

# TRENDS IN EDUCATION

The labor and educational  
situation in Latin America in the  
context of the COVID-19 pandemic  
2020 - 2021

EXECUTIVE REPORT



Internacional de la Educación  
América Latina  
IEAL

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# TRENDS IN EDUCATION

*The labor and educational situation in Latin America in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: main trends.*

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# Letter from the President of Education International Latin America Regional Committee

**HUGO YASKY**

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Hugo Yasky is an Argentinian teacher, union leader and politician. He is the president of the Regional Committee of the Education International Latin America and national deputy for the Province of Buenos Aires. Hugo Yasky is General Secretary of the Workers Central of Argentina (CTA) and former Secretary General of the Confederation of Education Workers of the Argentine Republic (CTERA).

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Instead of asking what the pandemic will do to humanity, the most appropriate question seems to be, "What will we do about the pandemic?" This refers to both to matters related to work, jobs and income and to education systems. These are the two major issues addressed by this study, and this general question provides the key to articulating its conclusions with proposals for action.

The global health crisis generated by COVID-19 may sharpen the outlines of existing inequalities. In addition, it will be able to expose the irrationalities that more than forty years of neoliberalism has installed as if they were common sense, although reverting these will take more than a virus. In increasingly unequal societies such as those mass-produced by this system not even death makes us equal. As the Uruguayan singer Alfredo Zitarrosa said, "You may die; that's a question of health. But you wouldn't want to know what a coffin costs."

The context, both economic and educational, prior to the pandemic is central to understanding the effects caused in each of the scenarios in which it occurred. It is not the same to deal with its effects in economically homogeneous societies with high levels of employment registered,

with state investment in health and education, boasting technological resources, adequate school buildings and well-paid teachers, as doing so in countries whose governments have deregulated labor markets, defunded the educational system, reduced budgets and liquidated the tools of state regulation. As this study shows, starting conditions in Latin America are closer to the second case than to the first.

However, this is precisely the point being made; these are conditions, not situations that are impossible to change. The point of departure does not have to be the same as that of arrival. That is why the information collected in thirteen countries from the region also shows the differences in the measures adopted by the states either to preserve jobs and sustain income, or to intervene in education systems, causing widely differing budgetary and financial situations. While in the economic field these conditions have been marked by a decades-long preface towards the process of neoliberalization in the different nations, in the field of education, new privatizing tendencies of and within education were imposed. These trends have implied the introduction of market values to the field of education, the relinquishing of state sovereignty regarding policy formulation, an opening up of education to business barely camouflaged as foundations and NGOs and the consequent privatization of teacher training.

When asked what is being done to confront the pande-



mic, the holders of de facto power respond with two determining principles that are used as a scale to think about the economy and education in our societies. These are, on the one hand, the economic determining principle that conceals the actions of the large business groups as market decisions, and, on the other, the technological determining principle that is seen to be inevitable, not based on transformations in our relationship with technological environments, but rather the political, economic and social uses of these changes with regards to benefiting a few at the expense of the masses. Historical changes do not come with a user manual that enables people merely to press buttons.

The work of teaching has initiated a process of transformation that will not be stopped. The responses made to the health crisis, with the unplanned multiplication of distance education technologies, accelerate this process of transformation. However, what is important is not whether changes will occur or not, but rather who will govern those changes and how they will be achieved. And there are clearly two options here: Either they are governed by democratic powers with the full and effective participation of society and its workers, or they are governed by the de facto powers. Virtual education delivered by means of technological devices can support the social right to improve teaching and learning conditions, or it can act as a mechanism of commercialization that places a limited number of companies in a dominant position.

The horizons opened by information technologies that will last after the pandemic could either serve to increase the productivity of teaching by means of overloaded and deregulated conditions or, on the contrary, could contribute to improving the working conditions of teaching. The use of technology can free teachers from certain burdens linked to traditional classroom learning or, conversely, condemn these to working days without limits or with very diffuse limits. It can generate new teleworking regulations protecting labor rights or, as already happens in higher education institutions, make face-to-face classes more flexible by adding students via virtual technology and maximizing teacher exploitation. But that

decision does not lie in technology, as those who hide their interests under the cloak of naturalization claim, but rather it is political.

Similarly, when it comes to planning a return to safe face-to-face education, it is not the same to design bubble strategies in classrooms with 40 students as it is in those with 20 students, nor is it the same with teachers assigned to one or two institutions as those for mobilized teachers who have positions in five or six different schools. It is not the same to maintain health and safety conditions in overcrowded establishments, lacking ventilation, auxiliary personnel and sometimes running water, as in spacious environments appropriate to educational work. In this sense, we will have to reconfigure educational systems, their institutional characteristics and their conditions of habitability as do cities that have suffered from earthquakes and have had to restructure an anti-seismic urban architectural landscape.

This study, carried out from the perspective of education workers, makes an indispensable contribution to this redesign in glimpsing many of the coming dilemmas, or rather, the contradictions currently present that will develop further in the coming years. It is important to ask whether online or distance learning will use open and free-to-download platforms or if the commercial logic of the large information technology monopolies will prevail. With respect to the need for connectivity, will this imply the extension of the human right to communication or will it deepen the gap of educational inequality? Will the necessary updating and distribution of educational content be defined in sovereign participatory forums of state governments, or in ministries that function as facilitators for the global education market?

The answer to these questions and many derived and related questions will depend on the strength of the trade union organizations, the will and capacity of popular forces and the effective limits that public policies place on the power of unrestrained capitalism. The state of affairs outlined in this EILA material makes a substantial contribution to the development of these countervailing strategies. ■

# Foreward

**ADRIANA PUIGGRÓS**

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Adriana Puiggrós has a Degree of Science in Education and a PhD in Pedagogy. She was Secretary of Education of the Ministry of Education of Argentina. Previously, she held various positions in public management, among which the following stand out: Constituent Conventional, Deputy of the Nation, General Director of Culture and Education of the Province of Buenos Aires, among others.

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School systems are facing great challenges, which are unprecedented in their previous two centuries of history. Among others, it is worth highlighting the effects of the deterioration of the environment and the emergence of powerful new actors in the field of education, such as those dedicated to its commercialization. Both situations are causing institutional, pedagogical and labor disturbances, among many others. It is essential to examine these in detail in order to understand the depth of the changes that are taking place so as to make political-educational decisions in the face of the immediate events and to plan strategies for the medium term. In this regard, it is worth taking into consideration the research carried out by the trade unions of education workers, who are directly affected in their working conditions, their professional field and their social rights.

Environmental groups and scientists have warned about the possibility of an environmental catastrophe, just as important international agreements have tried to limit the expansion of public and private policy within the framework of neoliberal capitalism. These policies endanger not only the quality of life on earth, but also its very existence. The COVID-19 pandemic came before countries complied with the measures that had been agreed upon and before their populations became aware of the problem threatening them, before educational policies could fully address the environmental issue (beyond, of course, environmental educational experiences and the struggle of teachers against pollution that directly affects many schools in the region).



Normal life in schools, like that of all institutions, was shattered by the sudden onset of the pandemic and the urgency of readjusting the functioning of schooling. As can be expected, different social subjects reacted in different ways; teachers, who may have instead opted to prioritize their individual security, primarily assumed the social responsibility of continuing with students' education. But they had to do so by opening up to a very different scenario than the one that had characterized their work previously.

National and international corporations had been promoting private education, trying to introduce this into state institutions, but in the advent of the pandemic they have broken down the retaining wall protecting public policy. They insisted that the need to continue the educational process could find consistent support in the new technologies at the same time as viewing favorably the enormous dearth of legislation on the market for communication, digital, editorial and educational products. Additionally, these companies were in a better position (and in many cases were more disposed) than many governments to address the urgency for solutions demanded by the situation. The establishment of digital networks, the provision of equipment and the sale of educational software were quickly offered by corporations to national and subnational governments. Transnational banks and agencies encouraged states to partner with corporations, as this report shows. Although taking up different

proportions of public and private intervention, market options made inroads into all Latin American education systems.

As for the actions of governments, EILA's work reports on significant differences between those who sustained investment in education, those who decreased it, and those who increased contributions as a result of the pandemic. The impact of education on the public policies of each country prior to the pandemic was a major factor in state responses that, alongside social inequality, led to an increase in educational inequality. At the same time, as the report points out, the dismantling of the public system caused by market policies has created widening "learning gaps" between public and private sectors.

The growing participation of the market in education acts to accentuate privilege, marginalization and social exclusion. It should be added that replacing students as the subjects of education with clients is a transplant that profoundly changes the nature of public education. In this chain of logic, the new subject of education becomes the product of selection made by the market, so displacing any democratic educational strategy. Commercialized education also aims to disrupt the teaching subject by applying meritocratic criteria and privileging digital programs over face-to-face activities in order to reduce the number of education workers, change their working conditions, and avoid their mediation in the formation of new generations.

The report succeeds in addressing Latin America as a region, providing quantitative and qualitative information that allows the comparison and grouping of countries according to the different variables that are specified. The references included make it possible to place the current situation of the countries in the context of their recent history and to weigh the impact of economic and social policies on the capacity and decisions made by governments to deal with the effects of the pandemic on education. In this context, it is shown

there is an imminent need to strengthen teacher unions to support education as a universal right. This includes the right to teach, which, when defined by neoliberalism, becomes blurred along with the teaching subject, so seriously affecting the transmission of culture between generations and social sectors.

The reduction of educational systems to non-face-to-face formats leaves them hostage to the market, in addition to constituting a short-range cultural and educational solution. Defending the centrality of school life should be combined with the incorporation of digital options, although this should be as a complementary support that enriches the teaching-learning process. Teachers must therefore master technology; it is essential that governments, universities, and teacher training institutions systematically support the technological training that teachers and professors have acquired through their own means to deal with the emergency.

It is becoming increasingly clear that states must hegemonize the necessary changes in education. These changes include the combination of different technological supporting resources with a major focus on face-to-face interactions. Strong public policies are required to "produce digital tools ( ... ) designed with the participation of teachers, with the possibility of free downloading and open access, and that avoid the tracking of personal information for commercial purposes," as the report states. It is essential that teachers be actively involved in the production and use of non-face-to-face programs, as well as those for use in combination with educational work in schools, together with strong regulations on this matter.

Public education systems are pillars of national and regional sovereignty. Agreements in this regard between Latin American countries are the path towards sustaining the rights of education workers, achieving progress in reducing socio-educational inequality and enshrining education as a universal right. ■

## General introduction

The pandemic caused by the expansion of the COVID-19 coronavirus on a global scale has affected all nations, making a deep impact on the group of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean by directly impinging on deep structural and economic inequalities. The health crisis, the economic recession and the consequences of physical distancing on the social whole have led the region to an unprecedented situation that is juxtaposed with preexisting critical situations at economic and political-social levels. Unemployment and poverty, inequality of access to connectivity and the availability of digital resources and devices, differing situations in housing conditions and home settings, the possibility of having families to support, the confinement of quarantine while working in the same space along with assisting with the education of children in the home, as well as the different working conditions in each country, all impact on the deepening of social and educational inequalities, as well as the precariousness of the conditions of employment in general and of the teaching profession in particular.

