



UNDP LAC C19 PDS N°. 26

The invisible COVID-19 graveyard: intergenerational losses for the poorest young people and actions to address a human development pandemic

By **Orazio Attanasio*** & **Ranjita Rajan****

Abstract

The pandemic's impact is unequivocally unequal. This is true for educational opportunity and outcomes as well as other dimensions: the poorest are far more vulnerable to the economic, health and learning support shocks of the pandemic. Furthermore, policies to limit COVID-19's transmission impose unequal burdens, exacerbating inequality and poverty. This is magnified for the youngest, with the pandemic unleashing large negative spillover impacts for children, and these effects are compounded for those in poorer households. Parenting practices and a stable environment during a child's early years are critical in determining outcomes in later life. The addition of formal learning becomes vital in later childhood and teenage years for determining life outcomes in adulthood. Emerging evidence suggests that all these factors are heavily compromised through a set of mutually negatively reinforcing factors, including reduced "teleworkability" of poorer parents, digital poverty (infrastructure and connectivity), the absence of in-person learning, cramped living conditions, domestic violence, reduced nutritional inputs, compromised physical and mental well-being, the reversal of gender parity advances, restricted social and community interaction, and much more. The thread of support for effective parenting practices and access to formal learning is considerably weakened –if not altogether broken– for the youngest of the poor. With each passing day, this "inequality pandemic" further jeopardizes the life chances of the youngest of the poor, and consequently, compromises the region's prospects for inclusive, sustained growth and development. At a defining moment for Latin American policy makers' commitment to human development, this paper aims to draw urgent attention to key aspects of the current situation, its complications, and the opportunities inherent in its resolution. Concerted and intentional policy action is urgently needed, and more likely to succeed in scale and impact if its design and deployment are based on two key elements: (i) leverage of existing programs and infrastructure, including cash transfer programmes, and (ii) community participation and ownership, especially programmes with an anchor community female leader. Innovation from scratch is not required. If a decades-long, intergenerational human development pandemic is to be halted in its tracks, then creativity and courage, building on existing foundations of tried and trusted policy infrastructure and community leadership, must be the order of the day.

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This document was commissioned jointly with UNICEF to contribute to the public policy debate in the region, with a particular emphasis on the protection of the rights of children and adolescents.

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Introduction to the series:

Evidence, Experience, and Pertinence in Search for Effective Policy Alternatives

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most serious challenges the world has faced in recent times. The total cost in terms of human lives is yet to unfold. Alongside the cost of lives and deep health crisis, the world is witnessing an economic downfold that will severely impact the wellbeing of large parts of the population in the years to come. Some of the measures that are currently being used to counteract the pandemic may impact our future lives in non-trivial ways. Understanding the association between different elements of the problem to broaden the policy space, with full awareness of the economic and social effects that they may bring is the purpose of this series.

Thus far, the impossibility of targeted isolation of infected individuals and groups has led to policies of social distancing that impose a disproportionately high economic and social cost around the world. The combination of policies such as social distancing, lockdowns, and quarantines, imply a slowdown or even a complete stop in production and consumption activities for an uncertain period of time, crashing markets and potentially leading to the closure of businesses, sending millions of workers home. Labor, a key factor of production, has been quarantined in most sectors in the economy, borders have been closed and global value chains have been disrupted. Most estimates show a contraction of the level of output globally. For the Latin America and Caribbean region, the consensus forecasts are at -3 to -4%, and it is not until 2022 that the region is expected to go back to its pre-crisis output levels in scenarios that foresee a U-shaped crisis pattern. According to ECLAC, more than 30 million people could fall into poverty in the absence of active policies to protect or substitute income flows to vulnerable groups.

We face a crisis that requires unconventional responses. We are concerned about the level-effect: the impact of the crisis on the size of the economies and their capacity to recover growth after the shock. But we are equally concerned about the distributional impact of the shock. The crisis interacts with pre-existing heterogeneity in asset holdings, income-generation capacity, labor conditions, access to public services, and many other aspects

that make some individuals and households particularly vulnerable to an economic freeze of this kind. People in the informal markets, small and micro entrepreneurs, women in precarious employment conditions, historically excluded groups, such as indigenous and afro-descendants, must be at the center of the policy response.

UNDP, as the development agency of the United Nations, has a long tradition of accompanying policy-making in its design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. It has a mandate to respond to changing circumstances, deploying its assets to support our member states in their pursuit of integrated solutions to complex problems. This series aims at drawing from UNDPs own experience and knowledge globally and from the expertise and capacity of our partner think tanks and academic institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean. It is an attempt to promote a collective reflection on the response to the COVID-19 health crisis and its economic and social effects on our societies. Timeliness is a must. Solutions that rely on evidence, experience, and reasoned policy intuition –coming from our rich history of policy engagement– are essential to guide this effort. This series also contributes to the integrated approach established by the UN reform and aspires to become an important input into the coherent response of the United Nations development system at the global, regional, and national levels.

Ben Bernanke, former Governor of the US Federal Reserve, reminds us in his book *The Courage to Act* that during crises, people are distinguished by those who act and those who fear to act. We hope this policy documents series will contribute to the public debate by providing timely and technically solid proposals to support the many who are taking decisive actions to protect the most vulnerable in our region.

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New York, March 2020*

1. CONTEXT

The pandemic triggered by the COVID-19 virus has altered and torn apart the world in manifold ways, with deep and far-reaching impacts, penetrating every sector of society and every continent of the world. The immediate consequences for physical and mental health, mortality, economic welfare and general well-being are undeniable and amply illustrated by the vast quantities of data being collected on different outcomes. However, the pandemic will also have long-lasting ramifications on concrete outcomes and on the way society operates.

