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## Will digitalisation make equal and fair education accessible to all?

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**T**echnology, used creatively, can be a valuable resource of the education system and can make a difference in the way teachers teach and students learn. The connection of technology with every aspect of our community is profound: access to computers and the web and the ability to use these technologies efficiently play a central role in the development of personal communication, business transactions, information collection and are a key competence around which professional careers can be built. Distance learning is also, and above all, under constant development. Teachers are constantly using the web as a means of getting access to information, keeping up to date and communicating with colleagues and students. Students, on the other hand, are able to connect to

and use the huge information resources available on the web, including online libraries, and collaborate with other students around the world.

Unfortunately, access to these technologies **is currently inadequate and unevenly distributed** between developed and undeveloped regions of the world, sometimes even within the same country or even the same city. This unequal access, called the *Digital Divide*, is a major obstacle to development because it prevents people, and especially children, from getting the right education due to lack of access to the right technology.

The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation



and Development) defines the digital divide as the gap between populations and regions that have access to modern information and communication technologies (ICTs), and those that do not or have limited access. These technologies may include telephone, television, personal computers and the Internet.

### Effects on education.

When contextualised in the **world of education**, the digital divide is a broad concept that needs to be considered from different perspectives. In addition to physical access to technology, **digital competences** are also extremely important. According to the UNESCO definition, digital competences consist of “a range of skills to use digital devices, communication applications and networks to access and manage information, enabling people to create and share digital content, communicate and collaborate, and solve problems for effective and creative personal fulfilment in life, learning, work and social activities in general”. Another aspect to be taken into account is the results in terms of **school performance** and engagement. Finally, other **external factors** such as parental support, teacher skills and the learning environment should not be underestimated. When information technology was introduced

into the education system, expectations were undoubtedly high, especially in terms of its impact on those at a disadvantage. However, these expectations were disappointing and unfortunately the digital divide has widened quite quickly, with obvious results:

- Low-income families are very limited in their **access to information** as they cannot afford technological tools or simply connectivity to the web. As a consequence, most students from disadvantaged countries focus only on theory activities without the possibility to develop concrete digital skills. This greatly affects their engagement, leading to poor performance.

- At present, the investment in technology by educational institutions is very substantial and most learning programmes include learning modules that are delivered online or simply made available on the web. This gives students who can access technology at school level a **competitive advantage** over their less lucky colleagues.

- While students from disadvantaged backgrounds face many obstacles in obtaining a quality education and may have to travel miles to reach their institutions, distance learning programmes allow



those who can afford them access to knowledge and skills under economic and organisational conditions that are actually better. Moreover, in most developing countries there is a tendency to focus on **technical training** or to make do with inadequate academic training, mainly due to low-level technological and computer equipment.

### Digital divide and development.

Technology is an essential part of education in most developed countries, but **access to technology and digital literacy are limited or non-existent** in the rest of the world. Lack of technology for educational purposes is closely related to economic impoverishment, gender inequalities (both in the home and in the workplace), reduced life expectancy, higher rates of early pregnancy, higher rates of child birth and mortality, increased domestic violence and reduced concern about environmental degradation. Indeed, the absence of technology in the least developed countries limits their economic growth and creates an adult population that cannot compete in the global marketplace with adults who are 'digitally fluent'.

By limiting, or even denying, access to digital technologies, the digital divide **reduces the chances of improving a country's economy and socio-cultural capital**. This condition ultimately contributes again to limiting access to digital technologies. It is therefore fair to say that digital inequalities are intrinsically associated with social and economic inequalities, feeding off each other.

### The pandemic.

Many studies and academic articles analyse the impact of the pandemic on the digital divide in education, highlighting that it is the sector that **has**