This report, prepared by Education International for Latin America (EILA) contains an analysis of the social, employment and educational situation in the countries of the region and the future of this situation after 2020 in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The investigation work and the preparation of the final report were carried out by the research teams of the Centro de Investigación y Formación de la República Argentina (CIFRA, Center for Investigation and Training of the Argentine Republic)<sup>1</sup> belonging to the Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina (CTA, Argentine Workers' Central Union), the Instituto de Investigaciones "Marina Vilte" (IIPMV, Marina Vilte Research Institute)<sup>2</sup> belonging to the Confederación de Trabajadores de la Educación de la República Argentina (CTERA, Argentine Republic Education Workers' Confederation), and the Instituto de Estudio y Capacitación (IEC, Institute for Investigation and Training)<sup>3</sup> belonging to the Federación Nacional de Docentes Universitarios (CONADU, National Federation of University Teaching Staff).

<sup>1</sup> Made up of Eduardo Basualdo, Mariano Barrera, Mariana González and Pablo Manzanelli. Damián Kennedy collaborated in the making of this report.

<sup>2</sup> Made up of Adriana Puiggrós, Miguel Duhalde, Eduardo Pereyra, María Dolores Abal Medina, Liliana Pascual, Andrea Núñez, Gabriel Martínez, Daniela Baradel, Cecilia Dupuy and Paula Matheu; and with the special advice for this study by Myriam Feldfeber.

<sup>3</sup> Made up of Yamile Socolovsky, Lucia Trotta, Daniela Atairo and Aldana Rodríguez Golisano.

To obtain the information, a self-administered survey was conducted among the teacher unions that are members of EILA, covering the following countries: **Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela.** In turn, the information collected in the survey was complemented and triangulated with other sources of available data, both documentary and journalistic in nature, and with the conducting of interviews with trade union leaders from the major organizations.

In the study, by way of a general context, a description is made of the impact of the pandemic on economic activity and the labor market in the different countries, with an analysis and survey of the preexisting trends regarding the commercialization and privatization of education and the increasingly precarious status of working conditions in the education sector. Focus is then made on the evolution of these trends during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, the measures adopted by the region's governments/states, as well as the actions and strategies developed by education unions, have been systematized and typified in order to identify the different facets and problems that have worsened or become more intense in societies during this crisis and the extent to which these have progressed or encountered resistance.

As a result of this process of investigation, this trend report is structured into three sections. The first section focuses on the situation of labor markets in Latin America during the pandemic. The second section analyses the impact of the health crisis on national education systems and on teaching. The third section addresses the processes of the privatization and commercialization of higher education in the region during the pandemic.

The first section<sup>4</sup> presents a succinct but panoramic overview of how the pandemic and economic recession have impacted the labor market in Latin American countries. To do so, it begins by identifying the relevant structural characteristics and preexisting trends regarding labor matters, in particular in

<sup>4</sup> Report coordinated by CTA's CIFRA.

relation to the quality of employment, the incidence of poverty and of unemployment. In addition, it reviews the main policies adopted by the different governments with regards to the preservation of employment and income in the context of the pandemic. Finally, detailed analysis is made of the evolution of the labor market in the different countries in the region, highlighting common trends as well as differences with a special focus on employment.

The section dedicated to national education systems and teaching<sup>5</sup> gives an account of the trends during 2020, starting from the pre-pandemic situation in the different countries and considering the main strategies deployed by governments to adapt to the pandemic. In addition, it analyzes the participation and interference of the private sector in the field of education through the actions carried out in this context by international financing organizations, transnational organizations, NGOs, foundations and private companies. Finally, the section describes the effects of the pandemic on teaching, including among the main issues working and wage conditions, task intensification and the demands for education and training for virtual teaching.

In the third section dedicated to higher education<sup>6</sup>, analysis is made of the deepening of some aspects of the process of privatization and commercialization in the region within the context of the responses deployed to the challenge of sustaining higher education teaching with institutions closed for face-to-face classes and the impact of this on working conditions. As part of this trend, highlight is made of the generalization of a funding strategy based on demand that transfers public funds to private institutions in financial crisis, and the formation of various alliances between the public and the private sector proposed to solve joint problems while being installed in a discourse based on the changes needed in higher education which legitimize the intervention of business corporations in the definition and management of public policy for the sector.

Equating what has happened in the context of the pandemic with the image of a shipwreck, we can say that in an emergency we always resort to what is

<sup>5</sup> Report coordinated by CTERA's IIPMV.

<sup>6</sup> Report coordinated by CONADU's IEC.

nearest to hand, as we are logically driven to do by the instinct for survival. In this sense, the report shows that during the year 2020 the vast majority of measures were taken without enough due discussion about which rescue raft is best built to reach the nearest coast.

This report shows how in the context of the pandemic what was often presented as “closest to hand” in the process of structural transformation and the digitalization of the everyday has been the presence and repositioning of large private companies that provide goods and services. Trade union organizations have therefore warned about this problem, which may become aggravated in the future if state policies do not generate the relevant regulations and initiatives necessary to guarantee the right to education. Should this not occur, the field would be left free of resistance against the advancing of commercial interests.



**LATIN AMERICAN  
LABOR MARKETS  
IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC  
POLICIES AND IMPACTS  
ON EMPLOYMENT  
AND INCOME**

## Structural characteristics and previous trends in labor markets in Latin America

The COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic caused a global crisis that is at once economic, social and humanitarian in nature, which continues to be underway, and of which the final effects continue to be unknown. The world will change in various ways following this pandemic, and there have been numerous discussions about this. We will most certainly see changes in the means of production and the way working and living are carried out.

With regard to our region, the limited scope of this report, and the content developed in this section, we sought to analyze how the labor market was affected in 2020 as a result of the pandemic and, in turn, to relate these impacts to preexisting structures and trends in labor matters. It is hoped that this information will also contribute to thinking about what changes may occur in the future, and how workers should prepare to collectively face those changes.

In relation to the structural characteristics of Latin American countries, two aspects were highlighted that, going beyond the differences between nations, are specific to the region and involve problems that differ from those of developed countries.

On the one hand, this is an employment structure featuring a high contingent of self-employed workers and, more generally, of employment in the so-called urban informal sector. Prior to 2020, there was a high proportion of employment in the informal sector in all the countries analyzed, from just under 30% in Chile to the maximum levels of 50% or more in Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. Historically, occupations in the informal sector have tended to function as a “refuge”, increasing in situations of socio-labor crisis. It will be seen that, in particular in the current crisis, this type of employment was found to be especially exposed in the context of economic crisis, above all, showing the greatest difficulties in being protected by labor legislation and the various policy measures taken for the preservation of jobs.

On the other hand, there preexisted abysmally higher levels of poverty than those existing in developed countries, which implies that this crisis hit households that were already in situations of previous hardship, with fewer assets, less savings and lesser possibilities of coping with conditions of isolation and reduced income. Also

regarding poverty, the differences between countries are significant: from incidences of below 5% in Chile and Uruguay to values close to or above 30% in Colombia and Nicaragua according to World Bank measurements quantifying the percentage of the population whose average per capita income is below USD\$ 5.50 (PPP) per day.

It is not a coincidence that levels of informality and poverty are correlated, such that countries whose labor markets are characterized by a greater percentage in the informal sector also tend to have greater incidence of poverty.

In addition to the structural labor and social problems of the countries in the region, the labor market was already showing general marked difficulties at the time of the outbreak of the pandemic. The unemployment rate, which can be considered the most representative synthetic indicator, had experienced an increase in most countries, either because of declines in the employment rate or because of greater increases in the economically active population than in jobs. While higher unemployment implies an imbalance of forces against the workers, regressive labor reforms as well as attempts to advance in this direction were followed in several countries, continuing the trend in the region occurring since the 1990s. In this respect, it is worth mentioning the Brazilian reform of 2017, the frustrated attempt for reform in Argentina in the same year, the project in Uruguay at the beginning of 2020 and the reform of the state promoted in Paraguay.

## Measures to preserve jobs and sustain family income

In this general regional context, the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic erupted in March 2020. Faced with the economic and social crisis this was to cause, several governments in the region adopted measures aimed at sustaining businesses and preserving jobs on the one hand, and compensating for income losses for those households whose members suffered total or partial reductions in their work income on the other. Some countries took such measures very early, anticipating the depth of the looming crisis, while others reacted later. Some extended the measures throughout 2020 and even until the beginning of 2021, while others concentrated the policies on the months in which the decline in economic activity had the greatest social impact. Similarly, the amounts associated with these policies were also variable in accordance with economic needs and budgetary constraints, but also with the political decisions made by each government.

A significant number of the countries made direct state contributions to prevent the breakdown of labor relations. These contributions were based on subsidies on the wage bill and/or on the extension of unemployment insurance to cover situations of suspensions or reductions of working hours.

In this sense, policy comparison shows the differences between the varying models adopted by unemployment insurance or unemployment funds. In those countries associated with individual capitalization accounts such as Chile, Costa Rica, Colombia and Peru, withdrawals made by workers were taken from their accumulated funds, being limited to that availability and, in turn, affecting the possibility of drawing on these in the future. This was not the case for insurance which is not of this type.

Targeting those who lost their jobs, unemployment insurance was also modified and made more flexible in order to cover a higher percentage of the unemployed, with a higher relative income and/or for a longer period of time. But beyond such modifications, this is not a policy with such broad coverage compared to other types of policies implemented, given the low coverage that this type of insurance has since it is linked exclusively to formal salaried employment.

With respect to formal employment, it should be noted that as economic activity recovered, some of the policies initially implemented were modified or finalized and,

instead, others were designed, aiming at the reintegration of workers and an increase in employment.

The high proportion of informality in the labor structure of Latin American countries meant that a highly significant portion of the most vulnerable occupations suffered more greatly during the pandemic. To reach these workers, the policies implemented in various countries were the making of monetary transfers (or those in kind) to families lacking formal income. In many cases, this meant reaching a group of households and populations that were not previously covered by programs of this type, i.e. incorporating a population previously not considered as a subject of public policy.

In relation to this type of policy, some countries, such as Argentina and Brazil, implemented more universal coverage criteria for income support, thereby covering a large part of the population and households with informal workers, while others such as Chile—particularly in the first months—and Paraguay focused on specific groups.

The fiscal effort implicit in the measures taken by countries has been partially measured by CEPAL, based on information up to the month of May, which in some cases was based on announcements. Drawing on this information, heterogeneous situations can be observed. On average, spending on measures announced to face the coronavirus pandemic came to 3.2% of the GDP, with six countries spending above that value, these being: Chile, Peru, Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina and Panama, in descending order. It should also be noted that three of the 14 countries selected spent percentages below 1% of the GDP, these being Uruguay, the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica, while Mexico was very close to that value.