Most urgently and disturbingly for those who measure, track and research human development and its role in driving inequalities and transmitting them across generations, it is increasingly clear that the pandemic's impacts are and will be unequal. The pandemic is exposing and reinforcing pre-existing inequalities. Furthermore, policies to limit COVID-19's transmission and mitigate public health consequences impose unequal burdens across different sectors of society. Inequality is multidimensional – something the current pandemic has starkly exposed – ranging from economic well-being to physical and mental health. Its increase in many parts of the world has rightly received considerable attention in recent years, despite the declines in disparities across different regions.

It is now clear that the pandemic has increased inequality within countries (Goldin & Muggah, 2020; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2020; Andrew *et al.*, 2020). In developed and industrialized countries such as the United States and regions such as Europe, COVID-19 has affected poorer households and individuals far more severely, impacting their health and economic outcomes. Surviving – let alone thriving – through the pandemic relies on economic wealth, which in turn drives physical assets and digital wealth (access to equipment and software, sufficient connectivity and literacy). Poorer individuals are less likely to possess teleworkability – the ability to work remotely (Lohan, 2020) – and thus rely on employment that is harder, if not impossible, to fulfil remotely. Their living conditions are ill-equipped with the space, equipment and connectivity to support remote access to critical goods and services. Poorer households are less likely to be able to afford access to high-quality support and virtual learning environments for their children. Finally, densely populated housing leaves them more vulnerable to COVID-19 transmission.

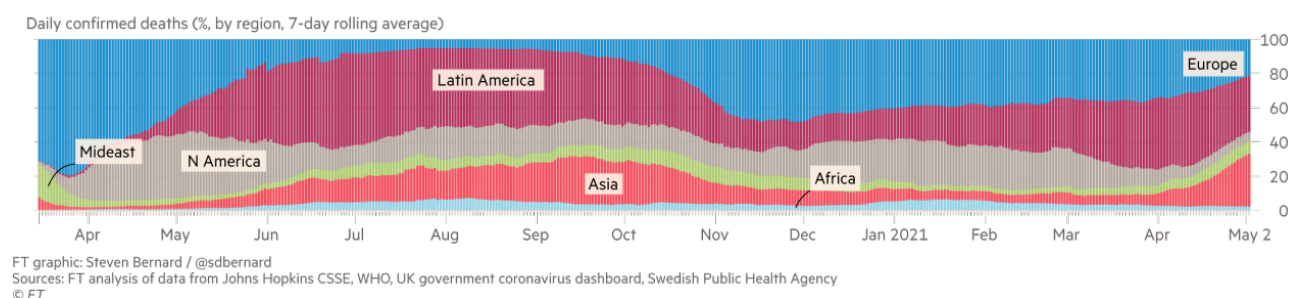
The toxic combination of hard economic shocks (more pronounced for poorer sectors of society), vulnerability to the virus and shocks to learning support previously available to many families is revealing the disturbing extent of inequality. Any advances in reducing inequality made in recent years are insufficient. The increased inequality currently unfolding is becoming entrenched, persistent and at high risk of being inherited by the next generation.

Negative shocks that affect children in their early years, including the absence of nurturing family and care-giving environments, are troubling due to their long-run consequences. An overwhelming body of evidence stresses the criticality of the early years for human development (see Almond and Currie (2011) for instance). The first 1000 days from conception are vital in determining outcomes in later life, as development is affected by the environment in which children live and grow. Change happens more rapidly and becomes ingrained in individual development. Development indicators at age three (or earlier) are predictive of a range of adult outcomes, including educational achievement, earnings, criminal behaviour and physical and mental health. Beyond the first three years of life, and into youth and adulthood, individual development continues to be affected by household and parental dynamics, to which are added individual educational experience, peer behaviour, the presence and influence of role-models, social capital, access to information and more. Oxford University's Young Lives longitudinal study, which tracks the lives of children aged one to 15 in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam over a 20-year period, confirms the criticality of early childhood; the multidimensional, potential-limiting nature of childhood poverty; and the "second chance" to address cognitive development through early action in adolescence. The implications are obvious: the early years

are highly responsive to environmental shocks and influences, and thus highly sensitive to policies; later stages of childhood development require intentional, ongoing and multi-pronged policy interventions.

Whether the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is worse in low- and middle-income countries is debatable. One body of research (Goldin & Muggah, 2020; Stiglitz, 2020; UNDP, 2020) argues that the pandemic has increased inequality across countries. Yet others (Decerf *et al.*, 2020; Goldberg & Reed, 2020; Deaton, 2021), note a positive correlation between per capita income and mortality (and other adverse COVID-19 health outcomes). This correlation seems present despite the health resources and health system available in richer countries. Latin America, a region characterized by high levels of inequality, provides a special case. Some of the worst affected countries, such as Brazil and Mexico, are among the largest of the region. Figure 1 shows the bald and bleak human consequences in Latin America, where the death toll is significant versus other regions.

■ Figure 1. Daily confirmed deaths, March 2020 – February 2021 (Percent by region, 7-day rolling average)



Source: Financial Times (2020-2021). Coronavirus tracker: the latest figures as countries fight the Covid-19 resurgence. Retrieved from www.ft.com/content/a2901ce8-5eb7-4633-b89c-cbdf5b386938

The (partial) decreases in inequalities in some Latin American countries (Lustig *et al.*, 2016; Busso & Messina, 2020) observed in prior years are at a standstill, even moving in reverse. Social tensions and the vulnerability of large sectors of society had become apparent pre-pandemic, manifested through protests in many countries (Ferreira & Shoch, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is compounding the drivers of this discontent.

Given the fragile status of education policies and early years interventions in several parts of the region, Latin America's human development is exceptionally vulnerable – now and in the aftermath of the pandemic. This note discusses the acute vulnerability playing out as of this writing, including its symptoms and consequences. Its focus is the impact of the current pandemic on human development outcomes for the youngest of the poor in Latin America, subdivided into children under the age of five, and youth between ages five and 18. Both of these groups are affected significantly by the pandemic, with commonalities and differences in drivers of their human development. These negative impacts are bound to be more severe for children with developmental delays or disabilities; children from ethno-linguistic minorities, indigenous populations, or populations on the move; and children from the poorest quintile.

