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How cities are utilizing the power of non-formal and informal learning to respond to the COVID-19 crisis

Introduction

With more than half of the global population residing in cities (UNFPA, 2020), in almost all countries affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, cities are the epicentres of infection and the frontlines for dealing with the vast implications of this public health emergency. In pursuit of effective education responses, many cities have mobilized cross-sectoral resources and are promoting, supporting and developing a variety of non-formal and informal learning initiatives to ensure continuity of education and equip and empower citizens with multi-faceted tools to face the crisis.

Non-formal and informal learning initiatives represent additional opportunities to reach underserved communities, promote relevant learning outcomes and organize flexible and efficient programmes (UIL, 2020a). These inherently flexible learning modalities are well-suited to rapidly changing circumstances, such

as those surrounding COVID-19. They have undoubtedly become a critical part of many cities' effective educational response to the pandemic, underpinning urban resilience and the capacity to recover from crises. They have demonstrated their advantage in addressing the needs of the population in general and of vulnerable groups in particular, such as students from low socio-economic backgrounds, ageing populations, people with disabilities, individuals with underlying health conditions, migrants and refugees, and women and girls, who have been disproportionately affected in the context of the pandemic. For example, it is usually female youth and adults in the home who are responsible for supporting younger children's learning; as a result, the workloads of women and older girls, including schoolgirls, have increased since the pandemic started.

The crucial role of non-formal and informal education and learning has been increasingly acknowledged in discussions and proposed solutions to the COVID-19 crisis. To a great extent, this is due to the necessary closure of the formal education schools due to the pandemic, but also because municipal governments tend to have a more direct influence on non-formal than formal education at the local level. Furthermore, non-formal and informal learning are well-suited modalities for learning programmes designed to change people's behaviour and ways of thinking, which has become a priority as the pandemic spreads rapidly. The experiences and insightful reflections from many local contexts across the world on utilizing the power of non-formal and informal learning are valuable assets to building resilience and informing educational planning and policy-making for local and national governments in the future.

Defining the topic and related key issues

The role of cities

In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, national governments are taking a leading role in developing strategies to confine the spread of the virus and to cope with all its unprecedented challenges. In this process, cities are key actors on the frontline. Nevertheless, the role of a city is not limited to being the 'passive recipient' of 'instructions' from national governments; many cities have actively developed and implemented innovative and contextual measures. Due to the proximity of citizens and local resources, cities can take action immediately and in a contextualized way, thus responding to emergencies and addressing citizens' needs more efficiently, especially the needs of vulnerable groups (OECD, 2020).

Emergent issues requiring education responses

COVID-19 has caused an overwhelming public health crisis first and foremost, which has also affected other sectors, including education. From an education perspective, the most pressing task for governments at all levels has been to quickly equip citizens with critical knowledge to protect themselves and slow down the spread of the virus. As these emergency education measures are intended for all citizens, governments must find complementary channels and modalities to reach and 'educate' in a timely and effective manner. When considering the special needs of vulnerable groups, the task becomes even more challenging. Factors of ethnicity, gender, religion, language, class, age and disability, among others, must be considered. It therefore requires a tailored approach.

Most governments around the world have closed educational institutions temporarily in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus. According to UNESCO, these nationwide closures affected up to 90 per cent of the world's student population (UNESCO, 2020a). Depending on the local context and information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, schools have moved learning and teaching to distance mode, either online or through other means, such as television and radio. Parents and carers have had to assume major responsibility for facilitating homeschooling and organizing learning activities for their children. These significant pressures are accompanied by opportunities: when the home

becomes the centre of learning, family members can learn together to improve health and well-being, strengthen family bonds and acquire new knowledge and skills (UNESCO, 2020b). These potential benefits can only be fulfilled when family learning is implemented effectively. Nevertheless, it is not an easy task. Parents or carers of disadvantaged groups, and most usually mothers who often assume this task, could confront compounded challenges such as lack of resources, equipment and competences, including linguistic skills (e.g. in the case of refugees or new migrants). All of these factors could hinder children in such families from accessing equal learning opportunities. In addition, mental health services are seeing an alarming increase in cases since the COVID-19 outbreak began, with loneliness, stress, fear and anxiety associated with the pandemic, as well as social confinements and social distancing measures, having a severe impact on people's well-being (WHO, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had devastating socio-economic consequences that call for effective educational responses from cities. The pandemic and its resulting measures have rapidly changed people's daily routines and the ways in which they organize their lives. It has become imperative for local governments to support their citizens in developing a sense of belonging to a common humanity, sharing empathy, respect and solidarity, establishing community resilience. Lockdown measures and social distancing restrictions resulted in many businesses closing down, causing considerable damage to the livelihoods of small business owners, freelancers and self-employed entrepreneurs. In many countries, the unemployment rate continues to soar, millions of people having lost their jobs. This current crisis has generated a critical need to upskill the workforce, transform business models and shift to a sustainable and green economy.