## The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on economic activity and the labor market

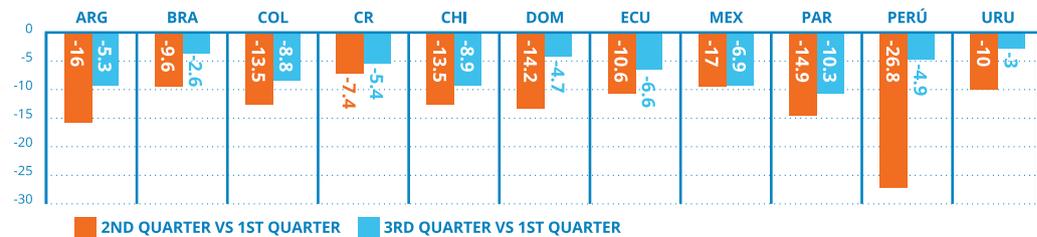
Since the first case of infection with COVID-19 coronavirus in the region was confirmed at the end of February 2020, the disease quickly spread to all countries, and with the same speed expanded its economic effects given the limitations on the movement of people—whether due to quarantine, self-isolation or social distancing—and the need to impose the total or partial closure of a variety of activities, as well as the restrictions imposed by the pandemic on production and consumption. The recession was deep and occurred in all countries regardless of the severity of the health measures taken.

Indeed, the GDP fell sharply in all countries holding records, albeit with marked heterogeneities. In the second quarter, the reduction in GDP relative to the first quarter was within a range of 7.4% (Costa Rica) and 17.0% (Mexico), with the sole exception of Peru where it fell by 26.8%.

Although the pandemic was far from being eradicated, the number of infected people tended to decrease in the second part of the year<sup>7</sup> and restrictions on the functioning of economic activities were relaxed. In this context, in the third quarter these economies as a whole experienced a relative recovery from the previous collapse. Levels of economic activity, however, continued below pre-pandemic levels in all countries. The rates of the decreases from the first quarter range from 2.6% in Brazil to 10.3% in Paraguay.

<sup>7</sup> As is well known, infections reemerged in some countries with even greater intensity than they had initially suffered at its worst moments in the last weeks of 2020.

### Change in GDP at constant prices in seasonally adjusted local currency, 2nd and 3rd quarters of 2020 in relation to the 1st quarter. In percentage

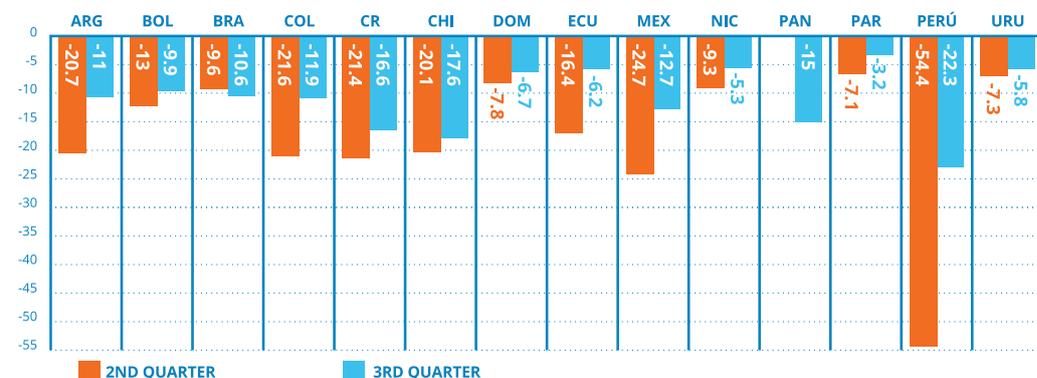


Source: compiled by CIFRA based on statistical institutes and central banks in the various countries.

In this scenario of the widespread decline in GDP, this chapter focuses on the impact of this on the labor market. To this end, it takes information from household surveys published by the national statistics institutes of each of the 14 countries for which these data are available: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay.

The main impact is undoubtedly the collapse in the level of employment. Three groups of countries can be identified according to the magnitude of the decline experienced in the year's second quarter: in Bolivia, Brazil, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Dominican Republic and Uruguay the decline was between 7% and 13%; in Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Ecuador and Mexico it was between 15% and 25%; and in the extreme case of Peru it was 55%.

### Variation in the number of employed. 2nd and 3rd Quarter of 2020 in relation to the 1st Quarter. In percentage



Source: Compiled by CIFRA based on national statistical institutes.

Taking into consideration strictly the universe of analysis of this report (mainly the large urban areas of the 14 countries), in the second quarter about 34 million jobs were lost. If the survey information is extrapolated to national totals, it can be estimated that approximately 46 million jobs were lost in total in that quarter.

Despite the fact that the economy showed a significant retraction in this period, the decrease suffered in employment was even stronger. In fact, in only three countries for which information is available was the decline in employment less than that of economic activity, with these countries being Paraguay, the Dominican Republic and Uruguay. In the other countries, the decline in employment was magnified, with this effect being particularly significant in Peru, where employment fell at a rate that doubled that of productive activity, and in Costa Rica, where it almost tripled this. The degree of worker informality, which is presented below, was probably associated with this abrupt reduction in employment and is another example of the degree of vulnerability of these occupations.

In the third quarter in all countries with the exception of Brazil there was a recovery in employment that accompanied the economic improvement. However, in no case was this sufficient to reverse what had happened previously and the level of employment in the third quarter remained below levels at the beginning of the year.

The following countries can be grouped together due to the similar scenarios they experienced: Ecuador, Paraguay and Uruguay showed a decrease of less than 10% in the first quarter; Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico had reductions of between 10% and 12%; Costa Rica, Chile and Panama had reductions between 15% and 20%; while Peru, despite the significant recovery in employment, experienced a decline between the first and the third quarter that exceeded 20%. In absolute terms, in this quarter there were 22.5 million less jobs there existed before the pandemic.

The decreases in the level of employment between these quarters were generally stronger than declines in the level of economic activity, with the sole exceptions of Paraguay and Ecuador. Of the 11 countries for which comparable data are available, the most extreme cases stand out in Costa Rica, where the reduction in employment tripled that of the GDP, and Brazil and Peru, where it more than quadrupled this.

The sharp contraction in employment in the second quarter meant a general increase in the unemployment rate, except in Paraguay and Uruguay, where it re-

mained relatively constant, and the Dominican Republic, where it showed a sharp decline. This increase is very different from country to country, not only because of the magnitude of the decline in employment in each case, but also because a significant part of those who lost their jobs withdrew—at least temporarily—from the labor market, being unable to seek employment, and so being classified as economically inactive. In all countries, considering the extrapolation of data to the national level, the increase in the number of unemployed was almost 4 million.

In the third quarter, beyond the general increase in employment, there was not an automatic decrease in unemployment, since a portion of the people who had previously been inactive rejoined the labor market. Unemployment rates, which in all cases were higher than in the second quarter, were above 10% of the economically active population in Argentina, Chile and Peru and above 20% in Colombia and Costa Rica. In the group of countries analyzed, the unemployed population in this quarter was 6.7 million higher than in the first.

It should not be forgotten that, in the years leading up to 2020, there was a trend towards increasing unemployment in most countries, which was sharply exacerbated as a result of the pandemic. Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico and Peru, where the unemployment rate had not been growing, are among the countries where it expanded the most.

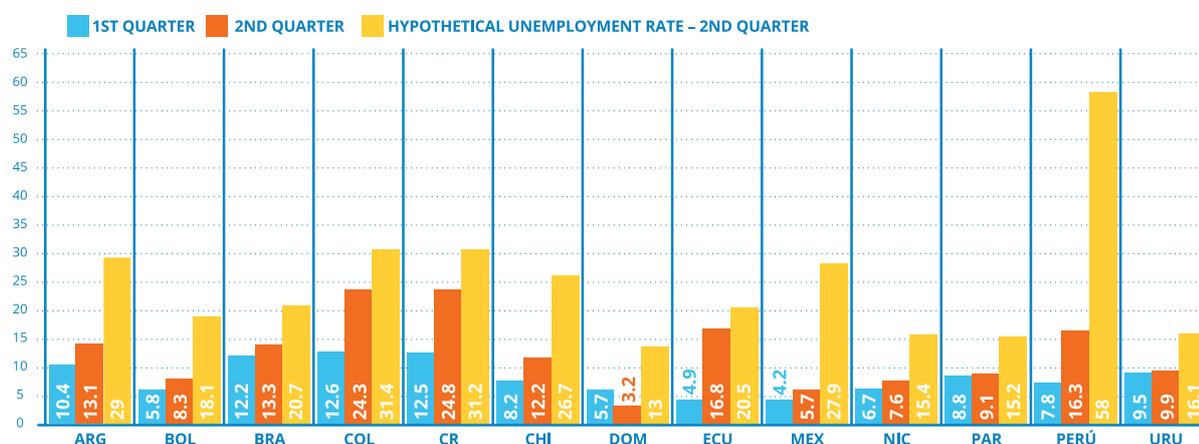
However, the evolution of the unemployment rate does not at all reflect the magnitude of the decrease in the level of employment. In the second quarter, given the situation of the total or partial shutdown of economic activities, measures for the restriction of the movement of people, fear and self-isolation, those who lost their jobs for the large part did not actively pursue other occupations due to not being able to circulate, the idea that another job would not be available and/or waiting to find out if recovering original occupations or activities was a possibility. These people were thus classified as economically inactive.

In the second quarter, the proportion of lost employment that was absorbed by the economically inactive population was above 85% in ten of the countries, while in the other three countries of Colombia, Costa Rica and Ecuador the proportion of the decline in employment absorbed by inactivity was between 30% and 50%. Thus, the economically inactive population increased by 42 million people on extrapolating the observed trends to the total population.

In the third quarter, a significant proportion of the inactive population returned to the labor market. This implies that, just as at first a significant part of those who were left without employment did not actively seek work (either due to restrictions on movement and/or low expectations), later they did so, either because of decreased restrictions on mobility and/or the imperative need to obtain an income several months after the loss of the source of work. Between the first and the third quarter, the economically inactive population grew by 22 million.

In order to illustrate the complete effect that the decline in employment would have had on unemployment if the aforementioned transition to inactivity had not occurred, a hypothetical exercise is proposed: computing the unemployment rate that would have been established if the total decrease in employment had resulted in an increase in unemployment. In the second quarter, this hypothetical unemployment rate would have been much higher than the effective rate in most countries, in all cases being above double digits, exceeding 20% in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador and Mexico, 30% in Colombia and Costa Rica and reaching almost 60% in Peru. These figures show more fully the dramatic situation suffered by workers in those months, which is not completely reflected in the increase in open unemployment.

**Unemployment rate. 1st and 2nd Quarters (effective and hypothetical).  
In percentages**



Source: Compiled by CIFRA based on national statistical institutes.

Although in the third quarter a reduction in the hypothetical unemployment rate was observed both due to the relative recovery of employment and the return of many workers to active status, this rate was at least in the double digits in the fourteen countries analyzed. In Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Panama and Peru it exceeded 20%.