This is a defining moment for Latin America's policymakers' commitment to human development and the objective of this note is to draw urgent attention to some key aspects of the current situation, its complications and to the opportunities inherent in its resolution. As observers and researchers of this domain, the authors' call for systems-wide, coordinated policy action to address and reverse a looming intergenerational human development

disaster. Moreover, policy action is more likely to succeed in scale and impact if its design and deployment are based on two key elements: (i) leverage of existing programmes and infrastructure, and (ii) community participation and ownership. While the considerations presented are broadly relevant for the entirety of Latin America and possibly beyond, Colombia features prominently due to in-country understanding of the institutions and current policy landscape. Examples from other countries, such as Rwanda and India, are introduced where relevant to provide contrast and inspiration. The intention is that using examples based on knowledge of a specific policy context will increase the specificity and saliency of the overall message. The authors fully recognize the limitations of this approach, including that examples or strategies might not be relevant for different contexts. They trust, however, that the main message – of urgent and important investment in Latin America’s youth and their human development, deployed through scalable and effective policies – carries through. Successful interventions are judged by their impact, sustainability, scalability and the absence of unintended consequences or distortions of incentives. This paper concludes by proposing the key defining features for successful policy strategy and actions for these young people who face a lifetime of continual human development losses.

2. The pandemic and the early years

The early years of life, in particular the first 1000 days after conception, have been proven to be vital for human development. During this period, the brain goes through fundamental development and growth. Research from early childhood development, neuroscience and biology demonstrates that relationships, nutritional inputs and environments during these first 1000 days have a material impact on long-term outcomes.¹ Research further proves that development during the early years can be affected by external factors. Parenting has been repeatedly shown to be of key importance to development during this time since parenting practices can impact all the key inputs borne out by research. More holistically, a stable, harmonious and stimulating environment is critical for the development of both cognitive and socioemotional skills. These skills build a foundation that allows a child to benefit from further dimensions of human development in later stages of childhood. As such, while many adversities can jeopardize current and subsequent development, parallel interventions that focus on parenting practices and the child’s environment are vital to mitigating these impacts.

The pandemic and the corresponding shocks are likely to have large negative spillover effects for children and for children living in poorer households in particular. Many countries have tackled the pandemic with lockdown measures that require adults to work from home if possible. Lohan (2020) defines teleworkability as the feasibility of working from home and presents it as a principal factor in COVID-19’s unevenly distributed health and economic consequences due to low-income jobs being less “teleworkable”. The lack of teleworkability in turn magnifies COVID-19’s health and economic risks, with the burden falling disproportionately on already-vulnerable groups (low income, low teleworkability, reduced health). For adults who cannot work from home, the pandemic is resulting in fewer job and earnings opportunities, with a corresponding negative effect on their children.

For those who continue to work outside the home, prevailing school closures in most of Latin America mean that their children are left to their own devices, at home alone with patchy and infrequent contact with the education system. Unsurprisingly, reductions in household income and increased uncertainty creates considerable stress and tensions in households, working at cross-purposes to learning and child development. It is well known that stress is linked to a reduction in the quality of parenting practices, as discussed in Brown *et al.* (2020). Given the

¹ The very large literature on these topics includes, among many other papers, Cunha *et al.*, 2006; Engle *et al.*, 2007; Heckman, 2006; Yoshikawa *et al.*, 2016; Almond and Currie, 2011; Doyle *et al.*, 2009; Pongcharoen *et al.*, 2012; Shonkoff and Garner, 2012.

importance of such practices in the first 1000 days, the youngest children are bearing the brunt of this stress, thus compromising their toolkit for future development. Yoshikawa *et al.* (2020) potentially describe the short- and long-term risks of the pandemic on early childhood development in the *Journal of Pediatrics*. This is underscored by the 2020 statement released by the Early Childhood Development Action Network, outlining the risks to care, protection and learning and the longer-term risk of losing the intergenerational social and economic benefits of early childhood development.

The multiple shocks inflicted on child development by the pandemic accentuate the criticality of parenting practices for children, given the paucity and often the absence of in-person or remote access to schools and public institutions, including care and early childhood development centers. These shocks are occurring during a time when programmes aimed at improving parenting practices were limited and under-developed. Now more than ever, these programmes constitute an utmost priority.

While some of these issues are being observed and documented in many countries, they are particularly relevant in Latin America, a continent with high levels of inequality. López-Boo *et al.* (2018) argue that in Latin America, parenting practices are strongly correlated with socio-economic status. For a number of reasons, children from poorer households seem to receive lower-quality parenting, as measured by the standardized HOME index.² The shocks induced by the pandemic are likely to exacerbate the divergence between the environments in which poor and less poor children grow up.³

Parents in many parts of the world rely on childcare services for their children. In Latin America, this is particularly true for poor children, who will often be cared for through public facilities, thus permitting their parents to work. In Colombia, community nurseries, known as *Hogares Comunitarios de Bienestar Familiar* (HCBF), are provided for children from six months onward. As mentioned by Hincapié *et al.* (2020), public services for children from poor families have been closed and, in most cases, no timeline for a reopening has been fixed. Similar situations prevail in Argentina, Chile, Ecuador and Panama. In some cases, such as Mexico and Uruguay, childcare centers have adapted to provide remote services.⁴

While remote access could be a partial, temporary solution to the lack of in-person contact and learning, the lack of connectivity that many poor households experience is a big challenge. Even if connectivity is somehow established, early education and formative experiences can be particularly difficult to deliver remotely. In the early years, much of what matters and affects development, such as playing, interacting and exploring, occurs through in-person interaction. Adapting these to remote modalities is extremely challenging. All parents, including the well-resourced, confront these challenges. However, they are undoubtedly exacerbated for poor parents, whose behaviours might be influenced by additional pressures and attitudes of an economically-constrained environment.