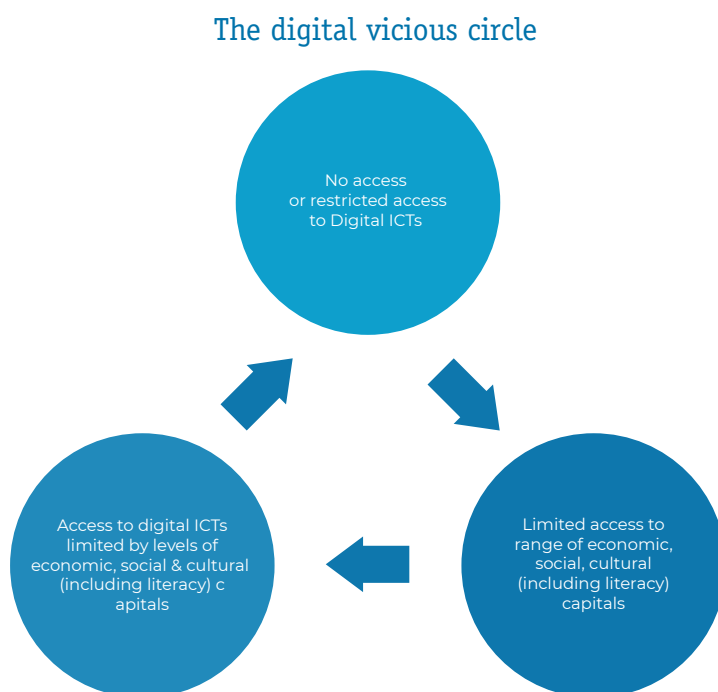
**been most affected** by the spread of the virus. The pandemic has exposed existing educational gaps, most of which are related to digital technologies, and to which not enough attention has been paid until now.

As mentioned above, the possibility of organising online lessons is not currently within the reach of every educational institution. Moreover, it is undeniable that the difficulties of providing these types of lessons are closely linked to the unavailability of suitable tools and the lack of skills in the use of digital platforms. According to the OECD, there is a **significant inequality in access to educational technology** among students from different socio-economic backgrounds: students attending schools in disadvantaged contexts are less

likely to have access to a computer to study, just as most teachers have arrived totally unprepared for this appointment (there are also differences in the availability of a stable Internet connection, but these are less relevant for statistical purposes). In fact, the digital divide in education also refers to differences in the level of digital literacy of students, teachers and family members, who have been unable to cope with the sudden and unplanned shift

towards online learning.

Unequal access to online educational resources, as well as the difficulties encountered by many students in finding technological assistance from their parents, are the main consequences of the digital divide in education. Both have contributed to a serious setback in the educational process for those students most affected by the digital divide. Even though it may seem obvious to state it, the introduction of new technologies in education **only benefits those students and teachers who have**



[Source: Baum F. et al., 2014, p.357]



**access to them** and, above all, the ability to use them. On the contrary, they can place an additional burden on those groups and individuals who for social, cultural, economic or personal reasons do not have the access, knowledge and skills to use them.

### Opportunities of technology.

In accordance with UNESCO's request on International Education Day, will digitisation make equal and fair education accessible to all? In the light of the above, it is difficult to give a completely affirmative answer. Today, most digital services seem to follow a 'market' orientation rather than a 'common good' approach. Power shortages, faulty equipment, lack of support, rigid teaching schedules and lack of teacher knowledge make it difficult to implement a digital educational approach on a large scale.

However, the potential for ensuring that the most vulnerable have access to quality education through digital channels is great. Local governments and technology companies **could support a change in this direction**, for instance by providing free Internet access, implementing technical infrastructure, providing language translation of content, expanding

the educational offer, and bearing maintenance costs.

Training teachers in **new teaching methods** also plays a key role in this process. When planning digital education projects, the logic of the school system's context must be taken into account. In most cases, however, technology is imported from abroad and often learning programmes are standardised tools, not adapted to the local context. Innovative approaches are also needed here. This is why working together with teachers is the most beneficial and sustainable way of working: a motivated and competent teacher will be a valuable resource in identifying and implementing effective learning programmes that take into account the context in which they operate and the real needs of their students.

Does it make sense to invest in digital technology on a planet with sustainability problems? Putting a technological device in the hands of a child in difficulty need to be something other than a market-driven need. Digitalization can represent a genuine tool for social emancipation. ■



# International Day of Education highlights ‘Transforming Education’ challenge

This year’s International Day of Education will be a platform to showcase the most important transformations that have to be nurtured to realize everyone’s fundamental right to education and build a more **sustainable, inclusive** and **peaceful** futures. “It will generate debate around how to unlock the potential in every person to contribute to **collective** well-being and our shared home.” (UNESCO website).

This fourth International Day of Education falls as gaping inequalities, climate crisis and the dreadful

impact of the COVID19 pandemic – disproportionately on low-income countries and vulnerable groups – challenge us to change course in the world.

On this Education Day, UNESCO is calling for a New Social Contract for Education under the banner **Changing Course - Transforming Education**, to “address inequalities and pull together for a more **sustainable** future”.