It can be concluded, based on the evidence presented, that there was a very strong reduction in employment in the region, associated with, but even more intense than, the decline in economic activity. To examine this topic in further depth, an analysis of the evolution of employment was also presented, which differentiates between employment categories and informal work.

First, on the basis of the available information, the variation in self-employment (non-salaried workers) was compared with that of total employment. It should be remembered that this type of employment is over-represented in Latin America, as it is in developing countries in general with respect to developed countries.

In five of the ten countries for which information on this category is held, the reduction of self-employment was observed to be markedly higher than that of total employment, while in four other countries the retractions were similar. Only in Paraguay is there a different pattern, in which self-employment hardly declined.

This greater relative decline in self-employment can be seen as a strong indication that the informal sector appears not to have played the typical role of “buffer” for the labor market; it did not constitute a refuge from the possibility of unemployment but rather the opposite, with its sharp decline boosting the loss of jobs. In effect, the reduction in self-employment accounts for no less than a third of the total job loss in all countries except Paraguay, and in some cases it is much higher than that proportion.

This situation was partially modified in several of the countries towards the third quarter; while the decline in self-employment was intense in relative terms in the second quarter, its relative recovery was also greater in the third quarter with respect to total employment.

Secondly, the relative evolution of informal or unregistered employment is differentiated. As could be expected given that this type of employment by its nature is more unstable and has fewer possibilities of protection via state regulation, its de-

cline was even more pronounced than that of employment in general in both the second and third quarters. Since Latin American countries are characterized by a high degree of non-registration in their employment structure, it may be thought that this has had a greater impact in terms of job loss compared to developed countries.

The difference in the degree of adjustment suffered by non-salaried or self-employed workers, as well as unregistered jobs, can be taken as evidence of the increase in the degree of inequality in Latin American societies. These types of jobs, which are concentrated on the lowest levels of income, were the ones that declined the most and which at the same time showed the greatest difficulty in being recognized by the different policies aimed at preserving jobs. For this reason, as mentioned, income transfer policies to households without formal income were generalized in the different countries as a way of providing income to these workers and their families.

On analysis of employment by branch of activity, it can be concluded that the branches that suffered the highest decline relating to employment were construction in the second quarter, and hotels, restaurants, domestic services, artistic activities, entertainment, recreation and other service activities in both quarters analyzed. This list is not surprising, since these are activities particularly affected by isolation and social distancing, a problem seen repeated on a worldwide scale.

The branch of education, on the other hand, does not show marked declines in employment relative to total employment in any of the countries for which there is information with the corresponding degree of openness. This may be linked to the fact that even without classroom attendance, different forms of distance or virtual learning were maintained, as detailed in this report. On the other hand, its association to a large extent with public employment at its various levels certainly also contributed to the greater preservation of jobs.

Finally, information is included on the evolution of the real income of those who maintained their employment. Of particular note are the reductions in labor income of non-salaried workers and the self-employed, whose income is necessarily more unstable, being subject to the variability that the demand for their products or services may have. The reduction in the employment income of wage earners is generally limited, which may be influenced by a change in the composition of these wage earners, since presumably those who were most affected by the loss of employment were those with lower relative incomes.

A close summary of the evidence found shows the depth of this socio-economic crisis in Latin America. Given the preexisting structure of labor markets, which are characterized by the high proportion of non-salaried workers and informality, low incomes and high levels of poverty and inequality, the crisis can be understood to have hit households in the region particularly hard. Households whose members had more unstable and unprotected job placements had to be assisted through comprehensive income transfer policies because of the difficulty of protecting jobs and incomes through other types of policies. Even so, in the face of massive job losses and declining income, there were undoubtedly sharp increases in the incidence of poverty and an intensification of inequality in 2020.

The panorama towards the end of 2020, the effects of which are likely to persist in “post-pandemic” times, shows a significant part of the working class struggling for survival and workers as a whole in a weakened position in the face of rising unemployment and loss of income. In view of this, it is crucial to organize to stop the attacks that may occur in relation to the implementation of unprotected forms of recruitment, the further deterioration of working conditions and the flexibilization of working hours and tasks. The labor reform agenda continues to be a threat. For countries in which regressive legal reforms have already taken place, the context of the pandemic has made it easy to implement these, and in some cases regulatory changes were even made in 2020 that affected job stability and working conditions.

In view of another agenda wielded as a threat by multilateral agencies, such as the reform of the social security system, collective organization is also important in the defense of policies that guarantee minimum social protection to families in the worst conditions of exclusion whose situation was made worse this year.

**NATIONAL EDUCATION  
SYSTEMS AND TEACHING  
IN THE CONTEXT  
OF THE COVID-19  
PANDEMIC**



## National education systems: the roles of the state, private providers and international organizations

During the coronavirus pandemic, the governments of all countries in the region have developed different educational actions with various separate and combined devices, in order to support both teaching and learning processes and educational communication.

None of the educational systems were prepared (nor had thought about) moving suddenly en masse from the "schooling" format to educational practice carried out in the homes of students and their respective families. The different alternatives and definitions of educational policy that were implemented "on the fly" in this context, were conditioned mainly by the status of the systems in respect to their background in the use of educational technologies, the availability of platforms and virtual environments on different scales, the possibilities of access and connectivity, and the availability of resources and digital media, among others.

Most of the unions affiliated with Education International report that it was not possible to achieve educational continuity with all students in their countries, that digital solutions did not allow the maintenance of teaching-learning processes, and that, in many countries in the region, governments have not promoted programs to strengthen education budgets.

Neither teaching staff nor families had access to connectivity and equipment (computers, telephones) and the ability of families to have the time and conditions to provide accompaniment to students was a limiting factor.

In both private and public sectors, teachers incurred expenses to provide technological equipment and to pay for connectivity data or broadband internet in order to teach classes. That is, teaching staff supported their work with their own funds and "subsidized" solutions based on digital tools.

In addition to limited access to the internet and the scarcity of technological resources accessible to the majority of the population, the educational contents available in most of the portals of the Ministries of Education were not designed to facilitate virtual education and meeting the school curricula of each country, but rather are predesigned standardized materials, which should be understood to be complementary material for use in the classroom.

The use of these digital materials (their downloading or browsing on the portals of the Ministries of Education) requires access to broadband or at least unlimited data.

For this reason, and given the need to include all students, other educational alternatives have also been developed based on the use of television, radio and printed materials. In this sense, with some differences in the model implemented, during the pandemic all countries have offered television programs teaching educational content, with some of these also having been complemented by radio programs, especially aimed at populations living in rural areas.

Countries such as Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Peru, Panama and Paraguay also developed printed materials for people who do not have access to digital and audiovisual media. This has proved extremely important for the integration of sectors in situations of social vulnerability or living in rural areas. In some of these countries, such as Peru, Panama, and Paraguay, printed material is available not only in Spanish but also in indigenous languages. In Argentina, these are also available in audible format for students with visual disabilities. At the same time, in several countries, such as Argentina, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay, work has been done on the implementation of curricular adaptations, prioritizing and reorganizing some knowledge in the current curriculum.

It is important to analyze this prioritization and reorganization of content, taking into account that, for two decades, the region has been under pressure from financial and multisectoral actors (the World Bank, the OECD, the Inter-American Development Bank) that promote the reduction and standar-

dization of educational content based on content favorable to standardized evaluations. That is why, in the context of the pandemic, even with connectivity problems resolved, educational mediation faces challenges because digital responses have been implemented as emergency responses and are not designed from a pedagogical perspective nor with teacher participation. Education International for Latin America has focused on the importance of safeguarding the pedagogical relevance of state responses.

In all the countries analyzed, differences were found in the responses of educational institutions according to the management sector to which they belong. Basically, private schools, which generally receive students from the middle and upper income sectors, have been able to make greater use of resources and tools that require connectivity. For their part, in public institutions, there have been more difficulties in sustaining non-face-to-face classes, because these schools are more concentrated among the most vulnerable sectors and those living in rural areas, where access and connectivity are less widespread, and where there is a great shortage of technological resources.

The resources of the state defined in budgetary and educational financing policies have meant a strong objective material condition on the basis of which different countries' decisions to allocate resources for education in the context of pandemic were made. In this regard, it should be recognized that all countries (with different nuances) already had high preexisting levels of social and economic inequality existing among families.

During the context of the pandemic, there was a sharp decline in economic activity, production and tax collection. To this must be added the redirection of a large part of the states' resources towards the priorities required by the sanitary and epidemiological crisis. One of the main consequences of this was the decrease in educational funding relative to GDP. Some governments specifically aimed to reduce the education budget in response to their lower revenue, while others tried to support it in order to reduce the negative effects of the pandemic on educational continuity. In almost all countries there were problems of under-implementation of the budget, especially due to delays in work on school infrastructure and building improvement plans.

Four types of budgetary and educational funding situations to address the pandemic that occurred in the region can be identified: a) countries that reduced the budget and did not make special subsidies for education (Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Panama, Paraguay, Uruguay); b) countries that did not reduce the budget and did not award special education subsidies (Honduras and Peru); c) countries that did not reduce the budget and that introduced special subsidies for education (Dominican Republic and El Salvador); and d) countries that increased the budget and made special education subsidies (Argentina).

One of the common trends in countries was that Ministries of Education proceeded to establish digital solutions and alliances with transnational technology corporations without consulting or generating a dialog with teacher unions. In the context of these transformations in the modes of teaching and learning as a consequence of government decisions to suspend face-to-face classes, a greater participation of the private business sector offering their services in the field of education has occurred, which may favor the trend towards private profit at the expense of public education. This private participation, in turn, was favored by the endorsement and sponsorship provided both by international financial funds and banks as well as transnational organizations. The former (IDB, WB, etc.) are expressed by means of “recommendations” that states establish agreements with the private business sector. On the other hand, transnational organizations (UNESCO, UNICEF, OECD, etc.), do this through programs, plans, and actions that promote partnerships and/or coalitions based on alliances with the private sector both in offering resources and in their being given access to the management of educational policy in the respective countries, with such alliances, and coalitions being maintained or strengthened during the pandemic.

This private sector, represented mostly by companies dedicated to doing business with education, NGOs, foundations and private universities, presents itself to the states as the “possibility/opportunity” to provide digital and technological solutions in a rapid response to the problem situation, taking advantage, in turn, of the scarcity or absence of state-led developments in this matter existing in most countries. The private sector has thus advanced along the various lines of action, among which we detected: digital programs for so-called continuous learning; teacher training; the release of licenses for the

use of the platforms linked to the access of personal data; offering "canned" resources and learning materials that are usually not aligned with the national curriculum; and the provision of equipment and/or technological devices.