Because childcare facilities often provide food, the closure of these centers creates multiple problems for poor families and their children: removal of childcare support coupled with removal of nutrition inputs. During the pandemic, some early years services have been adapted to deliver direct-to-home support, in some cases delivered by the careworkers. In Colombia, *madres comunitarias* have been distributing food to the children who would have ordinarily attended the HCBFs. In addition, the *madres comunitarias* are asked to reach out to families with phone calls at least six times per month. However, this system, adapted for the period of the pandemic, has been under-

² While López-Bóo *et al.* (2018) presents evidence on Uruguay, similar evidence exists for a variety of countries.

³ Additional evidence on inequalities in home investment can be found in CAF (2016).

⁴ There are exceptions. In Brazil, some of the activities of the programme *Crianza Feliz* have continued. Some in-person services have also continued in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. For updates on the status of reopening of childcares, preschools and home visits for 0-5 year-olds, see ECD-IDB website interactive maps: www.iadb.org/es/social-protection/desarrollo-infantil/covid19-respuesta-regional.

optimised. The home touchpoint (food delivery) could have been used to deliver messages or support for parenting practices, and specific instructions for phone calls could have been provided. Although some progress is being made, the crucial community system of *madres comunitarias* is underleveraged.

Already facing precarious circumstances pre-pandemic, poor households are faced with the triple shock of a substantial reduction in income, no access to childcare services and the disappearance of the benefits (including nutritional) they provide. Furthermore, in many situations there are limited opportunities for physical exercise and playing in the open air, which may have negative impacts on physical health. Parents are likely to be more stressed, leading to an increase in domestic violence, both towards children and women. More generally, many of the policies to limit the diffusion of the pandemic lead to social and emotional isolation. With such negative shocks likely to be common across many, if not most, households in poor neighborhoods, and with lockdown regulations preventing household mixing, community support is scarce. Moreover, in the majority of Latin America, no in-person service has been re-established, even in communities and villages with no COVID present. In aggregate, these factors constitute a massive, negative shock to mental health, individual resilience and family stability.

The magnitude of the pandemic's effects on adult health and income has attracted plenty of attention. However, the impact on the very young continues to receive less. Given the importance of early childhood in determining long-term outcomes, the heaviest lifetime toll of the pandemic will fall on today's young, in Latin America and almost anywhere. Without tailor-made interventions, the current situation is likely to exacerbate the inequality that is already endemic in Latin America. Time and investment are therefore of the essence in the design and implementation of policies to reach the continent's youngest during this difficult period.

3. The pandemic and education of young people, aged 5-18

Education is widely recognized as an important driver of social mobility. Indeed, access to high-quality education is viewed as an important determinant of lifetime outcomes. However, it is highly limited for large sectors of society, including in Latin America. Over the past several decades, there has been no shortage of policy debates and social interventions aimed at improving education quality and educational attainment for the poorest sections of Latin American society. The pandemic is likely to have a massive negative effect on children's learning. Moreover, "learning" does not refer exclusively to the development and accumulation of cognitive skills. Schools are vital for the social and emotional development of individuals, especially after the early years.

Burgess and Sievertsen (2020), in examining the available evidence from a variety of countries and studies, estimate that missing one quarter of the school year has a permanent impact on future earnings of between 2 percent and 2.5 percent. The majority of children in most settings have lost more than a quarter of a year's instruction in the current pandemic (Acevedo *et al.*, 2020; Azevedo *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, the shock induced by the pandemic is not solely restricted to hours of learning. The pandemic has negatively impacted a range of other factors that are critical to the growth, development, well-being and self-esteem of young individuals, including social interaction, sports and physical activities, examination and assessment, likelihood of domestic violence and regression on gender parity.

The pandemic has dramatically underscored inequality in access to education. Schools in poorer districts have severe resource constraints when it comes to organizing distance learning, or, for that matter, any form of communication with their students. Public schools are only now starting to open, a year after the pandemic began. This scarcity challenge applies to primary and high schools equally. Even more important is the dire situation of the

individual student learner. Poor households' lack of resources is associated with the lack of a productive home learning experience for children. In most public schools, pedagogical materials were distributed to students for them to work through on their own. At this age, it is more likely that students are left alone at home, as their parents have to go back to work. As a result, they have no supervision and have a difficult time working through the materials by themselves. The wide range of supplementary physical and human resources that are available to wealthier families, such as books, magazines and a wide diversity of role models, have always been scarcer in poorer households. The digital poverty that accompanies economic poverty is a further stranglehold on child development; limited (and legacy) physical infrastructure, connectivity and (at times) parental literacy make it difficult to access the internet and other sources of information. The digital and physical resource constraints notwithstanding, the home environment itself provides a further challenge. For children living in crowded accommodations, it is harder to find the space and quiet to pursue lessons from home, if and when such lessons are available.

While these issues are global, the differences between poor and less poor children's access to learning and teaching is starker in developing countries. Mounting evidence has been, and continues to be, collected on how the pandemic is changing inequality in education and child development outcomes. Andrew *et al.* (2020) compare UK data on time use by households during the pandemic with pre-existing data from a period prior to the first UK lockdown. They find that changes in time use induced by the lockdown vary across the United Kingdom's household income distribution, and that for both UK primary and secondary school children, total "learning time" during weekdays declines significantly. The average decline is over two hours per day. Interestingly, they find that for primary school children the decline in learning time has been significantly larger for poorer families. In contrast, in the case of high school students, the decline in total learning time does not vary significantly with economic resources; however, the increase in home time learning is larger for better off high school students, with Andrew *et al.* (2020) indicating that these effects seem to be mediated to a large extent, by the number of resources available to households. Better off families have access to more and higher quality resources for at-home learning, from the resources offered by their children's schools to resources they may have at home.

