by the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC), 97% of respondents from the US, Canada and Australia indicated that they expect "increased demand for online resources from faculty & students" to have a long-term impact on the (academic) library landscape which will continue beyond the pandemic. [6]

2) *Measures taken*. Alongside the #ebooksos campaign mentioned above, numerous actions have been taken at both library system- and organisational levels, to provide more access to digital learning and educational materials. In some cases, where possible, this has been achieved by expanding digital collections users can access – as is the case, for example, with the National Library Board of Singapore and many others. [7]

There are also examples of initiatives exploring various channels for digital content delivery, to further boost access to educational materials. One example is, for instance, a government public library in Kota Rajasthan, India – which works to deliver a range of key digital resources through a dedicated WhatsApp group, including materials for both formal study and lifelong learning. [8]

In light of these needs and evolving practices, we encourage further attention to policy dialogues and measures which foster equitable access to educational and learning content, including in digital formats.

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[3] https://jis.gov.jm/features/chase-fund-boosting-services-provided-by-libraries/
[4] https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380398
[5] https://www.libraryassociation.ie/the-ebooksos-campaign-in-ireland
[6] https://sparcopen.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/SPARC-COVID-Impact-Survey-092021.pdf
[7] https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/nlb-adds-8000-e-books-and-other-digital-offerings
[8] https://princh.com/blog-public-library-covid-19-adaptations/

The right to education – *learning outcomes*

1) ***Challenges.*** It is also crucial to consider the emerging evidence around the impacts of the pandemic on educational outcomes and attainment. Clearly, students who may never return to school following school closures is one of the most pressing concerns in this area, with some early data following school closures in several countries suggesting decreases in enrolment, while possible increases in grade repetition rates present another concern.[9]

At the same time, emerging evidence sheds more light on how the pandemic has impacted key skills acquisition among school-age learners. Encouraging evidence from Australia, for instance, suggests that there has been no significant decrease in student performance at the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy exams in 2019 and 2021. However, on a larger scale, a 2021 report The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery by World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF suggests significant losses in reading and maths skills in several countries in different world regions.[10]

Crucially, much like several other key factors impacting children's enjoyment of human rights during the pandemic (such as digital exclusion), the report highlights the multiplication of inequalities – with e.g. girls, children with disabilities, younger students and those from lower-income backgrounds more likely to be impacted by learning losses.

2) ***Measures taken.*** Clearly, efforts to further support learning recovery continue to be critical. One of the tools in the arsenal so far has been non-formal and semi-formal learning support. Various examples of this can be seen in many parts of the world, e.g. in the form of homework and study help (including from libraries in Italy, the UK and other countries). In the US, for instance, the 2020 Public Library Technology Survey reported 36.9% of libraries offering their communities online homework assistance resources.[11]

There are efforts to implement different formulas for such initiatives, to best match local community needs and interests. In January 2020, the New York Public Library, for example, introduced a pilot drop-in (rather than enrolment-based) model for homework help, with tutors and trained young volunteers. A return to in-person help in 2021 saw the programme expanded, offering further opportunities to help counter pandemic-related learning losses.[12]

There are also extensive and varied efforts to facilitate reading habits and competencies. For example, the *Ireland Reads* campaign matches readers with a book fit for their reading skills and preferred genres, which in 2021 saw members of the public pledge more than 900.000 reading minutes for the Ireland Reads Day, February 25.[13]

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[9] https://www.unicef.org/media/111621/file/%20The%20State%20of%20the%20Global%20Education%20Crisis.pdf%20.pdf
[10] Ibid.
[11] https://www.ala.org/pla/sites/ala.org.pla/files/content/data/PLA-2020-Technology-Survey-Summary-Report.pdf
[12] https://nycfuture.org/pdf/CUF_Branches_to_Recovery.pdf
[13] https://www.lgma.ie/en/news/public-pledges-900-000-reading-minutes-for-ireland-reads-campaign.html

In short, non-formal and semi-formal learning support, such as homework assistance in libraries and similar organisations, can be a helpful tool in broadening strategies to address learning losses caused by the pandemic.

The right to health – *mental health and well-being*

1) **Challenges.** There are significant negative documented impacts on children's and young adults' mental health and well-being linked to the pandemic – including isolation, stress and anxiety, and fewer opportunities for socialisation.