*The shift towards e-learning and emergency distance learning has made education technologies a key component of education worldwide, giving the private sector and commercial organizations a central role in essential education services (...). The global education industry, composed of private and commercial organizations, has worked at local, national and international levels to introduce education technologies into training practices and processes. It has often set the agenda, offering the technical solutions that have been resorted to by government education bodies and continuing to actively advocate for long-term reforms that would involve the integration of private technology companies into public education systems both during the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and afterwards, through new hybrid models of teaching and learning<sup>8</sup>.*

The participation of the private sector thus continues to be deployed in all countries, while being strengthened and acquiring different characteristics according to the different processes of the implementation of plans, programs and concrete actions that are being carried out in each of these. In this sense, that expressed by the trade union leadership of Brazil (CNTE), can be generalized to the rest of the region:

*Brazil was already living through an advanced process of commercialization of its education through alliances between its subnational states and private companies offering educational packages and platforms, especially in the area of teacher training. Now, with the pandemic, these services acquired from private companies are expanding to other areas, especially linked to the provision of educational content.*

In that sense, Education International's Latin American Pedagogical Movement warns on the importance of opening up social dialog, most specifically about the need to design technological tools that are public, operated by the state, with the participation of teachers and the collaboration of public universities. It stresses the need to propose regional integration and Latin American collaboration in designing and updating technological tools for public education.

<sup>8</sup> Williamson B., Hogan A. (2020), *Commercialization and privatization in/of education in the context of Covid-19*, Education International Ed., United Kingdom.

Currently, there is a strong debate about conditions for the return to the physical environment of schools, with the countries of Latin America facing the challenge of redesigning “post-pandemic schooling.” It can also be clearly observed that tension/conflict has been raised between adopting technocratic educational models based on “rapid responses” using software solutions and technology offered by the private sector, and advancing public policies from the state with proper technological developments, which allow use of digital tools in the medium and long term according to national and regional educational realities, designed with the participation of the teaching group, with the possibility of free downloading and open sources, which avoids the tracking of personal information for commercial use. In this latter case, the idea is to design educational models that, while including digital solutions, are intended as complementary pedagogical proposals for face-to-face classes, which promote collaborative work among peers and creativity, with a central focus on the educational sovereignty of the people.

Although this tension and conflict between the two models is not new, it became more explicit during the pandemic, with the uncovering of the economic interests of companies offering educational services on a global scale that are clearly positioned to appropriate a significant part of the resources that countries decide to invest in education. In this regards, it is also important to note that while in some countries there is evidence of the presence of the states, this appears as a “facilitator” from which policies in favor of the extension of the “educational market” are deployed, either through direct subsidies by the state to the companies outsourcing services or by generating systems of regulations based on the notion of “new public management”<sup>9</sup> which leaves the field free for the advancement of privatization and the increasing establishment of the positioning of business above the perspective of education as a social right.

A sample of the actions that highlight the onslaught of the business market perspective to impose its definitions on the role of the state is the so-called “Meeting of Ministers of Education” that the IDB and the Red Latinoamericana de Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil para la Educación (REDUCA, Latin American Network of Civil Society Organizations for Education) have been co-organi-

<sup>9</sup> This takes up once again the concept of “New Public Management” worked on in the previous research carried out by CTERA-EILA: *The educational privatization in Argentina* (Feldfeber M., Puiggrós A., Robertson S., Duhalde M., 2019).

zing in the region, which had its “Second Meeting”<sup>10</sup> in the year of the pandemic. In this meeting (June 2020), the ministries and vice-ministries of Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay participated, addressing the issues: transformation, the return to the classroom and educational equity and equality.

This is considered a forum for business interference in public policy since REDUCA is the network that represents one of the privatizing trends, expressed through the participation of NGOs, foundations and private companies in the field of education. Forming part of this network are Educar 2050 Project (Argentina), Todos por la Educación (Brazil), Fundación Empresarios por la Educación (Colombia), Educación 2020 (Chile), Grupo Faro (Ecuador), Fundación Empresarial para el Desarrollo Educativo FEDAPE (El Salvador), Empresarios por la Educación ExE (Guatemala), Fundación para la Educación FEREMA (Honduras), Mexicanos Primero (Mexico), Eduquemos (Nicaragua), Unidos por la Educación (Panama), Juntos por la Educación (Paraguay), Asociación Empresarios por la Educación (Peru), Acción por la Educación EDUCA (Dominican Republic) and Reaching U (Uruguay).

At the same time, throughout the region there are multi-sectoral coalitions and “de facto alliances” between states (on both national and subnational levels), private companies providing educational services (Microsoft, Amazon, Google, etc.), financing funds and international banks (IDB, WB, etc.) and transnational organizations (UNESCO, UNICEF, OECD, etc.) seeking to advance the restructuring of education systems implementing the clear primacy of privatization trends. We speak of “de facto alliances” because legal frameworks, regulations or specific laws in the relevant countries to regulate these do not necessarily exist, but rather respective arrangements and public-private agreements are signed “de facto” fashion.

It is also known that the IDB has been making systematic “recommendations” to countries, continuing with this same line of intervention in the context of the pandemic. In May 2020 it published the document “Education in times of Coronavirus: Latin America and the Caribbean's education systems in the face of COVID-19” (IDB, 2020). In this document, among other things, the Bank recommends “making alliances with telecommunications, radio, open television and cable com-

<sup>10</sup> <https://reduca-al.net/encuentrodeministros.html>

panies,” and gives as an example the “Aprendo en Casa (Learn at Home)” program in Peru because, according to the IDB, this is a very comprehensive multichannel strategy by level and geographical area.

It also includes among its recommendations “convening television channels, cable and broadcasting companies, radio education institutes and other mass communication channels to establish spaces in the content grid to offer distance education”. It reinforces the idea by saying that “alliances should be made with regional partners with experience in television production and innovation in establishing a set of resources for education systems (Sesame Street, Discovery, School+, NatGeo).” In addition, it proposes “calling on internet providers and cell phone companies to expand access to connectivity and hosting: (i) promoting free use of “.edu” and “.gob” content; (ii) releasing the use of a minimum bandwidth for teachers; (iii) expanding connectivity possibilities to the places of residence of low-income students; and (iv) achieving additional hosting space for all educational pages and platforms. The recommendation is also made to look for mechanisms for access to these types of platforms to be free, without discounting data from user plans.”

The IDB, on the other hand, expresses its concern about the possible drop in enrollment in private schools due to the general crisis and, in this regard, recommends “establishing a subsidy or demand financing program to maintain current enrollment in the private sector, particularly in urban centers, in schools that offer quality education to low-income populations.” Let us remember that one of the lines of intervention of the IDB has been the financing of projects for “low-cost schools” as a way to sustain the trend of educational privatization even in those sectors of the population with low economic resources.

Along the same lines of privatization with regard to enrollment, it proposes “establishing or strengthening student credit funds, which include subsidies for students attending upper secondary and higher education institutions undergoing accountability processes, to cover the payment of pensions or maintenance.” In this regard, the IDB explicitly recommends: “Establishing a crisis support fund for private educational institutions, both for pre-university and higher education levels with accountability and quality compliance requirements to minimize disruption in the provision of private educational services.”

As is known, all these “recommendations” go on to function as mechanisms imposed through the conditions and requirements of credits granted by the international organization to the respective countries.

On the other hand, to lay clear the role of transnational organizations promoting private participation in education, we can take, for example, the call made in March 2020 by UNESCO for the purpose of forming the World Coalition for Education in response to COVID-19<sup>11</sup>. This coalition is presented as a platform aiming to “protect the right to education” during the pandemic and to achieve this it called upon foundations, NGOs, academic institutions and private sector companies including Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Teach for All, Fundación Varkey, Eidos Global, Fundación Ceibal, Zoom, PROfuturo, Oxfam, INO, Fundación Telefónica, Movistar, and so on, in a continuing list of approximately 140 members.

One of the main problems recorded is the absence of specific legal frameworks that restrictively regulate corporate expansion over public education and curb the subjugation of countries' sovereignty over education and communication. The lack of said frameworks for application to the link between face-to-face and virtual education leaves the door open to the private sector not only in the present but in the post-pandemic world.

This is very serious as companies operating in the development of digital tools in the educational field obviously collect, store and process personal data in increasingly more automated and novel fashions. The “educational experience” is thus also included in the business dynamic that conceives of it as “raw material for the digital industry”; while, additionally, NGOs, foundations, and private companies that use these big platforms (enabled by the governments) have more and more opportunities to determine educational policies and social domination.

In the context of the pandemic, digital, television or radio responses cannot guarantee, by themselves, the continuity of public education, because continuity also involves the job stability of education workers, the reinforcement of state budgets for education and the guarantee of the right to social dialog and union participation in decision-making.

<sup>11</sup> Source: UNESCO <https://es.unesco.org/covid19/globaleducationcoalition>. Last accessed on 11/21/20.

<sup>12</sup> <https://globaleducationcoalition.unesco.org/members>. Last accessed on 11/21/20.

## The situation of teaching in the context of the pandemic

The almost total closure of educational establishments as one of the main responses of states to the pandemic meant setting up a general alternative proposal for educational maintenance and continuity in a context of non-face-to-face learning. This involved the transition from regular institutional work with continuous presence in schools to the performance of tasks in the homes of educators, almost exclusively using their own personal and family resources. This passage involved the comprehensive transformation of the work conditions and organization of teachers, impacting on all possible dimensions of these. Similarly, a series of unprecedented demands were generated for teachers, on whom fell a large part of the actions aimed at sustaining the presence of the state in communities and homes, even going beyond what can be strictly considered as the field of education.

In the different countries of Latin America, states made various responses to the situation generated by the pandemic. In this regard, it can be noted that in some countries the health and social emergency provided a framework favoring the imposition of regressive measures and the adoption of regressive social laws for the population as a whole. In these countries, working relations in the public and private sectors have been altered, and the national policies of social protection and rights in force have been weakened, opening the door for the incursion of private companies, especially in strategic areas such as education.

Both the neoliberal reforms initiated long ago (Peru, Colombia and Chile) and the recent dismantling of the welfare state (Brazil, Uruguay, Honduras, Paraguay) brought as a consequence the erosion of social rights related to work in much of the region; while, on the other hand, also bringing the progressive establishment of a more segmented, polarized (according to the proportion of formalized employment in each country and its stability) and, in many cases, ever more precarious labor structure. This has led to increasingly differentiated access for workers to health, education, social protection, labor rights and social security rights. In

<sup>13</sup> We refer to a shift in the policies in the region that began with the overthrow of the former president of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya, in 2009, and continued in Paraguay with the case of Fernando Lugo in 2014, and then in Brazil with the former president Dilma Rousseff in 2016. In the case of Uruguay, in March 2020 a right-wing government assumed power when it won the elections after 15 years of Frente Amplio governments.

addition, in several of these countries, wage cuts and/or reductions were also applied, focusing mainly on the private sector, but with a strong impact also on the public sector.

**This study typified the following main trends of regressive impacts on teaching in general terms, going beyond particular and disparate situations:**

- 1 • Increasingly precarious working and salary conditions of teachers.
- 2 • Intensification of teaching work in the context of the pandemic.
- 3 • Excessive demands for teacher training in virtual teaching.
- 4 • Insufficient material resources for virtual teaching.

The working conditions of teachers have become increasingly precarious, given that countries in which job stability has been affected have been observed amending statutes and/or various regulations, and supervisory and control powers over this group of teachers have been expanded. There are also restrictions on labor rights, especially in the recognition of licenses, in wage payment delays or reductions, including arbitrary dismissals in Chile, Peru and Brazil.