This new social contract is grounded in a reaffirmed





yet expanded understanding of education as a **human right**, a public endeavour, and a common good. It calls for pedagogies of **solidarity** and cooperation that treasure diversity and pluralism. It notes the requirement for scientific and digital literacies (*inserire hyperlink all'articolo di Marcello*) to counter the spread of misinformation and divisiveness; and to redefine mankind's relationship with the **planet**.

This UNESCO call has strong echoes of Pope Francis's call in October 2020 –calling for a new integral and participatory education system to serve the world, which would lead future generations to pay attention to “grave social **injustices**, violations of rights, terrible forms of poverty” .

UNESCO welcomed the launch of the Pope's **Global Education Compact** in 2020, with the vision of putting **people**, in all their human value and dignity, at the **centre** of education; listening to **children** and **young people**; encouraging the education of women; valuing **families** as key educators; having a special focus on “the most **vulnerable** and **marginalised**”; preserving the environment; and having education generate new concepts of economics, politics, growth and progress that serve everyone “within the context of an **integral ecology**”.

The COVID19 pandemic has again highlighted key weaknesses in education globally – particularly around **inequality** of access to quality basic education, and critical challenges to **girls'** participation and achievement – which we must address to build a better future.

FMSI works to improve the accessibility, inclusion,



and quality of all educational initiatives. FMSI supports educational initiatives that build awareness of social responsibility, that strengthen educational systems, and that defend policies in support of the **right** to education.

### **(E)QUALITY EDUCATION**

Malawi is a huge challenge: it has a high illiteracy rate and has one of the highest rates of early marriage in the world.

According to UNICEF's 2020 research<sup>1</sup>, the situation of children and women in Malawi is **critical**: 46.7% of girls marry before the age of 18 and, once married, many drop out of school; the rate of premature births is the highest in the world at around 13%; 39% of girls and boys are engaged in child labor; 71% of girls and boys are subject to violent discipline. One reason for this is poor access to education, particularly for girls: 32% of young women who, based on age, should be attending secondary school are out of school, compared with 23% of their male peers.

<sup>1</sup> The situation of children and women in Malawi - <https://uni.cf/3AhKYMN>

The pandemic has also led to even more girls **dropping out of school**. The closure of all schools and educational institutions in the country had an immediate impact on learners, especially the most marginalized. The resulting loss of all learning opportunities has particularly affected children with disabilities, those attending Open Schools, learners in socio-economic hardship and, finally, girls in the poorest and hardest-to-reach communities because they are not adequately prepared for the new modes of distance learning or home-based education support.

FMSI, in collaboration with the Marist Brothers, has already implemented 4 projects in Malawi including *“Equity of access to quality education for girls and disadvantaged children”*, which aims to promote equality by strongly affirming that equity and quality education are both a right and a necessity and by considering the issues of **girls’ empowerment and gender equality** as fundamental.

Below is a brief interview with Brother Francis Jumbe, project manager of the project, Provincial Councilor of Malawi and president of the **African Mission Commission**, with great experience in Marist initiatives in the field of education.

### Which challenge does Malawi face in providing quality education for young girls?

Certainly **limited access to quality education**: during 2020, 226,809 out of 270,558 candidates passed the primary school leaving certificate. However, only 83,835 candidates were selected to begin the first module in various secondary schools, or 36.9% of those who passed. A small percentage of the selected male and female students go to conventional national and district secondary schools, while most go to community day secondary schools, with few teachers and no reception facilities. More-

over, students who are not selected for secondary schools end up enrolling in “Open Secondary Schools” that operate in regular schools from 2pm to 5pm, where the quality of education provided is really poor and difficult for a girl to access. This Open school organization is not good for girls who, in Malawi, start out already disadvantaged and are victims of gender discrimination. The lack of selection and the long distances to reach secondary schools are factors that push a large number of girls to drop out of school. As a very common consequence, there are early marriages and premature pregnancies among girls; a situation that perpetuates the cycle of poverty.

### How parents influence girls’ education?

Many parents, especially in rural areas, still have the belief that the proper place for girls is in the kitchen. Because of the traditional roles girls play in the home, such as fetching water and firewood and taking care of younger siblings, education is not a necessity.

If a family is struggling financially, they would rather send a boy to school than a girl. In addition, financially struggling parents too often consider marrying off their teenage girls to overcome the family’s financial problems instead of sending them to school.