In the case of Latin America, a recent UNICEF report (UNICEF Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office [LACRO], 2020) provides timely evidence on several fronts. Firstly, 97 percent of Latin American students have experienced some disruption to their education. Given the large gaps in access to quality education pre-pandemic, the pandemic crisis is likely to make an already inequitable situation even worse. Secondly, the situation in Latin America is considerably worse than in developed countries. Across at least a third of the continent, schools have been closed for long periods of time, without a timetable for reopening. As a result, children in Latin America have lost, on average, 174 days of education, four times as much as in the rest of the world. Thirdly, and most relevant to inequality, while 75 percent of private schools have organized some form of distance learning, just 50 percent for public schools have done the same. Current estimates say that only one third of Latin American children have access to quality distance learning. This inequality of access is heightened by a range of vulnerabilities, including disabilities, ethnicity, geographic remoteness or dislocation due to migration. Poverty itself is also a major driver. Yet again, the poor, as the main attendees of public schools, are the worst off during the pandemic.

These shocks to the education system and education access are likely to lead to significant drops in educational attainment and, consequently, will be reflected in earnings and productivity losses in the medium run. The World Bank has estimated a potential loss of US\$1.2 trillion in future earnings because of the pandemic (Azevedo *et al.*, 2020). This finding is further reinforced in a recent paper by Acevedo *et al.* (2020), which examines different channels through which the pandemic affects Latin America's education systems and emphasizes how these effects can exacerbate pre-existing inequalities. From an academic perspective, the effects of the pandemics are determined

by three factors: differences in how schools of varying quality were equipped to deal with pandemic-type shocks, differences in how families were equipped to deal with these shocks, and differences in how individuals were equipped to deal with the new reality. Regarding schools, Acevedo *et al.* (2020) state that schools attended by the poorest children were the worst equipped to deal with the new situation, specifically when it came to remote learning. On families, the authors cite the huge differences in family environment, which are a direct consequence of the high level of inequality in Latin America. Finally, regarding individuals, they stress that the pandemic shocks are likely to exacerbate pre-existing inequalities, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds being less equipped to manage in a new and stressful situation.

Acevedo *et al.* (2020) also point out that these shocks to education, learning, and the economic situation of many households can amplify gaps in access to education in the long term as children drop out of school. This evidence shows that the pandemic is likely to accentuate the pre-existing disparities in school and home learning environments globally. These trends are likely to be even more prominent in developing countries, including in Latin America overall, regardless of the specific policies adopted by individual countries. When schools close in-person teaching, better off students are likely to suffer less, due to superior access to alternative resources and a home environment that is more conducive to home learning. UNICEF LACRO (2020) reports that 25 percent of children living in poverty do not have enough space at home to study and most of them do not have access to a desk. The absence of a basic enabling environment is likely to lead not only to immediate negative outcomes but also to negative medium- and long-term consequences, such as a complete withdrawal from formal education. Acevedo *et al.* (2020) highlight the dynamics of different countries, including how the dynamics influence the extent of the pandemic's impacts, and how each government and society have reacted to them. In a recent paper, López-Boo *et al.* (2020) use existing evidence from longitudinal studies to estimate the long-run costs for individuals subject to shocks in utero or during their early years. In particular, the paper "simulate[s] losses due to preprimary program closures because of the [...] pandemic" and stresses the magnitude and relevance of these costs, pointing to the importance of policies aimed at minimizing them. The paper now turns to policies that have been adopted and that have yet to be adopted, starting with the former.

4. Contextual considerations: what is being done

In commenting on the scope for specific policies, this policy document presents contextual considerations: firstly, the reaction to the pandemic and secondly, the repercussions of the home environment for young children and adolescents.

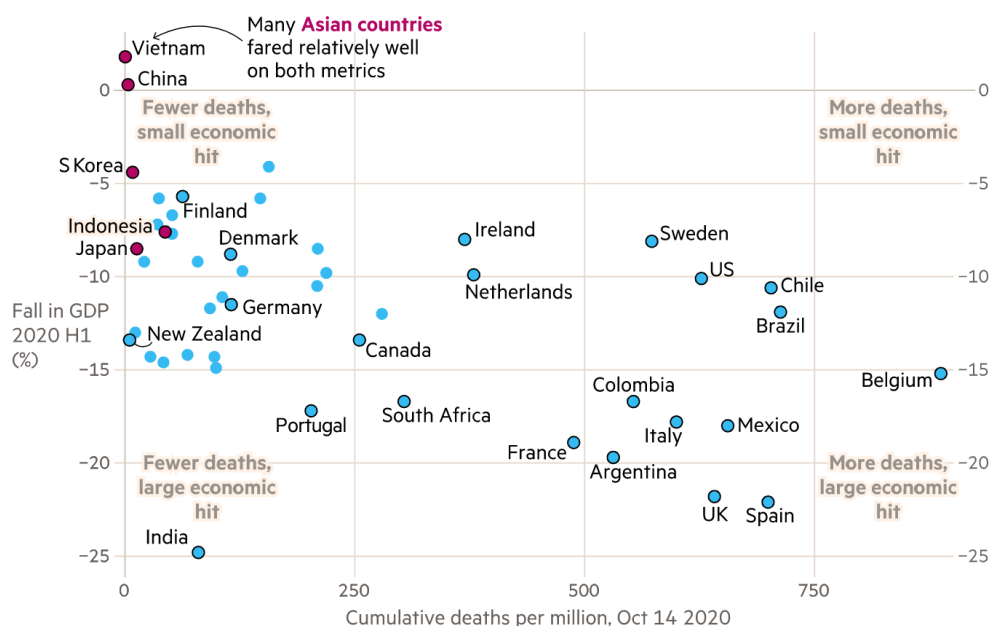
4.1 Government and policy reactions to the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic caught most of the world unprepared. Hence, the reaction across countries has varied hugely. Policymaking and political decision structures were challenged by the unprecedented nature of continuously emerging new information in a fast-moving situation. While the short-term trade-offs between protecting public health resourcing (thus limiting "excess deaths" caused by the pandemic) versus protecting economic activity and well-being were apparent from the beginning, the policy responses at the start of the pandemic (throughout the pandemic, in the case of some countries) have magnified these trade-offs and increased the economic costs of containing the public health costs. These trade-offs are stark for the poorest of society. In developed countries, the poorest households have been the hardest hit by the health and economic