Teaching work has been intensified by the absence or limited possibility of face-to-face classes, which has required the search for and use of new forms of communication and of work (telephones, messaging, social networks, emails, etc.), as well as the preparation of classes and materials for working remotely.

In turn, non-face-to-face classes has restructured the working day, making the boundaries between working time and rest time very diffuse, as is the difference between working space and the space of daily family life. The intensification of the working day has also had a strong impact on the health of teachers associated with these new working conditions. Likewise, the juxtaposition of family and work responsibility strongly demanded in most teachers' homes has mainly affected female workers, since women—who make up the majority of the teaching sector—also assume the greatest burden of responsibility in domestic tasks, providing domestic care and assistance.

In most countries for many teachers the working day continued to include regular face-to-face activities with various objectives such as the organization and

distribution of food bags, the disinfection and cleaning of items, preparation of personal protective devices, as well as booklets, guides and educational support.

Teacher training and technological equipment for teachers and students provided by state governments is included in the list of most urgent demands, as is free access to the internet and the use of mobile data. In this regard, it is important to recognize that a great self-taught process occurred in teaching given the need to maintain educational continuity within the mode of virtual education. This self-taught process is set in the broader need that teaching collectives have been confronted with to solve emerging demands fairly autonomously, on the whole using the material, training and organizational resources available to each teacher and each institution.

Parallel to the need for teacher training in the use of digital tools, there is also the problem of the transformation of working conditions, precisely because of the inclusion of IT in the requirements making up new teaching jobs. In this regard, the report gives an account of the aspects most affecting teaching in this context, both due to work overload produced by the intensification of tasks and to the poor working conditions with which the teaching sector has had to face the crisis. In this sense, the conditions of virtual work and the use of IT as an educational tool are points very much to be taken into account for education in the future.

Trade union organizations propose that it is necessary to be very careful in designing policies for the integration of technology in the teaching and learning processes, as the new hegemonic communication technologies are structured in such a way that the citizenship is seen as a group of users and customers whose needs are to be met following business/commercial logic, in the short term and on a renewable basis.

The direct participation of states in the generation of their own digital platforms that circumvent dependence on the private sector thus becomes indispensable and redoubles the challenge of political intervention that puts a stop to commercialization and guarantees the right to public education that is currently being put at risk by platform capitalism.



**THE PROCESSES OF  
PRIVATIZATION AND  
COMMERCIALIZATION OF  
HIGHER EDUCATION  
IN LATIN AMERICA AND  
THE CARIBBEAN IN THE  
CONTEXT OF PANDEMIC<sup>14</sup>**

## Introduction

*The COVID-19 pandemic placed the entire world in an unprecedented and unthinkable situation, whose implications in terms of social, economic, political, psychological and affective consequences are not yet fully evident, with the large part of human activities having been disrupted, giving way to new ways of meeting up and relating as well as of researching, teaching and learning.*

The suspension of face-to-face educational activities occurred rapidly in the region. On March 12, the process of closing the higher education institutions began and in less than a week this had reached almost the entire population of students and teachers. According to data from UNESCO-IESALC (May 2020), the closure of the institutions affected approximately 23.4 million students and 1.4 million teachers in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The measures affected all the functions carried out by higher education institutions: research, extension services and teaching. In particular, this report analyzes the processes that were deployed to support higher education teaching while the relevant institutions are closed. From concerns about what happens in this context regarding the right to higher education, which is recognized as a responsibility of state governments in the principles established in Cartagena in 2008 and ratified in Cordoba in 2018, this paper intends to explore some dimensions of the processes of privatization and commercialization existing in the region in the context of the pandemic and the vicissitudes that higher education workers are going through due to this situation. This proposal involves looking at the deepening of long-standing processes at the same time as identifying emerging ones that promote privatization and commercialization, along with efforts that could counter these in a democratizing fashion.

<sup>14</sup> This report is a reduced version of a work in which it is possible to find the empirical data supporting the arguments raised. We would like to thank Gabriela Bonilla (Observatorio Latinoamericano de Políticas Educativas - EILA) and Mercedes Martín (FaHCE-Universidad Nacional De La Plata) for the advice received for the report.

From the study<sup>15</sup> it is possible to apply two arguments: firstly, the type of response made in each of the region's higher education systems (HES) to the arrival of COVID-19 was highly variable and depended not only of the economic situation, health, and politics of each country, but also of the degree of privatization and commercialization of each education system, the previous development of Distance Education (DE) and the progress in the expansion of educational access and the persistence of inequalities limiting the exercise of the right to education in terms of access to the university and to technologies. Secondly, the actions implemented within the framework of emergency remote education caused by the pandemic and the closure of face-to-face classes in the institutions have consolidated and updated the trends towards privatization and commercialization present in higher education in the region.

<sup>15</sup> We performed a systematic analysis of the “Coyuntura Latinoamericana (Latin American Situation)” report produced by EILA regional office's Observatorio Latinoamericano de Políticas Educativas; the web site SITEAL (UNESCO) that reports on news about government initiatives disseminated on the countries' government agency internet sites and social media accounts; internet searches on the documents and activities of several relevant organizations for the issue in question; and press releases on significant items that were identified. This was further complemented by a set of interviews conducted electronically of trade union leaders at the higher education level who contributed information and opinions. The analysis was carried out from May-December, months in which the orientation of the measures were changing in parallel to the extension and complexity of the social-health scenario.

## Regional higher education systems up to the advent of the pandemic: privatization, commercialization, inequalities of access and the disparate development of distance education

The pandemic broke out on a scenario that was highly heterogeneous among and within each of the region's countries, with an innumerable variety of responses made at the level of institutions, among which there is a very wide heterogeneity with respect to experience, accumulated knowledge, technological infrastructure and previously installed capacities. It is therefore important to analyze the socio-political and institutional conditions along with the particular characteristics of tertiary education in the region, especially with regards to the major variables that were central to the process of national responses to the pandemic situation in the field of higher education.

*Firstly, Latin America is distinguished as one of the regions with the highest degree of privatization of the higher education sector in the world, having 55% of its enrollment in the private sector (Red IndicES, 2016) places it in a very different situation to other regions such as Europe (13%) and North America (28%) (UNESCO, 2015). This burgeoning percentage also has an impact on the number of institutions, of which 67% belong to this sector, made up of a wide diversity of institution types<sup>16</sup>. These two classic indicators permit the higher education system in the region to be characterized as "hyperprivatized" (Saforcada and Rodríguez Golisano, 2019).*

This configuration has been taking shape over the last thirty years. During the nineties, the demand for higher education in the context of neo-liberal policies promoting the reduction of resources allocated to the level generated two concomitant processes in public universities: partial or total fee-charging, and the strengthening of selection systems leading to the development of the private sector that absorbed all this new demand, mainly through "low cost" universities, as happened in Peru, the Dominican Republic, Chile, Ecuador, Costa Rica, and Brazil.

<sup>16</sup> *Institutions which are secular versus those belonging to different religions; those which are elite versus mass institutions; large, medium and very small institutions; for-profit versus non-profit institutions; national versus transnational institutions; those specializing in particular disciplines or focused on particular types of students; and face-to-face versus distance learning; etc.*

During the new millennium, within the paradigm of educational inclusion, an increase in public budget was promoted in the regions's nations, regardless of whether higher education was considered a right or a service in each country. However, in context of the privatization of public policy—as a result of the capacity of private universities to create a direct impact in this area<sup>17</sup>—new forms of privatization came about. A large part of these new funds are allocated, for example, to scholarship policies that, while aimed at facilitating access to higher education, cover up demand-driven funding by redirecting public funds to private universities. This privatization is based on symbolic aspects with a blurring of the boundaries between the public and private sectors in the context of deep institutional differentiation and diversification of both sectors.

Second, the prior development of distance education in each of the countries has been a key variable in the responses made to promote the continuity of teaching through virtual platforms in the context of COVID-19. In some countries, existing government regulations have favored the development of distance education. This occurred in cases where institutional capacities and technological infrastructure existed that generated better conditions for the continuity of education. However, the scale, immediacy and universal nature of the need also turned the process into a great challenge that required state and government measures.

The data show that, in line with the global trend, the significant expansion of distance education is one of the great transformations of the higher education system in the region, with a growth rate in the last seven years of 73%, reaching 15% of the total enrollment (OEI, 2019). Brazil, Colombia and Honduras are the countries with the highest participation in this mode (21%, 18% and 17% respectively), while in Mexico, the Dominican Republic<sup>18</sup> and Ecuador it represents around 13% (OEI, December 2019). The expansion in the region occurred under a semivirtual format with the obligation of instances of face-to-face training, although recently there has been a trend towards multimodality that ranges from the new 100% virtual options to the flexibilization of face-to-face education with the accreditation of courses taken in virtual mode. These latter include, for example, undertaking so-called MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). It is important to note that in the

<sup>17</sup> Through positions held in the different levels of government or state agencies with the capacity to place issues on the agenda and lobby on behalf of associations, foundations and other types of non-governmental organizations.

<sup>18</sup> The development of distance education has a long tradition, although development of the virtual mode has been poor (OEI, 2017).

region the private sector has been the most dynamic in offering distance education modes, and that these offers have been made on national levels, although processes of internationalization of distance education have begun to unfold with some intensity (Rama, 2016).

Thirdly, the shift towards emergency remote education took place in a situation of structural inequality cutting across Latin American societies, with particularly strong inequalities of access to higher education that are deepened by the digital divide present in these latitudes, which constitutes a new obstacle to the effective exercise of the right to education. Enrollment rates in higher education have a marked trend of sustained growth: at the beginning of the millennium a rate of 23% was registered, in 2010 this had risen to 41% and by 2018 it reached 52%. Even so, very different situations exist within the region: while Argentina, Chile, Peru and Uruguay are in the stage of the universalization of higher education with gross rates above 50%, the remaining countries are in the stage of massification with rates between 15% and 50%. Honduras is the country with the lowest coverage at 16% (Informe Iberoamérica Red Índices, 2019). Even countries that show better indicators mask strong internal inequalities; for example, not all segments of the population of a country benefit equally because there are large differences in participation according to income level, gender, ethnicity, place of residence, etc.

Inequalities in access assumed new forms with the continuity of studies being based on access to technology. The so-called digital divide is manifest on different levels: 32% of the Latin American population does not have access to Internet services, reflecting strong disparities between different countries, with Chile, Uruguay, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina boasting the best conditions in the region (CAF, 2020)<sup>19</sup>. There are also inequalities within the region according to income level and household location: 81% of households in the highest income quintile have internet access, while households in the first and second quintile account for only 38% and 53% respectively. However, inequalities are deeper in some countries: while in Brazil and Chile more than 60% of households in the first quintile have internet connectivity, in Bolivia, Paraguay and Peru, only 3% of the poorest households do so.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> If we take into account quality of connectivity, the data indicate that 44% of users do not have the download speed that allows, for example, the development of online education activities (Cepal, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> Inequalities also occur by area: 67% of urban households are connected to the Internet, while in rural areas this figure is only 23%. The gaps are more severe in Bolivia, El Salvador, Paraguay and Peru (90% of rural households do not have internet connectivity) (Cepal, 2020).