### Which impact can the project have in problem solving?

We are working hard to ensure that the project helps boys and girls acquire skills for everyday life. Education doesn’t just involve acquiring academic credentials; rather, it educates them to become productive members of their communities and how to successfully deal with everyday problems. Entrepreneurial education courses, for example, will provide skills to run small businesses. We can all help change the mindset: the myth that **girls’** place is the kitchen should be dispelled. If given an opportunity, girls can play a significant role in improving family income and **community development!** ■



Br. Francis Jumbe - Project Manager



# Project in Zambia

## A BETTER PLACE TO GROW AND LEARN

### The project in brief

The project supported the purchasing of educational and play equipment for the St. Paul Mulungushi kindergarten, Kabwe area, Zambia.

### Context

The community of St. Paul Preschool is characterized by a high percentage of people unemployed or doing informal activities (selling coal, small-scale fishing, farm work), where poverty and illiteracy are widespread, there is an high number of marriages and early pregnancies and a high spread of HIV virus which leaves many children without parents.

The St. Paul Mulungushi Pre-school is the only kindergarten in this area of 8 villages, some up to 15 km away from the school. Founded in 2001 by the

Little Servants of Mary Immaculate with the aim of helping orphans and vulnerable children through education, the school now has 231 pupils, boys and girls, and offer them free educational support. The teachers are volunteers and Sister Elizabeth, of the Little Servants of Mary Immaculate, is the director of the school.

Orphans and vulnerable children are signaled to the school by the communities through the village leaders. Once the children are identified, the Sisters visit the children's villages and families to check their conditions and ask the family or relatives who are guardians of the orphans to sign a commitment for promoting the children attendance at St. Paul Pre-school.

Every day the school has to deal with the few resources available, the lack of desks for everyone and an empty playground.

### Purpose of the project

The aim of the project is to improve the educational activities offered by the St. Paul Pre-school through the purchasing of new desks, blackboards and play equipment.

Before the implementation of the project, the school had only 68 desks and chairs for 231 pupils and 163 children attended lessons sitting on the floor. Children living closest to the school were used to arrive earlier and sit on the desks, excluding the others. Due to the lack of blackboards, the teachers had to keep the children crowded into the only two







equipped classrooms. Children found many problems in learning.

Thanks to the purchase of desks and blackboards, St Paul Pre-school pupils can now attend lessons in smaller groups in separated classrooms, also being able to respect the anti-covid distancing, and can play with the new equipment. They are doing a

better school experience, which will be useful for their life and to be prepared when they will go to primary school. ■



In the picture, a former St Paul Pre-school student and now a professional nurse who visits the school frequently as a volunteer to provide health education with children. She had been selected among the beneficiary children of the pre-school when the aunt she had been entrusted to, died.

## The project in numbers:

- 125 chairs, 61 desks, 4 blackboards and new play equipment purchased and installed at St. Paul Mulungushi pre-school,
- 231 orphaned and vulnerable children have access to improved preschool educational activities and a space to play where they can develop their cognitive and physical skills
- 4 teachers are facilitated in their work ensuring better teaching

SDGs



Laudato Si' Goals



# Project in Bolivia CHILDREN'S AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

## The project in brief

The Project is being implemented in Bolivia, a Country that has raised public concern - local and international - about the implementation of **recommendations made by the UPR** (Universal Periodic Review), a mechanism of the United Nations Human Rights Council tasked with periodically reviewing the Human Rights performance of all 193 member States.

## Context

The UPR's recommendations on Bolivia<sup>1</sup> has highlighted the State's slow compliance with some fundamental Human Rights, particularly with regard to the issues detailed below:

- **Participation of children and young people:** during the last review of Bolivia, it emerged that there is a total absence of direct involvement of children in the

Country, in total contradiction with their right to participation. During its 88th session, the CRC (Committee on the Rights of the Child - a group of experts that monitors and reports on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) suggested that the views of children should be taken into account in decisions that directly affect them.

- **Gender-based violence:** Bolivia has one of the highest rates of sexual violence against children in South America and one of the lowest reporting rates. According to recent reports, most of this violence takes place in the home or in the workplace of children. Many girls between the ages of 15 and 19 believe it is justifiable for their husbands or partners to beat them, as a normal part of a relationship.
- **Child labour:** In 2014, Bolivia passed a new code that lowered the minimum working age to 10. As a result, in 2015, 20.2% of children between the ages of 7 and 14 were working and engaged in some of the worst forms of child labour, including mining and sugarcane harvesting.

