

**Background Guide**  
**UNESCO**  
**Educational Technology**



## **I. Introduction to the Committee**

UNESCO is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. It seeks to build peace through international cooperation in education, sciences, and culture. UNESCO's programs contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals defined in the 2030 Agenda, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015.<sup>1</sup> As early as 1942, in wartime, the governments of the European countries, which were confronting Nazi Germany and its allies, met in the United Kingdom for the Conference of Allied Ministers of Education (CAME). World War II was not over; yet, those countries were looking for ways and means to rebuild their education systems once peace was restored. The project quickly gained momentum and soon acquired a universal character. New governments, including that of the United States, decided to join. Upon the proposal of CAME, a United Nations Conference for the establishment of an educational and cultural organization (ECO/CONF) convened in London from 1 to 16 November 1945. Scarcely had the war ended when the conference opened. It gathered representatives of 44 countries who decided to create an organization that would embody a genuine culture of peace. In their eyes, the new organization was to establish the "intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind" and thereby prevent the outbreak of another world war.<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, UNESCO has launched pioneering programs to achieve this. UNESCO mobilized philosophers, artists, and intellectuals from every country. From the very beginning, UNESCO debunked racist theories and developed innovative projects that changed the world such as the Universal Copyright Convention (1952) and the Man and the Biosphere Program (1971). UNESCO gave rise to global centers of scientific research, from CERN (1952) to SESAME (2017) and developed a global tsunami early warning system. UNESCO brought together experts and scholars to write the first ever general history of Africa and all five continents. UNESCO carried out literacy campaigns that spearheaded the development of nations in Italy, Korea, and Afghanistan. UNESCO has also established universal principles for scientific ethics and the human genome and protected the temples of ancient Egypt – among other sites.<sup>3</sup>

Faced with the challenges of our age, UNESCO is more relevant than ever – and with 193 member states, it continues to lead the way forward. The organization does this by imagining the future of education to navigate to our new world, living in peace with others and the planet, establishing common standards on open science and ethics of artificial intelligence, developing new tools to fight new forms of racism, hate speech, and misinformation.<sup>4</sup>

## **II. Statement of the Issues**

The World Bank Group (WBG) is the largest financier of education in the developing world, working on education programs in more than 80 countries to provide quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.<sup>5</sup> The partnership with governments and organizations

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<sup>1</sup> "UNESCO in Brief," UNESCO.org (UNESCO)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> "History of UNESCO," UNESCO.org (UNESCO)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> "Education and Technology," World Bank (World Bank, September 24, 2021)

worldwide to support innovative projects, timely research and knowledge sharing activities about effective and appropriate use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in education systems to strengthen learning and contribute to poverty reduction around the world. WBG estimated the levels of “learning poverty” across the globe by measuring the number of 10-year-old children who cannot read and understand a simple story by the end of primary school. In low- and middle-income countries, “learning poverty” stands at 53 percent while for the poorest countries, this is 80 percent on average.<sup>6</sup> With the spread of COVID-19, 180 or more countries mandated temporary school closures, leaving about 1.6 billion children and youth out of school at the height of the pandemic, thereby affecting about 85 percent of children world-wide.<sup>7</sup>

According to the United Nations International Children’s Fund (UNICEF), two-thirds of the world’s school-aged children – or 1.3 billion children aged 3 to 17 – do not have internet connection in their homes.<sup>8</sup> There is a similar lack of access among young people aged 15-24 years old, with 759 million or 63 percent unconnected at home. Henrietta Fore, UNICEF Executive Director stated, “Lack of connectivity does not just limit children and young people’s ability to connect online; it prevents them from competing in the modern economy. [...] Put bluntly: lack of internet access is costing the next generation their futures.” Nearly a quarter of a billion students worldwide are still affected by COVID school closures, forcing hundreds of millions of students to rely on virtual learning. For those without internet access, education can be out of reach. The digital divide is perpetuating inequalities that already divide countries and communities. Children and young people from the poorest households, rural and lower income states are falling even further behind their peers and are left with truly little opportunity to catch up.<sup>9</sup>

Globally, among school age children from richest households, 58 percent have internet connection at home, compared with only 16 percent from the poorest households. The same disparity exists across the country's income level as well. Less than 1 in 20 school age children from low-income countries have internet access at home, compared to 9 in 10 from high income countries.<sup>10</sup> There are also geographic disparities between countries and across regions. Globally, around 60 percent of school age children in urban areas do not have internet access at home, compared with around 75 percent of school age children in rural areas. School age children in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are the most affected, with around 9 in 10 children unconnected.<sup>11</sup>