## Actors, discourses and actions in the context of the pandemic at the higher education level

At the higher education level, the public and institutional policies implemented were guided by a fundamental principle: to sustain educational continuity. Identification was hence made of government actions aimed at retaining enrollment, facilitating connectivity and supporting the transition to emergency remote education, sanctioning or adapting current regulations in order to guarantee the legality of processes in virtual format, promoting alliances between secondary and higher levels, readjusting or suspending university admission tests, and, to a lesser extent, supporting teaching work, among others.

On analyzing the measures for the continuity of academic programs, it can be observed that some of these were implemented from the perspective of the right to higher education, although occurring as they do in a region that has not succeeded in neutralizing the deep trends towards privatization and commercialization, actions were made advancing processes consolidating said trends. These processes have also generated movements in the opposite direction, such as the “zero enrollment” movement in Colombia. These movements dispute the idea of education as a commodity by questioning the idea of profit and the very scaffolding that sustains highly privatized higher education systems.

The two central areas that demonstrate the processes of privatization and commercialization in the region in the context of COVID-19 are presented below. First is the group of measures aimed at responding to the financial crisis in higher education, particularly those that depend on charging fees for their operation. Second are the different actions that reposition technological agents in the field of higher education.

### **The financial rescuing of the private sector:** discourse and action as ways of deepening the privatization of higher education

For many countries in the region, the pandemic situation has meant the deepening of pre-existing economic difficulties and their effects on social structure, whose historical inequality has been compounded by the effects of the policies of neo-liberal and

neo-conservative governments that have governed in the region in recent years. According to the survey carried out, rationalization and adjustment processes were implemented, although not without conflict, by the region's national governments and led by the presence of international organizations. Added to these general measures is the fact that higher education institutions and the scientific-technological field were also the focus of budgetary restrictions affecting cuts in specific higher education programs such as occurred in Brazil, Chile and Costa Rica, among others.

In this context of restrictions, the state has had to implement measures to address the loss of enrollment at the level of higher education. In different countries, different educational or university authorities announced that the dropout rate exceeded 20%, and that it was approaching 30% in the private sector. The abandonment or discontinuation of studies associated with the economic situation that has been deepened by the pandemic and/or the difficulty of access to the technology required to maintain connectivity as a necessary condition for educational progress is one of the causes of problems in making payments of higher education fees. Although other situations are also recorded, especially in commercialized systems that consider education to be a service that is to be charged and paid for, in which the student group resists “not getting what they are paying for”, given that proposed online training courses do not have the same costs nor are of the same quality or are not guaranteed course accreditation, so becoming a problem for those who must deal with the payment of loans acquired. This situation has implications in terms of the loss of rights to access, permanence and graduation from higher education, putting on hold the progress achieved in recent decades in terms of the democratization of access to knowledge. But in highly privatized and commercialized systems in which institutional functioning depends on the payment of students' tuition fees, this also represents a financial problem. In this context, observation can be made of discourses and actions that led to government measures aimed at financially assisting the higher education private sector as part of the group of measures taken seeking to ensure educational continuity of the tertiary level.

Given this situation, national and regional associations of private universities put forth discourse defending the interests of the sector, voicing concern about the effects on the region's higher education institutions and the need for governments to implement scholarships and financing to prevent millions of higher education students from leaving their studies. These actions were promoted by international organizations: the inter-American Development Bank (IDB), among other recom-

mendations, suggested “establishing a program of grants or funding aimed at demand to maintain, as far as possible, the current enrollment in the private sector...” (2020: 26), while UNESCO-IESALC argued that “a significant portion of resources must be allocated to higher education institutes, who have denounced the effects of the loss of fees, and another substantial portion to be allocated as financial support to the most vulnerable students, regardless of the sector in which they are enrolled, whether public or private.” (2020: 37).

The investigation carried out identified different types of government strategies responding to this growing financial deficit. In some cases these were aimed at meeting supply, in others demand, and in still others towards a combination of both types of instruments. On the other hand, containment instruments were implemented that were geared to demand, such as multiple scholarship plans and tuition fee subsidies. The intervention of the state was also observed to ensure conditions for the reproduction of the higher education market by enabling new loans, and/or flexibility in systems of course credit conditions, etc. On this point, a trend led by more privatized and commercialized systems such as those of Chile, Colombia, and Peru is the consolidation of financing schemes for demand through programs of grants and loans, which are presented as forming part of higher education inclusion policies, while in fact increasing subsidies to the private sector to sustain its economic profitability.

### **Old and new players in the tertiary education market: Immediate responses to major transformations**

#### **Public-private partnerships: The role of technological agents in the provision of the necessary infrastructure to provide educational continuity in the region**

While the process of adopting new technologies had already begun in many higher education institutions in the region, the sudden and accelerated form of this demanded by the context of the pandemic required different types of partnerships with commercial technology actors in order to quickly ensure the transition to emergency remote teaching. Thus, the main initiatives were oriented towards favoring the installation of emergency technological solutions to give immediate continuity to teaching in a scenario of higher education without higher education

institutions following the recommendations of the IDB and UNESCO, which promoted the establishment of multisectoral alliances to respond to the situation.<sup>21</sup>

In this sense, the actions implemented have deepened privatization processes since the private sector plays a central role in the provision of essential services that are a condition for access to the right to education. From the survey carried out, it can be observed that the actions taken have focused on, on the one hand, expanding and improving the connectivity and technology devices of students and teachers, and on the other, making available to institutions lacking their own virtual education platforms those mechanisms and technological resources required for the delivery of distance courses. Hence the prominence gained in this scenario of different technological agents that were repositioned via the provision of educational technological solutions such as connectivity, virtual platforms, apps, Infrastructure, Data Systems, technological inputs and multiple services.

Two main types of governmental and institutional alliances were observed: the first were with commercial actors to ensure connectivity and possession of technological devices via direct subsidies to institutions (Peru), the delivery of technological devices (Ecuador, Paraguay), agreements with telecommunications companies on connectivity plans and access to devices with preferential prices (Ecuador, Dominican Republic, Colombia), agreements with telecommunications companies to release the consumption of data on educational websites (Bolivia, Argentina, Panama).

On the other hand, there were governmental and institutional alliances with commercial actors to ensure virtual teaching and learning environments and other digital resources. On the institutional level, in the majority of the region's countries such as El Salvador, Peru, the Dominican Republic, and Colombia the experiences of institutions are similar. Many of these already had a certain degree of development

<sup>21</sup> By May 2020, the IDB suggested “best practices for educational continuity” such as establishing partnerships with other actors, in particular with the private sector in the world of publishing and telecommunications companies (radio, television, publishing houses), as well as with internet service providers to allow free access to .edu sites, to expand the coverage of services to rural areas and to achieve discounts for low-income students. On the other hand, UNESCO promoted the Global Education Coalition, a multisectoral partnership to ensure adequate distance education for all students. Additionally IESALC, a specific organization belonging to UNESCO for higher education, promoted the improvement of conditions of access to equipment and, above all, mobile connectivity packages to facilitate the improvement of the technological capabilities of students and teachers. It also proposed that governments promote having telecommunications companies offer free data use for educational applications and services (May 2020).

and experience in educational platforms, but on being placed in this crisis situation strengthened their alliances and the purchasing of services from companies such as Microsoft, Google, Blackboard and Ilumno<sup>22</sup> and of other platforms specializing in laboratory experiences or simulators for the disciplines of science and technology. On the governmental level, there are cases of more comprehensive alliances, such as occurred in Brazil, which signed an agreement between the Ministry of Science, Technology, Innovation and Communications and the company CISCO to implement the “Inclusive Digital Brazil” program. A similar alliance occurred in Chile, where the Undersecretariat of Higher Education made an agreement with Google to make the Google Suite platform available to higher education institutions that did not have digital platforms and/or tools.

#### Public-private partnerships: The repositioning of the private sector with regards to the change in tertiary education

The solutions that were presented to the major problem of the educational suspension have, on principle, an immediate commercial benefit in an increase in the market and, secondly, a projection to extend their benefits from the great transformation of higher education based on multimodal distance education that expands the market for their products, platforms and services. A transformation promoted by international organizations based on the idea of turning this crisis into an opportunity for innovation. For example, UNESCO-IESALC, which has played a central consulting role in the region on the virtualization of higher education teaching in the face of the COVID-19 emergency, has put forward two principles: to leave no one behind, and to take advantage of this unique opportunity to rethink traditional formats of higher education and install hybrid or 100% virtual models.

In this context in which technological agents appear as the “saviors” of education, these are strategically positioned as broadly legitimized interlocutors in the definition and orientation of public and institutional policy, thus accelerating the process of the privatization of public policy already present in the region. In this

<sup>22</sup> Ilumno is a company that provides services and solutions to higher education institutions in the virtual education sector in relation to virtual educational environments, enrollment management, marketing, etc.

sense, distance education is perceived not only as a format to impart education but also is consolidated as a market segment for the conducting of transactions by large transnational commercial actors, in addition to introducing changes in higher education systems according to their own vision and organizational agenda. These actors are strongly establishing an agenda focused on training for “employability”, the need to make formats and career paths more flexible, and the development of skills and capacities in line with the new techno-capitalism. This is a discourse that also consolidates the idea of the neutrality of technology, and of education as a technical rather than pedagogical and political problem.

### Emerging coalitions in times of the pandemic

In Latin America, coalitions with varying degrees of complexity have been formed to provide continuity of education that involves promoting profound changes in the higher education sector and introducing new educational modes such as virtual short courses for employability. An example of a complex coalition is the Peruvian branch of the Education Coalition<sup>23</sup>, an initiative that seeks to make the educational strategies implemented during the pandemic serve as the basis for educational transformation in Peru. In this context, one of the measures adopted was to strengthen the technical capacity for transformation towards virtual education from a contestable fund such that national or international private higher education institutions with experience in virtual education can provide technical assistance to the country's public universities. In the context of these measures, IESALC-UNESCO was selected in the open call for submissions made by the Ministry of Education of Peru and the Inter-American Development Bank to implement the program to support the design and implementation of strategies for continued learning in the framework of PMESUT (Programa para la Mejora de la Calidad y Pertinencia de los Servicios de Educación Superior Universitaria y Tecnológica a Nivel Nacional, National Program for the Improvement of the Quality and Relevance of Services for Higher Education and Technology) and of DIGESU belonging to the Peruvian Ministry of Education. IESALC-UNESCO, which has been developing projects

<sup>23</sup> A multisectoral partnership convened by UNESCO to ensure adequate distance education for all students involving actors from different sectors, including international multilateral organizations, civil society organizations, non-profit organizations, private sector companies and other organizations and networks.

with Microsoft in the region, is the actor promoting and guaranteeing links with the Peruvian Ministry of Education and a group of Peruvian public universities. This complex coalition between international organizations, technology companies such as Microsoft, a Ministry of Education and a group of universities resulted in concrete actions in Peru, but the project exists for this to be implemented later in other countries in the region.