## Aim of the project

In a situation such as the one just described, the Project "Children's and Women's Rights in Bolivia: Follow up on the UN bodies recommendations" aims



1 <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/BOIndex.aspx>





to improve access to Human Rights by monitoring the implementation of the UPR recommendations, focusing on **gender-based violence and child labour**, as well as on the right of children to **participate**, and encouraging the development of critical skills that allow them to effectively monitor the application of their rights. Bolivia was reviewed under the UPR in 2019 and will be reviewed by the CRC in 2021. This is a unique opportunity for Bolivian civil society organisations to promote the implementation of women's, youth and children's rights. ■



## The project in numbers:



- 3,800 direct beneficiaries and 25,200 indirect beneficiaries
- 1 online course on UPR and CRC recommendations



- 1 coordination group to monitor the recommendations
- 1 training course in formal education for adolescents and young people



- 3 workshops for adolescents and young people to develop 2 concrete action plans
- 3 awareness-raising events on how to defend children's rights
- 20 workshops to prevent violence against women, with about 100 people per workshop



- 20 information sessions to ensure a better implementation of the national law on violence against women, with about 100 persons per session



- 1 training programme on school mediation to implement alternative methods of conflict resolution
- 150 Primary School children will be able to act as mediators for conflict resolution.

SDGs



Laudato Si' Goals



# Whatever happens, wherever it happens, it affects all of us

**F**MESI – together with several organisations of the Marist Institute – published a letter expressing growing concern about the continuing fires in the tropical forests of **Bolivia**.

The continuous fires have been occurring in different departments of Bolivia, especially in the Chiquitania area, in the Madidi Park, in the Tunari National Park and in the area surrounding the Alalay Lagoon and highlight the danger that they pose to our Common Home and our Mother Earth. Let us share some recent figures that illustrate the scale of the problem:

- Bolivia is among those Countries with the **highest rate of tropical deforestation** in the region and the world. In 2020, Bolivia lost almost 300,000 hectares of tropical forest, the “fourth highest in the world”.

- More than 3.4 million hectares of accumulated burned areas were detected in 2021 at the national level during the period January 1 to October 15. Almost 95% of these affected areas belong to the departments of Beni and Santa Cruz.

- According to estimates, the fire, which has been burning for a month now, has so far consumed more than 450 hectares of forest in the protected areas of the Pilón Lajas Biosphere Reserve and Communal Land, putting the Madidi National Park at risk

In recent years events on this fundamental issue - such as the **COP26 Climate Summit** held in Glasgow, Scotland - have taken place and diplomatic solutions to the problem are being sought. More than 100 global leaders have committed to ending deforestation by 2030 by signing a Joint Declaration. We are concerned that the **Bolivian state is not a signatory to this document**, which is why it is so urgent to bring attention to the current situation in Bolivia. In the aftermath of this global event, we strongly support the Declaration signed by **40,000 young people**, who demand change from decision-makers, recognising that young people are the generation most threatened by climate change and valuing the important **role** they play around the world in raising awareness and providing innovative solutions on how to address this issue. We

seek thus to ensure their continued **participation**, recalling that they are still under-represented in the consultation processes and implementation of policies and initiatives related to the issue.

FMSI recognises and strongly believes in the **right of future generations** to enjoy the Earth which is at the heart of Humanity's history, culture and the social bonds of every generation and every individual. Each generation, in sharing in part the inheritance of the Earth, has a duty to steward it for future generations, to prevent irreversible damage to human freedom and **dignity**. The letter was signed by the “**Secretariado de Solidaridad del Instituto**”, the “**Red Corazón Solidario**”, the “**Grupo Temático de Ecología Integral y Cuidado de la Casa Común**”, the “**Sector Marista Bolivia**”, the “**Consejo Estudiantil Marista**” and the “**Equipo Marista de Solidaridad Bolivia**”. FMSI and the Marists Community in Bolivia wish to create channels for reflection and denunciation on the subject, especially because it is still a little-known topic, despite the magnitude of the phenomenon that is causing serious environmental damage to Bolivia and, therefore, to our planet. As often happens, if a phenomenon occurs far away from us, we feel that this phenomenon does not affect us. **But fires in Bolivia do affect us all.** ■