Cities drawing on non-formal and informal learning to provide effective solutions

In search of an effective educational response to solve these emergent issues, countries must seek solutions beyond formal education, by mobilizing and utilizing non-formal and informal learning resources in cooperation with partners across sectors. This is not only due to disrupted schooling, but also to the variety of learners and the diversity of their learning needs. Non-formal opportunities include a number of programmes implemented by diverse groups of stakeholders to respond to the learning needs emerging during the pandemic, with flexibility and open access. At local level, cities have been implementing health information campaigns and online programmes to promote learning during the pandemic beyond the formal education system.

Although in many countries, municipal governments have little or no jurisdiction over the formal schooling system, they are usually responsible for a number of non-formal learning spaces. For example, they oversee community learning centres, libraries and museums and often support various community learning initiatives such as learning neighbourhoods, study circles or family learning. Furthermore, cities can cooperate with partners from a variety of sectors to design, develop and implement non-formal and informal learning programmes, ensuring that education continues and learning programmes are available to those who need them most.

Lessons from current crisis

The experiences of a number of members of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC) provides wide evidence of effective educational responses to the pandemic, in which cities mobilized non-formal and informal learning to implement local lifelong learning coping strategies. These experiences were presented in a series of webinars entitled 'UNESCO learning cities' responses to COVID-19', hosted by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL). Those responses can be grouped into several areas, as presented on the following pages.

Supporting homeschooling and family learning

During the pandemic, many family homes were transformed into venues for online schooling; however, not all families were prepared for this. Those from low socio-economic backgrounds in particular are at high risk of being left behind. To tackle the divide in digital learning, the city of Hangzhou in China cooperated with a company specializing in digital solutions to support low-income families by providing free digital manuals on online learning (Wasu Group, 2020). Évry-Courcouronnes in France supported the most vulnerable families, sharing knowledge with parents on how to organize homeschooling and ensure continuity of learning during the pandemic (UIL, 2020b).

Beyond school education, family support is key to facilitate social-emotional learning and help maintain good mental and physical health (UNESCO, 2020b). In the city of Lima, Peru, the municipal government used the pandemic to promote intergenerational learning by providing learning materials targeting different members of the family. By encouraging and supporting learning across generations, this initiative aims to strengthen the family bond by contributing to effective, assertive and emotional communication (UIL, 2020c). There are, however, difficulties for working parents, grandparents and carers, who need support and advice on how to plan a day of children's learning activities while continuing to work and take care of the household. In particular, women have assumed this responsibility to a great extent. In response to these challenges, the city of Swansea, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, with the support of educational experts, published a parental guide to supporting the well-being and learning of children during the COVID-19 outbreak (Swansea City Council, 2020).

Drawing on a community-based approach to health education

More than ever, citizens are living within the confines of their communities as a consequence of social restrictions during the pandemic. Community has therefore become a relevant setting to disseminate health and hygiene information and provide other required services. For example, in the City of Chengdu, China, community staff call vulnerable locals daily to assess their needs, share the latest information on the pandemic and suggest sanitary measures. They also offer masks, medicine or food and deliver supplies to the door (UIL, 2020d). The City of Gdynia, Poland, has formed partnerships with local volunteer groups and non-governmental organizations to maintain regular contact with vulnerable families and attend to their needs (UIL, 2020e). Neighbourhood centres in the city have established online meetings, activities and integration initiatives. Local residents use these platforms to access hygiene information and offer support, DIY ("Do It Yourself") ideas and more (ibid.).