On the other hand, public-private partnerships are observed between the specific government ministries or directorates and private companies that have promoted the expansion of MOOCs under a limited virtual training mode oriented towards employability. That is to say, in a context of the reduction of tuition fees of higher education institutions, alliances were consolidated to offer an educational model based on the acquisition of hard skills and soft skills<sup>24</sup>, capacities and abilities, which are short-term and flexible and depend on the needs arising in the labor market, without explicit recognition that this is in opposition to the model of traditional Latin American higher education institutions with programs that are broader in scope and duration times, with specific certification and a strong component of civic education. The main exponent of this initiative is the COURSERA platform that, in partnership with government agencies from several countries (Colombia, Costa Rica, Panama, Guatemala, Argentina-Caba), offers free training courses for higher education students and the general public under the promise of free access with international certification.

The construction of a collective imagination regarding the link between training and the labor market is projected, which presumes a linearity and individualization of the problem and, even more, a conflict with the type of training offered in higher education institutions. This concept is also present in the proposals of Microsoft Learn, a specific platform belonging to the multinational company for the educational field that, although being of limited deployment, is renown in the region because it was established as one of the main actors leading the private offensive in offering services, content and technology, as well as alliances with different levels of government and institutions. Or, as in the case of Google Career Certificates (GCC), which, although not yet being specifically developed for the region, stand out for being, along with Microsoft, companies with which higher education institutions have primarily made agreements for the use of their platforms.

<sup>24</sup> Are those focused on emotional intelligence and fostering a good relationship and communication with other people and the environment, such as teamwork, leadership, flexibility, adaptability, communication, motivation, etc. All characteristics with a rising value in large companies and corporations.

As a general synthesis, the profound global transformations that the COVID-19 pandemic will bring to social, economic, political, health and educational fields are still far from being visible in their magnitude and complexity. As we approach the completion of a year since the emergence and spread of the virus, we members of the region's educational community have been part of a process that revolutionized our day-to-day working and sentimental lives. We have been called on most especially in our roles as teachers for the process of forced virtualization, which was at first tumultuous then more orderly, but which without a doubt will leave its mark on the future methods of teaching and learning, carrying out research, and building academic communities.

A first general conclusion is that, in times of pandemic, the fulfillment of recognizing higher education to be a social public good, a human and universal right and a duty of the state (CRES, Final Declaration of Cartagena 2008 and Córdoba 2018) was placed under strong pressure by the characteristics of the responses implemented to the temporary disruption of face-to-face teaching in higher education institutions. The study highlights two clear trends that, even considering the strong heterogeneity between and within each country, emerged as intersections in so far as they both express the consolidation of prior processes and the emergence of new forms of privatization and commercialization that, in turn, are expressed with a different amplitude and intensity depending on the characteristics of national systems, either being more aimed at the market or with a strong tradition of public-state ownership.

Firstly, there was the configuration of discourse and actions that led to government measures aimed at financially assisting the private higher education sector as part of the group of measures taken to ensure educational continuity at this level. This confirms the trend led by the more privatized and commercialized systems such as those of Chile, Colombia and Peru, which feature the consolidation of financing schemes aimed at demand through programs of grants and loans as part of higher education inclusion policies that divert public funds to the private sector given that said grants follow the students. It can thus be seen that more than the degree of financial vulnerability of the private sector, what is left in evidence by the effects of the physical closure of higher education institutions due to COVID-19 is the degree of fragility that the process of expanding access to higher education had on the basis of the expansion of privatized and commercialized

systems in societies with levels of social and educational inequality as deep as those of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Secondly, the shift towards emergency remote education led to government alliances with commercial technology service providers, as well as the formation of multi-sectoral coalitions that provided the material basis required to sustain the link between education and teaching. This has meant superlative economic gains for these large commercial players both now and in the future as a product of their expansion into new market segments. Additionally, under the discourse of representing a “great opportunity for innovation”, it allows these to appear as the “saviors” of higher education and to position themselves strategically in the definition and orientation of public and institutional policies and the promotion of higher education models based on multi-modal distance education.

In this scenario, coming through the pandemic involved a strong disruption of higher education teachers' working conditions, which, among other things, depended on the use of personal resources (equipment, connectivity), the intensification of the work of teaching and the added requirement of transforming face-to-face education to remote emergency education in record time, the loss of real wages and of job positions, particularly in those cases where a strong component of precariously hired teaching staff exists. There is also a lack of specific training for distance education; an absence of support and clear guidelines from institutions; an overlap of work and domestic care tasks with the consequent mental and work overload; and impacts on health, especially for women. In a regional framework of little or no labor regulations for higher education and, specifically, for distance education, this panorama of strong precariousness and work overload demands a greater need for organization and the capacity for union intervention.

Union strategy must also warn on how the actions of the major commercial and political players are currently oriented towards laying the foundations for the profound transformation of higher education in the region. The possibility of blocking this deployment will depend on the visibility that can be given to its economic and ideological dimensions, and on the opposition that can be raised by popular organizations in defense of the right to higher education and the democratization of knowledge.

# Conclusions

## TRENDS

The social, labor and educational situation have been strongly affected during the year 2020 by the pandemic caused by the expansion of coronavirus (COVID-19) throughout the region. It is an impact that, in turn, has affected societies that already suffered from deep structural inequalities and preexisting critical situations in the economic, political and social fields, as well as being adversely affected by the digital divide, differentiated access to technological devices and connectivity.

Based on the information obtained for the present study, strong trends have been observed in the context of pandemic:

- The recession was deep and occurred in all countries regardless of the severity of the health measures taken. A significant number of countries made direct state contributions to prevent the breakdown of labor relations. These contributions were based on subsidies on the wage bill and/or on the extension of unemployment insurance to cover situations of suspensions or reductions of working hours.
- Several governments in the region took measures to support businesses and preserve jobs in addition to compensating for income losses for households whose members suffered total or partial reductions in income.
- Undoubtedly, the main impact has been the collapse in the level of employment and the loss of real wages. There was a very strong reduction in employment in the region associated with, but even more intense than, the decline in economic activity.
- Trade unions have voiced concern about attacks that may occur due to the implementation of unprotected forms of recruitment, the further deterioration of working conditions and the flexibilization of work schedules and tasks. The labor reform agenda continues to be a threat. For countries in which regressive legal reforms have already taken place, the context of the pandemic has made it easy to

implement these, and in some cases regulatory changes were even made in 2020 that affected job stability and working conditions.

- The context of the pandemic has proven to be even more conducive to the advancement of market rhetoric in education, which, to some extent, had already been sustained in the region. Private companies in the IT and communications sector have expanded and formed multi-sectoral coalitions and de facto alliances under the auspices and sponsorships of international organizations (such as UNESCO and UNICEF) and international financing entities, mainly the IDB and the World Bank.

- Interference by the private sector in the field of education has occurred through the implementation of several lines of action: a) educational continuity and teacher training programs; b) the release of licenses for the use of platforms and of personal data; c) the offer of “canned” resources and teaching materials and d) the provision of equipment and/or technological devices.

- There is an absence of specific legal frameworks that restrictively regulate corporate expansion over public education and curb the subjugation of countries' sovereignty over education and communication.

- The general acceptance by the states of so-called “quick solutions” offered by the private sector to the educational problem (canned content, platforms). The consolidation of educational practice based on “search engines”, which private companies are responsible for placing at the fingertips of states and educational subjects, and which are directly related to the manipulation of personal data.

- The restructuring of the working day, given that the boundaries between working time and rest time and between working space and the space of daily family life became very diffuse. This includes the use of personal resources (equipment, connectivity) and the lack of specific training for distance education.

- The intensification of the working day had a high negative impact on the health of teachers as a result of these new working conditions. The juxtaposition of family and work responsibilities strongly demanded in most teaching households mainly affects female workers. Women—the majority percentage of teachers—assume the greatest responsibility in the tasks of domestic care and providing assistance to children, young people and older adults, as well as domestic tasks, which highlights the profound inequalities already existing in relation to the differentiated distribution of the workload.

- The earlier incorporation of digital resources and tools in private schools than occurs in public schools. This is due to previous inequalities regarding the appropriation of technology in terms of equipment and knowledge and the sectors of the population that mostly attend private rather than public institutions. This is a serious problem because of the underlying danger of confusing the causes and, instead of taking into account the social conditions and resources of the schools, considering that private education is fundamentally better than public education.

- Evidence of fragility in the processes of expanding access to higher education, with the strong expansion of privatized and commercialized systems in societies with deep inequality.

- Alliances of governments with commercial suppliers of technological services, as well as the configuration of multisector coalitions, under the discourse of offering a “great opportunity for innovation”, which allow these to appear as the “saviors” of higher education and to strategically position themselves in the definition and orientation of public and institutional policy and the promotion of multimodal higher education distance education models.

## Glossary of acronyms

**CEIBAL:** *Conectividad Educativa de Informática Básica para el Aprendizaje en Línea (Basic Computer Education Connectivity for Online Learning) Uruguay.*

**CIFRA:** *Centro de Investigación y Formación de la República Argentina (Argentine Center for Research and Training).*

**CNTE:** *Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación de Brasil (National Confederation of Education Workers of Brazil).*

**CONADU:** *Federación Nacional de Docentes Universitarios (National Federation of University Educators).*

**CRES:** *Conferencia Regional de Educación Superior (Regional Conference for Higher Education).*

**CTA:** *Central de Trabajadores De La Argentina (Argentine Central Workers Union).*

**CTERA:** *Confederación de Trabajadores de la Educación de la República Argentina (Confederation of Education Workers of the Argentine Republic).*

**DE:** *Distance Education.*

**ECLAC:** *Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.*

**EILA:** *Education International for Latin America*

**GDP:** *Gross Domestic Product.*

**HE:** *Higher Education.*

**HES:** *Higher education system.*

**IDB:** *Inter-American Development Bank.*

**IEC:** *Instituto de Estudio y Capacitación (Institute of Research and Training).*

**IESALC:** *Instituto Internacional para la Educación Superior en América Latina y el Caribe (International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean).*

**IIPMV:** *Instituto de Investigaciones Pedagógicas “Marina Vilte” (Marina Vilte Educational Research Institute).*

**MOOC:** *Massive Open Online Course.*

**NGOs:** *Non-Governmental Organizations.*

**OECD:** *Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.*

**PMESUT:** *Programa para la Mejora de la Calidad y Pertinencia de los Servicios de Educación Superior Universitaria y Tecnológica a Nivel Nacional (Program for the Improvement of Quality and Relevance of National Higher Education Services).*

**PPP:** *Purchasing Power Parity.*

**REDUCA:** *Red Latinoamericana de Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil para la Educación (Latin American Network for Civil Society Organizations for Education)*

**UNESCO:** *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.*

**UNICEF:** *United Nations Children's Fund.*

**WB:** *World Bank.*

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