costs of the pandemic. The same holds true, and devastatingly so, in many developing countries. From examining the experience of Asian countries (such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Viet Nam) and a few others (such as New Zealand and Norway), it is abundantly clear that an early and coordinated reaction to the pandemic, informed by scientific advice to contain, test and trace the transmission of the virus, led to much better health outcomes. It is undeniable that some of these countries took a considerable hit in economic terms. However, the evidence in Figure 2 below shows a positive correlation between excess mortality and the economic costs of the pandemic: countries hit harder in terms of mortality also performed worse economically. In Europe, Spain and the United Kingdom are cases in point. Unfortunately, several Latin American countries, such as Argentina, Colombia and Mexico, are in the bottom right part of the figure, reporting a large number of deaths along with a considerable economic downturn. These correlations seem to indicate that the countries slowest and least effective in reacting to COVID-19 were also the worst affected economically. Other countries that opted for very limited containment measures, such as Sweden, or with different political dynamics, such as Brazil and the United States, still faced a sizeable economic downturn and high excess deaths. The economy versus health is therefore a false trade-off, and the poorest disproportionately bear the brunt of negative economic and health impacts.

■ Figure 2. Excess deaths as of October 2020 and fall in GDP

Countries that were unable to control their outbreaks have tended to suffer the most economic pain



Source: FT Visual & Data Journalism team (2020). COVID-19: The global crisis — in data. Financial Times, 18 October 2020. Retrieved from [ig.ft.com/coronavirus-global-data/](https://www.ft.com/coronavirus-global-data/)

A causal interpretation of the correlation apparent in Figure 2 is challenging, and can be misleading, as it could be due to a variety of different factors. Focusing on the Latin American countries present in that graph (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Mexico) could produce a positive rather than a negative relation. This picture also suggests that political leadership (and the acceptance of such a role by communities and society at large) might play a role in the containment of the pandemic’s health effects. Finland, New Zealand, South Korea and Viet Nam (among others) have very different health burdens than the Latin American countries in the figure or countries such as the United Kingdom or the United States.

Policies aimed at containing the negative health effects of the pandemic have targeted behavioural change, from the micro (individual) to the household, from communities to organizations. Political leadership, community participation and the diffusion of specific social norms have proven critical to the behaviours of face-covering, social distancing and more. Limiting the negative impact on human development similarly calls for policies that target behavioural change at an individual, household and community level. This underpins the proposed human development policies aimed at the youngest sectors of the population. The success of such policies in the longer term certainly depends on a stable foundation of accepted and enabling social and community norms.

To assess actual and potential interventions to foster child and youth human development, it is important to consider the interventions being implemented in different countries. In some instances, special measures of economic support have been introduced, ranging from cash transfers (often untargeted) to furlough measures to maintain employment. In several developing countries, existing cash transfers schemes, such as *Bolsa Familia* in Brazil and *Familias en Acción* in Colombia, have played an important, potentially enabling role. In some situations, new and additional subsidies were offered during the pandemic on top of already existing ones. The programme *Ingreso Solidario* in Colombia is similar to *Familias en Acción*, but is offered to households not eligible for *Familias en Acción*.⁵ In other countries, like Mexico, conditional cash transfer programmes were cut back before the pandemic, and these reductions have continued. This evidence indicates substantial heterogeneity in public response and impact. The extent of public awareness of the pandemic's risks is heterogenous, and so is the nature, effectiveness, impact and penetration of public programmes. More generally, even when transfers and income support schemes have been provided, they are unlikely to be sufficient to reverse or avoid the losses in human development that the pandemic causing.

A recent study by *Centro de Estudios Educativos y Sociales* (Center for Education and Social Studies) counts the measures adopted in different countries in Latin America. Remarkable differences stand out: countries such as Argentina, Colombia and Peru adopted more than 10 measures, while countries like Brazil and Ecuador only had three. Moreover, looking at the substance of the programmes, it is apparent that interventions were very limited in some countries, as confirmed by the International Monetary Fund (Hannan *et al.*, 2020). The case of Mexico is particularly striking given that in 2019, prior to the pandemic, the government had decided to abolish Prospera, the country's conditional cash transfer (CCT) programme. Previously implemented under the names Progresá and Oportunidades, it was one of the oldest such programmes in the world. In short, there was no existing vehicle or infrastructure in place to deliver supplementary measures.

It is worth noting that where pre-existing programmes were leveraged, they were not used purely as a support mechanism, but also to effectively deliver transfers and interventions in a new and uncharted situation. New, fresh infrastructures and logistics mechanisms did not necessarily need to be designed. Additionally, the pandemic situation and public responses to policy measures have demonstrated that when delivering interventions aimed at changing individual behaviour, communities play a starring role. Community participation and ownership is a prerequisite to channelling the right messages to individuals and households. Governments fare better when they employ the infrastructure of existing programmes that are well known and trusted by their intended beneficiaries. An example of this type of infrastructure are Anganwadi workers (AWW)⁶, the community linchpin of India's Integrated Child Development Services programme. AWWs are women who typically run small community nurseries for local children between ages 2 and 5 and are paid a monthly honorarium. They are also

⁵ Some details for the programs available in Colombia can be found [here](#).