In addition to the continuation of existing social programmes in Mexico City, Mexico (scholarships for students, assistance for single mothers, assistance for the unemployed, etc.), the local government has implemented two new measures: the distribution of 'COVID-19 Medical Kits' to homes and an information campaign on the health crisis. The success of these measures implemented at the local level is due to the participation of various sectors and local partners (UIL, 2020c). In Cork, Ireland, some structures to support learning networks were already in place prior to the health crisis; at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a Local Authority Community Response Forum was also established in every district to help vulnerable members of the communities. In total, 30 partner organizations are cooperating (Cork City Council, 2020). A similar case can be found in Osan, Republic of Korea: among other initiatives, the 'One Learning, One Sharing' mask production project is built on this momentum. Materials were funded through the local government disaster funds and provided to cooperatives to produce about 100,000 reusable cotton masks, which have been distributed to school students and vulnerable groups (UIL, 2020f).

Organizing libraries, museums and other cultural initiatives to support learning, promote well-being and foster solidarity

During the pandemic, many libraries have moved services online with the support of local governments. Across cities, it is common to see libraries providing the public with free access to e-collections, virtual learning programmes for all ages, and selected learning materials that address the pandemic and

preventive healthcare. In Fermo, Italy, the city library supported learning at home by providing free access to an online repository of newspapers, books and other written resources (UIL, 2020g). In Wyndham, Australia, the city library offered free live tutoring for students, online educational games for young children, pet-story time and family history support, online résumé support programmes for job-seekers and online volunteering programmes for people seeking work experience, as well as cultural events such as a virtual art competition (UIL, 2020h). As a result, the library experienced a 50 per cent increase in new memberships (ibid.).

Local governments have also developed partnerships with cultural institutions such as museums to formulate an educational response to COVID-19. For example, in Shanghai, China, the Shanghai History Museum launched the 'Open Solicitation of Objects Witnessing the Anti-epidemic Efforts' campaign and developed online exhibitions, encouraging citizens to share their efforts to combat the pandemic in the city in their capacity as a citizen, employee, family member, volunteer or member of the community (SMILE, 2020). In Glasgow, Scotland (UK), the city government organized 'art in a time of crisis' in collaboration with the Centre for Open Studies and Hunterian Museum, featuring 20-minute lectures on the topic of civil engagement and various other concepts, ideas and philosophies to boost confidence and promote solidarity.

Harnessing the potential of ICT to deliver learning programmes to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic

Local governments developed a wide variety of ICT-based non-formal and informal learning programmes in response to the pandemic. Limerick in Ireland, for example, took advantage of the city's well-established ICT infrastructure to implement an online course in infection prevention and control. This three-week course equips learners with skills to prevent and control infections in a variety of settings. The city has also paid particular attention to addressing the issue of digital inclusion by establishing working groups for citizen engagement, data, digital inclusion and energy. The digital inclusion working group has focused on developing a better understanding of what it means to be 'digitally included' and 'digitally excluded', and has developed collaborative initiatives for inclusion (UIL, 2020i). In Espoo, Finland, ICT-based non-formal learning programme design has also taken the linguistic diversity of the city into consideration. A chatbot service offers COVID-19 information and instructions in 100 languages and a multilingual online counselling service supported by volunteers and local library staff is on-hand to respond to Espoo residents' queries and concerns (UIL, 2020d).

In Kashan, Islamic Republic of Iran, the local government sought advice from specialized higher education institutions and ran educational and informational television programmes on virus prevention (UIL, 2020g). In Chefchaouen, Morocco, educational shows are broadcast on television and produced with a mix of live broadcasts, pre-recorded content and edutainment programmes to guarantee the continuation of learning for vulnerable groups that do not have access to the internet or to digital devices (UIL, 2020b). Many local governments have also relied on ICTs to facilitate the continuity of adult education and non-formal technical and vocational education and training (TVET). The Torino City Love project in Italy was developed in collaboration with local companies and offers free resources and skills programmes to support citizens and businesses (ibid.).

