The challenges of education in the face of COVID-19

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UNICEF has insisted that the lack of access to the Internet is costing the future of millions of children and young people. Photo: Los Angeles Times

By María Josefina Arce

COVID-19 has been a major challenge, but also a setback for education worldwide. In 2020, the health emergency forced the closure of educational centers in more than 190 countries in order to prevent the spread of the virus.

The necessary measure to protect students and teachers has led to nearly one billion infants being at risk of significant learning loss.

In Latin America, the challenge is extremely high. A year and a half after the outbreak of the virus, some 86 million children have not yet returned to school, which, according to experts, jeopardizes the levels of knowledge previously acquired.

Moreover, every day away from the classroom makes children more vulnerable to dropping out of school, gang violence, abuse or human trafficking, warned UNICEF, the UN Children's Fund. This is a situation they were already facing before COVID/19, due to the poverty and lack of opportunities in Latin America -- a region considered the most unequal in the world.

Although during these months, distance education was put into practice, mainly through new technologies, to keep children and young people learning, the disease caused by the new coronavirus made more evident and marked the great digital gap existing at a global level.

According to UNICEF, two out of every three school-age children in the world do not have an Internet connection, a situation that is much more complex in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Studies by international organizations show that 90% of students in this geographic area do not have computers at home and 82% of those who do have them cannot connect to the Internet.

Although to a lesser extent, these disparities are also present in developed nations such as the United States, a 2020 Census Bureau report notes that Black and Latino families continue to be less likely than white families to have good Internet connections and access to devices.

UNICEF has insisted that the lack of access to the Internet is costing millions of children and young people their futures.

The world is facing a great challenge: to make up for lost learning time in months and we must, experts warn, avoid a generational catastrophe.

A challenge, but also a necessity, because, as UNESCO -- the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization -- states, if we do not make education, along with health, employment and climate, the pillar of recovery plans, societies, instead of reversing the growing inequalities and poverty, will be nourished by these evils.

Radio Habana Cuba