In Singapore, for example, a survey rolled out in autumn 2021 reflected "a mix of optimism and anxiety" among youth, with "stressed out" and "anxious" as the most widely reported mental states over the past two months (41% and 37% respectively, followed by "calm" (31%), "overwhelmed" (28%) and "happy" (25%).[14] The *National Online Survey of Children's Well-being During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Japan* tracks school-age students and guardians' responses on children's well-being – including mental health, studying, and exercise. The September 2021 survey results indicated, for example, that 38% of children felt uncomfortable thinking about COVID-19, and more than 25% had difficulties concentrating or were easily irritated.[15]

2) **Measures taken**. Clearly this remains a crucial issue which necessitates a multifaceted response. Within the library field, particularly during library closures, one of the frequently voiced concerns (e.g. in the 2020 School Library Survey UK) has been around reduced access to the physical space of libraries, which provide social and safe spaces for students and support for the more vulnerable or marginalised students.[16]

However, there has been a wide range of efforts to replicate such support both online and, where possible, on-site. One example is "bibliotherapy" (e.g. offered in libraries in Lithuania, Turkey, Australia and other countries),[17] in which books or texts spotlighting, depicting or related to a specific issue are offered to help with coping and addressing the issue and promote overall well-being. Making mental health resources more easily available is another approach libraries have taken to help address these concerns.

Other initiatives that focus on social and emotional well-being, aim to offer children and young adults socialisation and engagement opportunities to support their overall well-being, particularly when there are fewer physical opportunities available elsewhere. For instance, in Singapore, the National Library Board's Children's and Teen services hosted *Teens Takeover,* a programme comprising various online and offline activities, ranging from skills-building workshops and opportunities to study online together to opportunities for socialising and entertainment.[18] In many countries, libraries have been hosting discussion and reading groups and story times for younger children and toddlers as a means of supporting both social inclusion and learning during the pandemic either online or outdoors when safe indoor, in-person activities are not possible. And in the US, there is also a renewed focus on including mindfulness as part of library programming.

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[14] https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/today-youth-survey-majority-more-fearful-less-sociable-due-covid-19-hopeful-better-life
[15] https://www.ncchd.go.jp/center/activity/covid19_kodomo/report/CxC6_digestEn.pdf
[16] https://www.softlinkint.com/blog/impact-of-covid-school-libraries-uk/
[17] https://www.ifla.org/news/literacy-cannot-wait-how-libraries-have-continued-to-fulfil-their-mission-to-promote-literacy-during-covid-19/, https://journals.lnb.lt/relevant-tomorrow/article/view/760
[18] https://childrenandteens.nlb.gov.sg/services/programmes/teenstakeover

While several types of initiatives outlined above are rooted in library practices predating the pandemic, many have been adapted, spotlighted, digitised and/or scaled up to help address the mental health challenges that children and young adults face more recently. In April 2021, for example, Libraries Connected compiled a list of some of the common challenges around children's mental health and well-being, and the ways libraries work to help address these, as well as further resources they can draw on.[19]

In short, to help address the range of concerns around mental health and well-being of children and young adults, supporting existing efforts by libraries and other community-based organisations can be one of the tools to make help more widely available.

Right to an adequate standard of living – *addressing food insecurity*

Clearly, the pandemic has strongly impacted young people's enjoyment of fundamental rights in other key areas as well. The pandemic has caused increased poverty and food insecurity for many households across the globe, particularly for vulnerable households and families.[20] A 2021 report by UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti and the World Food Programme estimated that due to school closures 370 million children worldwide have missed 40% of school meals, a crucial source of nutrition for many of them.[21] These findings therefore highlight the vital importance of comprehensive nutrition services.

Simultaneously, solutions that further assist and enable food distribution are crucial to reach as wide a network of vulnerable community members as possible. In the USA and Canada, there are examples of libraries partnering with food banks and food pantries to provide free lunches, snacks, and in some cases, meals for families;[22] in Greece, the ECHO mobile library has been used as a food delivery vehicle in cooperation with a free food kitchen.[23] Broadly, this highlights the diverse ways that available networks and existing infrastructure can be leveraged to further assist the distribution of vital resources and assistance during the pandemic.

Conclusion

During the pandemic, as schools closed and many young people's formal education moved online, the digital divides have been a major source of disruption. The pandemic caused increased poverty and hunger for vulnerable households, impacts on the mental health and well-being for young people unable to socialise and learn with their peers, and multiplied existing inequalities, including educational ones. Libraries around the world have implemented initiatives to help uphold and deliver on young people's human rights - working to help bridge the digital divides, offering non-formal and semi-formal educational support, engaging young people and their families online and facilitating access to assistance and resources; building upon, expanding or adapting the services they provide to further support the well-being of young people and their families.

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[19] https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/resource/childrens-mental-health-and-wellbeing-guide
[20] https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/brief/food-security-and-covid-19
[21] https://www.unicef.org/rosa/press-releases/nutrition-crisis-looms-more-39-billion-school-meals-missed-start-pandemic-unicef-and
[22] See e.g. https://theconversation.com/why-more-public-libraries-are-doubling-as-food-distribution-hubs-160674, https://www.oclc.org/content/dam/research/publications/2021/oclcresearch-new-model-library-a4.pdf
[23] https://culturalfoundation.eu/stories/echo-mobile-library-mobile-cultural-exchanges/