

## **WE CANNOT AFFORD A COVID-19 LOST GENERATION**

Jorge Sampaio<sup>1</sup>,

Day by day, as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic shows it has triggered a human, economic and social crisis that is truly global, speculation is rising as to what the world will look like in the future. For the moment, it is crystal clear that this unprecedented health emergency has severely disrupted economic growth worldwide in addition to prompting social impacts - unemployment, loss of income and increased vulnerability. Whatever the future may hold, the right question to ask is not how the coronavirus will change the world but rather how our societies and governments will respond to its aftermath. Should we attempt to go back to the status quo ante? Will we get bogged down? As challenging as it is, this crisis also offers an opportunity to implement transformative agendas, aiming to achieve social progress by making universal social protection a reality, revisiting the social impacts of globalization, building more inclusive societies and ensuring green growth strategies. Let's hope this will be the way forward.

The Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development that applies to all nations worldwide, as well as other common goals agreed at international level, such as the Paris Climate Agreements, offer a unique global framework to steer a steady course through the current global crisis. Yet amid a huge number of pressing needs, progress made towards achieving these goals is likely to slow down or even be at risk of going backwards, in particular as regards the most vulnerable or specific issues that are unlikely to be prioritized. However, to lose a decade to this fight means losing an entire generation. Access to higher education is a case in point.

During times of crisis, higher education tends to be neglected. As households often adopt coping strategies and expenditure with education is pushed back, higher education also slips further down governments' equity agendas. These trends usually create long-term deficits, affect the preservation of human capital and spawn lost generations of university graduates. As the coronavirus pandemic sends shockwaves throughout the world, a whole generation is at risk of being lost across all countries. To

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prevent this happening, bold collective action is needed to ensure that students in vulnerable conditions are supported, whether students from low-income households, refugees of all kinds (internally and externally displaced), forced migrants or students in conflict-affected societies. Altogether, the expected decrease in international aid flows, funding by private and philanthropic donors, public resources available at country level coupled with a reduction in tuition fees collected by higher education institutions, will shape an extremely difficult situation.

Our challenge today is to find ways to navigate this perfect storm in the midst of uncertainty and competing demands, when practically everything is urgent, and things evolve so fast that we seem to live in a constant state of emergency. Without a shadow of a doubt, more than ever today collective action with bold responses to support and boost higher education opportunities is required. **We cannot afford to create a Covid-19 lost generation of university graduates worldwide.** Providing tertiary education opportunities that empower young people, enhance their resilience and reinforce their skills to thrive and build hope for the future is the only way forward to ensure progress and prosperity for all. Available data shows that the private and social returns of tertiary education are 12.4 per cent in high-income countries. But in developing countries, the social rate of return is 16.4 per cent. Higher education is a true catalyst for social cohesion, the progress of society and human development. Still when things fall apart, human capital is one of the first things to be affected. In our times of global crisis, we really have to gear up for a major push into more support and investments in higher education in order to protect and foster human capital.

For that to happen, **we need an emergency fund and innovative and fast-tracking financing tools to refrain the global spread of drop-out in tertiary education and the breakdown of the higher education system as a whole.** I call upon the academic community, the private sector, philanthropies, governments and international organizations to come together and commit to prevent a COVID-19 lost generation of university graduates. Without action our youth have a bleak future anywhere. With action now, we can make it bright for many everywhere.

Let's leave no one behind in particular those most in need and most vulnerable within all our societies, but also those in fragile settings and

conflict affected societies. As a striking example of the scale of the challenge ahead, let us not forget that only three per cent of refugees are currently enrolled in tertiary education, compared to 37 per cent of young people worldwide. Higher education protects, enhances resilience and unleashes innovation and entrepreneurial skills that are crucial for economic recovery and job creation, thus building a stronger foundation for sustained recovery at global level.

As Mandela's anniversary is approaching, in order to inspire the much needed and urgent transformation, let us call to mind that "education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world".

***Jorge Sampaio is inviting you to disseminate and join this Call to Action***