### **III. History & Past UN Action**

For decades, the UN has called upon nations to gather to solve educational technology issues. In 2015, member states created and adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> “Two Thirds of the World's School-Age Children Have No Internet Access at Home, New UNICEF-ITU Report Says,” UNICEF (UNICEF, December 1, 2020)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

Sustainable Development Goals are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere.<sup>12</sup> These goals are a part of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which set out a 15-year plan to achieve the goals.<sup>13</sup> Educational technology falls under SDG 4: Quality Education and according to the UN, the COVID outbreak has caused an education crisis. It is estimated that 147 million children missed more than half of their in-class instruction over the past two years. This generation of children could lose a combined total of 17 trillion USD in lifetime earnings in present value.<sup>14</sup>

The UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education (IITE) was established as an integral part of UNESCO by the General Conference of UNESCO in November 1997. IITE is the only UNESCO Institute that holds a global mandate for information and communications technology (ICT).<sup>15</sup> The mission of IITE in the new era is promoting the innovative use of ICT and serving as a facilitator and enabler for achieving SDG 4 through ICT-enabled solutions and best practices. Over the twenty years since its foundation, IITE has accumulated rich expertise and experience in promoting ICT in education, with dedicated support and guidance from UNESCO Headquarters, UNESCO IITE Governing Board, and the host country.<sup>16</sup>

#### **IV. Latest Developments**

The crisis has starkly highlighted the inequalities in digital access and that ‘business as usual’ will not work for delivery of education to all children. To close the digital divides in education and leverage the power of technology to accelerate learning, reduce learning poverty, and support skills of development a focus must be placed in bridging the gaps in digital infrastructure, human infrastructure, and logistical/ administrative systems to deploy and maintain tech infrastructure.<sup>17</sup> In September 2019, UNICEF and ITU (International Telecommunication Union) launched Giga, a global initiative to connect every school and its surrounding community to the internet.<sup>18</sup> Working with governments, Giga has now mapped over 800,000 schools in 30 countries. With this data, Giga works with governments, industry, civil sector, and private sector partners to craft compelling investment cases for blended public-private funding. The initiative is now coordinated under the Reimagine Education initiative and through this initiative UNICEF aims to address the learning crisis and transform education.<sup>19</sup>

UNESCO is also working to address this issue. UNESCO is assisting the Ministries of Education and other partners in Egypt, Ethiopia, and Ghana with the implementation of a three-year (2020-2023) project to design, pilot test, and scale up Technology-enabled Open School Systems.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “The Sustainable Development Agenda - United Nations Sustainable Development,” United Nations (United Nations)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid,

<sup>14</sup> Ibid,

<sup>15</sup> “About UNESCO IITE,” UNESCO IITE (UNESCO, August 31, 2022)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> “Education and Technology,” World Bank (World Bank, September 24, 2021)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> “Technology-Enabled Open Schools for All,” UNESCO (UNESCO)

This project aims to build technology-enabled crisis-resilient school systems that will connect school-based and home-based learning, to ensure the continuity and quality of learning no matter under normal or crisis situations. This project allows schools in low-income countries to be transformed into technology-enabled open schools and provides inclusive, equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. It will empower countries to rethink and build the new generation of digital schools and digital learners. UNESCO also supports ICT in education policy development to ensure sustainability and mainstream the initiative into national policies.<sup>21</sup>

## **V. Problems That Resolutions Should Address**

The issue of equitable education has expanded over decades as conflict, the COVID pandemic, growing global population, and limited resources increases the number of children and adults without access to technology. Several interrelated issues need to be addressed while addressing education technology.

Delegates are encouraged to consider the following issues and questions in the course of their research and position paper writing:

- How did COVID expose and in many countries exacerbate inequity when it comes to access to education technology in both developing and developed countries?
- How does geography impact access to educational technology, especially the divide between rural and urban areas?
- How have private sector and NGOs helped play a role in trying to address this issue?

## **VI. Helpful Sources**

- UNESCO [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)
- World Bank [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)
- Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations [www.sdgs.un.org/goals](http://www.sdgs.un.org/goals)

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid

## Endnotes

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<https://www.unesco.org/en/brief>.