By Jutta Urpilainen and Henrietta H. Fore *

“One child, one teacher, one book, one pen can change the world.” These words by Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai could not ring more true. Making sure girls and boys all over the world get good quality education is how we will build a more sustainable, more equal and more peaceful world.

Global school closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in unprecedented disruption to children’s education, with more than a billion students affected.

Those who have returned to school are presented with new challenges – masks, social distancing, lack of access to hand washing facilities and fears of getting sick.

As the digital divide deepens, most will have missed out on the chance to learn from home over the past few months. They will have fallen behind as a result, making the return to classrooms more daunting for them – and for their teachers.

In many ways, however, they are still the lucky ones. The new challenges they face are by far overshadowed by the catastrophic long-term impact of missing out on education altogether, particularly in the poorest countries and those affected by conflicts or crises.

We know from previous crises that the longer children stay out of school, the less likely they are to return. We also know that when children do not go to school, they are at increased risk of violence, abuse and exploitation. Girls face the additional risk of early marriage and pregnancy. Now with COVID, and as essential health, nutrition, immunisation and child protection services are put on hold, children are also exposed to under nutrition, disease, mental health issues and abuse.

In these most difficult of circumstances, can we still win the battle to educate our children? The answer is a resounding “yes”. But for this, like model students, we will need to work even harder to get the results we want.

In response to global pandemic, the European Union and its Member States –Team Europe – have demonstrated the power of working together for better results.

Given our proven track record of getting results from our partnerships, the EU and UNICEF can together make a lasting difference to education outcomes worldwide.

There are concrete steps we can take to safeguard children’s futures, steps that will build on existing work and strike out in new, innovative directions. This means investing now, so that the most vulnerable children can re-enter education. It means making sure that their schools are safe and their teachers can respond to their needs. It means reshaping education systems so that children graduate with 21st-century skills, such as digital skills and entrepreneurship training, ready for the new world before them.

Recently, we have seen impressive change, with many governments providing education online, on television, on the radio and via mobile phone. For instance, in Somalia, offline recorded lessons are being uploaded onto solar-powered tablets and made available to children. In Kyrgyzstan, children can access remote learning through online platforms, three national TV channels and two mobile network applications free of charge. In Vietnam, certain tests and modules have been dropped from the curriculum, while others have been postponed to the next school year to allow students to catch up on missed learning over the whole of next year, and to reduce academic pressure and psychosocial stress.

So the green shoots of recovery are there. Now it is time to nurture them. This is the moment to reimagine education systems, embrace technology, remove barriers and give all children the same access to modern education systems.

This must include closing the online education gap. We must embrace and invest in the promise of online learning – not just basic skills like reading and math, but digital, entrepreneurial and workplace skills, so young people can join the workforce.

Above all, education budgets must be protected from cuts as the global economic crisis bites. Education must be seen as part of the COVID-19 recovery plan: Rather than diverting finances away from education, there must be more investment to strengthen education systems. Education is essential to human development, which underlies all EU investments in international cooperation and this will be boosted in EU development financing for the upcoming period. Building back better applies as much to education as to anything else.

The scale of this crisis requires a global, coordinated response; the EU and UNICEF intend to be at the forefront of that response. The education community must jointly develop a global action plan to pave the way for equitable and quality education for all.

We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to emerge from this once-in-a-generation crisis doing things differently, addressing inequalities through more sustainable social systems.

Embarking on this huge undertaking means realising that business as usual is not an option. If we learn the right lessons now, we can re-imagine and deliver better education systems – for this generation and the next. (End).

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