⁶ Details on Integrated Child Development Services can be found at icds-wcd.nic.in/icds.aspx; and on Anganwadi Workers at icds-wcd.nic.in/icdsimg/RoleresponseAWWs.pdf

responsible for several other programmes and services related to advancing child growth and development for those under the age of 6, as well as providing support to adolescent girls and women. AWWs are explicitly trained and treated as social change agents within their communities to improve care of young children. Ultimately, they play an important, trusted role in their communities, and by extension played a critical role in the Government of India's response to the pandemic. The AWWs serve as an existing, ready channel to deliver resources and support to vulnerable populations. The government knows how to engage the AWWs. The communities know their AWWs, and importantly, understand their intermediary support role.

The Indian example is not the only one. In Colombia, HCBFs have existed for several decades and are widespread across the country. *Madres comunitarias* are often well known, especially in small towns, with the potential to play a linchpin role in delivering or helping to deliver the kinds of interventions outlined in this paper. Unfortunately, there is not much evidence of this happening. *Madres comunitarias*, in addition to delivering food and sending generic text messages and phone calls, could deliver in-person services in outdoor areas, short visits, or engage more directly with parents with more direct and specific messages about parenting practices. The UNICEF toolkit, developed in response to the specific challenges of domestic violence in early childhood during the pandemic, provides guidance and resources for telephone-based support, and could potentially inform a wider set of objectives and interventions.

By extension, existing cash transfer programmes can play a similarly enabling role. These programmes, especially those with conditions, often incorporate important community life aspects. In Colombia, for instance, the local beneficiaries of the *Familias en Acción* programme elect a representative (called the *madre líder*) who is the responsible intermediary between beneficiaries and the programme, organizing gatherings and meetings to integrate some of the programme's activities. *Madres líderes* have come to play a distinctive role in their communities: they are smart, resourceful, entrepreneurial women, acting as comforting yet inspiring role models. Essentially, they have the attributes of trusted leaders. The identification and existence of this specific brand of human capital is a non-negligible by-product of the *Familias en Acción* programme. Building on this distinctive human capital is likely to be a driver of success for the delivery of interventions that require direct contact with poor households and communities. There are similar community "figures" in other countries: for instance, in Mexico, the *Progres a/Oportunidades/Prospera* programme, especially at its start, had *madre promotoras* in the villages that played a similar role to the *madres líderes* in Colombia.

The criticality of social behaviours and norms in responding to the pandemic underscores the role of communities and established infrastructures in establishing behavioural rules that allow the deployment of the right type of interventions. Certain social norms need to be established to bring the virus under control and, more generally, to mitigate its impacts. The importance of wearing face coverings and social distancing, and vaccine uptake are obvious examples, though not the only relevant ones. As described further on, appropriate parenting practices are particularly important in situations where children spend considerably more time at home interacting with their parents than they did before the pandemic. Given the difficulties of reaching children in person or online during the pandemic, establishing these behaviours is critical especially for parents in the poorest households. Vulnerable communities and individuals, already reeling from the negative impact on their finances, education and health, require stability and certainty in receiving attenuating and fortifying support. Community support and sound social norms are key to achieving this goal, and even more so amidst the uncertainty, ambiguity and volatility of the pandemic.

4.2 Contextual considerations: impact on the family home

For the most part, the pandemic has increased the amount of time that adults, as well as children, spend at home. This has the potential to trigger a number of problems, especially for poorer households with limited access to space and connectivity, thus compounding the difficulties created by the economic shocks generated by the pandemic. Crowded environments and limited resources give rise to conflicts among family members, generating mental health problems which in turn have proven to have significant negative effects on child development. Furthermore, the pandemic's economic shocks can disrupt roles within the household, of men and women, or those of older siblings, altering the dynamics of what happens at home. More generally, the new situation can increase violence in the home, as documented by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2020).

It is obvious that parental behaviour and changes to that behaviour are crucial for final outcomes in child development, and it is likely that the COVID-19 crisis is generating parental behavioural changes. One key objective of government interventions is to improve parenting practices at home. This could be achieved by providing parents with information and “nudging” them to follow certain practices, accompanied by concrete immediate help, e.g. improved connectivity and provision of remote counselling. Delivery of any of these would be best achieved by leveraging existing infrastructure and intermediary channels, such as childcare centers, to provide such services. However, policymakers need to tread carefully in implementing solutions that appear efficient in the short run, yet ultimately entrench role changes. It is well documented that women and mothers have suffered more, in terms of employment, than men and fathers. In responding to the immediate welfare shocks, policy interventions for overall family support could easily reinforce the increasing role women are playing in the provision of childcare services at home. Such changes could generate permanent shifts that are far from desirable, and indeed regressive on multiple dimensions. Advancing gender parity is therefore a vital consideration when designing interventions to improve the provision of childcare services and parenting practices during lockdown periods when schools and other institutions are closed, and staying at home and working from home become necessary.

Similar considerations hold true for adolescents, whether male or female. While it is true that they might be given temporary responsibilities during the pandemic (e.g. providing childcare for younger siblings or helping them with their schoolwork), this could easily generate long-term negative changes in educational attainment, and in some cases lead to permanent withdrawal from education.

The discussion so far makes it clear that policy decisions and choices are not easy in the current situation, especially with respect to education and human development. Policymakers face some hard trade-offs. Should there be a strong push towards in-person learning, both for children under 5 and for the 5 to 18 years old? The evidence on COVID-19 transmission in schools is still not completely clear, and the long-run costs of keeping schools and educational infrastructure closed are clear and dramatic, especially for the poorest sectors of society. Policymakers face strong resistance to reopening from teacher unions and other sectors of society. However, policies aimed at a controlled and careful reopening should be considered. The following section will discuss desirable policy options.

5. Policy responses

Given the tragedy of the current situation, it is imperative to consider possible interventions to limit the pandemic's negative effects and, in parallel, initiate reforms to unlock positive long-run impacts on the delivery of quality education to the poorest sections of society. While the focus is on poverty, it is important to note that these interventions are equally relevant and important for other vulnerable groups, including children with developmental delays or disabilities, children from ethno-linguistic minorities, indigenous populations, and populations on the move, and children from the poorest quintile, although each of these groups may require different interventions.