Key messages and practical tips for designing policy interventions

Timely use of ICTs which are sensitive to age, gender, linguistic or cultural differences: Non-formal and informal learning initiatives – focusing on collaborative and inclusive use of ICTs – have an advantage when responding to emergent learning needs in a timely manner. Also, their effectiveness lies in their age, gender, linguistic and cultural sensitivity. They can meet the specific and multi-faceted needs of many different groups flexibly. The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in a remarkable technological boom

when it comes to supporting continuity of learning and education. ICTs have widened access to learning materials, enhancing the flexibility of time and place and meeting learners' needs (UIL, 2020a). This 'sudden digital boom' may motivate cities to explore the potential of ICTs to digitize education and other public services further once the crisis has ended. Government-led initiatives that use ICTs to enhance learning and education should be collaborative and cross-sectoral to harness the existing technological resources and learning expertise in the private and voluntary sectors. Issues such as online safety and unequal access, among others, need to be addressed so that targeted policy intervention for digital inclusion can ensure that no-one is left behind (ibid.).

Focus on lifelong learning for all: The implementation of lifelong learning for all may be the key characteristic of effective local educational responses to the pandemic. Cities have enabled local governments to identify gaps in learning provision and fill them with non-formal and informal learning initiatives. Despite having little control over formal education, many cities have succeeded in building partnerships for non-formal and informal learning programmes. In this process, cities have managed to align three learning modalities: formal, non-formal and informal. They have harnessed the collective power of these modalities to meet the learning needs of all citizens. The pandemic has allowed us to recognize and demonstrate the value of non-formal and informal learning. Cities can thrive on what they achieve during the crisis and benefit from the momentum that follows by continuing to place importance on non-formal and informal learning and promoting lifelong learning for all. Cities that embark on this route should firstly engage different stakeholders in discussing a comprehensive local lifelong learning vision. This vision could be conveyed by adopting a learning city charter to guide stakeholder involvement and contribution, for example. The good practice of one city can spread and be scaled up to lead to a country-wide initiative, with the support of the central government, including special provisions related to COVID-19.

Cross-sectoral partnership and collaboration: Partnerships underpin cities' resilience when designing and implementing local educational and learning measures. The involvement and participation of a wide variety of local partners has enabled the formulation and delivery of emergent solutions. In a collective battle against the pandemic, city governments and local partners have enabled continued access to more equal learning opportunities and empowered citizens to better cope with the crisis. Their contributions have been made through financial means (e.g. by funding or sponsoring technical devices) and non-financial ones (e.g. by contributing to the design and delivery of learning initiatives targeting vulnerable groups). Cross-sectoral collaboration has enabled an efficient and effective response to the diverse and specific needs of citizens. When establishing and managing partnerships, local governments should remain at the centre of the partnership to ensure it operates in the public interest (UIL, 2020j). Clarity is crucial when it comes to commitments to the governance system – each partner should know exactly what their roles and responsibilities are (ibid.). Drawing on successful experiences during the pandemic, local governments should consider cross-sectoral collaboration as a part of their long-term strategy for resilience. To develop and create synergy based on this governance model, it is essential to establish intersectoral policy frameworks that set priorities, provide coordination mechanisms, create alternative pathways between different lifelong learning modalities, and correct disparities regarding gender, age, ethnicity and socio-economic status. A continuous and structured dialogue and a platform for consultations between local institutions and non-state actors are valuable tools for achieving long-term civil empowerment (UIL, 2020a). Social media can support involvement by bringing together the voices of many groups of society and engaging them in discussion (ibid.).

Pay particular attention to disadvantaged groups, linking educational and learning support to other services: Given their circumstances prior to the pandemic, many disadvantaged groups are now confronting even more acute challenges during the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, in the context of the pandemic, a single-faceted educational solution for disadvantaged groups can hardly be effective. A solution package that takes their acute challenges into consideration is more effective. To this end,

some local governments have been seeking cooperation with community leaders, committees, NGOs, extension programmes (e.g. livelihood and food support programmes) and family support services (e.g. health and counselling services) to design and deliver integrated solutions. Local government should incorporate health education and food assistance into family support programmes for vulnerable groups as critical elements. Family support service staff and volunteers should receive training on how to help disadvantaged families engage in family learning.

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About the UNESCO Education Sector issue notes

The UNESCO Education Sector issue notes cover key topics related to the COVID-19 education response. They provide evidence of good practice, practical tips and links to important references for each topic in an effort to mitigate the impact of school closures.

The issue notes cover several topics under nine thematic areas, namely: health and well-being; continuity of learning and teaching; gender equity and equality; teaching and learning; higher education and TVET; education and culture; education policy and planning; vulnerable populations; Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development.

They are prepared collectively by UNESCO education colleagues across the world. The present note was developed by the **UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL).**

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