This section first discusses policy interventions aimed at young children and education interventions targeted at older children and youth. It then turns to the backbone of this argument: interventions that leverage existing policy infrastructure and are anchored in community ownership and participation will permit higher quality, more sustainable and scalable impact. This final subsection also discusses some overarching themes that are relevant for children across different development stages.

5.1 Policy action for the early years: supporting parents and parental practices

As described in the introduction, what happens within the family is a major driver of early childhood development with long-run impacts. Policies that aim to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on children's human development must factor in the high likelihood that it is also negatively impacting parenting practices and integrate incentives for parents to prevent this from occurring. This goal is obviously very hard to achieve. Such interventions can operate through several channels: firstly, the improvement of financial support and availability of resources to deal with negative economic shocks to the household; secondly, direct support of parenting practices, adapted for remote access and attuned to the risk of gender parity reversals; and finally, the leveraging of communities and existing policy infrastructures. The problems outlined here are particularly serious for the poorest sectors of society. Households who have successfully secured alternative methods of education and stimulation (to minimize the detrimental effects of lack of access to in-person preprimary and primary schooling) are, in the main, rich and well-resourced families. These disparities are likely to take deep root in the long run. The policies discussed here are therefore relevant for the poorest sectors of Latin American society. It should be noted that while parenting practices are key to effective policy measures in the early years, they continue to play a vital role for children throughout their development and into the transition to adulthood.

Financial support and resources: For many households, the pandemic has wrought severe economic shocks – ranging from reduced income and earnings to an increase in household needs (additional connectivity, childcare, nutrition, learning support and so on). Governments should support and sustain the more vulnerable households. Many of these households face a great deal of economic uncertainty; not only has household income tumbled, but it is unclear if, when and how income levels could recover to pre-pandemic levels. This has increased stress levels in parents, in turn generating negative effects on parenting practices, with the price ultimately being paid by their children. Ideally, government financial support would have the twin aims of reducing both the quantity and time uncertainty of the negative economic impact. As such, the end goal is that vulnerable households receive immediate financial support, but also have the reassurance of income security and protection while uncertainty prevails. Realistically, this approach requires that financial support be deployed through appropriate existing channels and structured as an incentive for beneficiaries and communities to participate in wider support efforts, as discussed below. Moreover, such programmes could integrate monitoring tools to detect specific red-flag indicators,

such as mental health and well-being (e.g. depression), domestic violence against children and women, and school dropouts. The current situation and the vulnerability of some sectors of society, together with the difficulty in identifying them, also puts policies such as universal basic income – which has been controversial – in a new light.

Parenting practices & remote interventions: parenting is challenging in the face of a sequence of negative shocks. Several existing programmes and interventions offer support to improve parenting and caregiver practices during the early years. UNICEF’s Care for Child Development is one of these, providing guidelines and resources to build a nurturing family environment during early childhood. Another example is the Reach Up and Learn intervention initially designed for Jamaica, subsequently adapted for Bangladesh and Colombia, and implemented at scale in Peru under the name *Cuna Más*. Delivering these interventions remotely is a new, additional challenge. Several organizations and initiatives have been working on these models, which involve the use of smartphones, tablets, radio and television to achieve this objective. For instance, the Reach Up and Learn programme has pivoted in the face of the pandemic (and the resulting suspension of home visits and in-person parent groups) by designing a manual with highly visual content to cater for low levels of literacy. The content is delivered through a range of mediums, including print, SMS, WhatsApp, phone, radio and television, and importantly, is translated into Spanish and Portuguese.⁷ The remote delivery mode allows the programme to reach parents who were not previously participating in the Reach Up and Learn activity, thus laying the foundations for larger scale impact in the immediate term and in the aftermath of the pandemic. The conversion and adaptation of successful interventions such as Reach Up and Learn, which has inspired several interventions around the world, could be adapted for remote deployment of other existing interventions. Again, while stimulated by the pandemic, remote delivery could provide policymakers with useful tools that are relevant in a post-pandemic world.

Designing interventions to improve parenting practices, and, more generally, change individual behaviours is difficult and faces many challenges, especially in the current situation. It will be important to balance the desirability of live in-person sessions with the health of both recipient families and the personnel delivering the interventions. These trade-offs will be different in different contexts and will necessitate the development of appropriate protocols.

Parenting practices & gender parity: The context of the pandemic home environment poses real risk to gender equality advancement. The recent work of Andrew *et al.* (2020) investigating the impact of COVID-19 on two-parent opposite-gender families in England, finds that mothers’ paid work has suffered more than that of fathers’, and that mothers spend more time on childcare and housework. Furthermore, significant gender asymmetries emerge when one partner halted paid work during the pandemic, with mothers shouldering a higher domestic burden than fathers in the equivalent circumstance. Doubtless, the inequality in gender responses to domestic responsibilities is exacerbated by the extensive shock to childcare provision due to school and childcare closures. Disturbingly, Andrew *et al.* (2020) show that gender gaps in time use prevail regardless of the income generating circumstance: gender gaps exist when comparing mothers and fathers currently working for pay, and also when comparing mothers and fathers not currently in paid work.

When these findings are extrapolated and applied to the poorest and most vulnerable families in Latin America, together with prevailing social norms, the phantom of massive regression on gender parity looms large, clear and present. Moreover, Andrew *et al.* (2020) suggest that seemingly evanescent changes to family life due to pandemic

⁷ The Reach up and Learn adaptation to a remote mode of delivery has been promoted and supported by the IADB: publications.iadb.org/es/manual-para-padres-actividades-de-estimulacion-temparana-para-ninos-de-hasta-3-anos-de-edad. Reference for Care for Child Development can be found at: Care for Child Development (CCD).

lockdowns could have far-reaching and persistent consequences in how parents see and recalibrate their household roles in the family, including how childcare is organized.

However, changes in gender roles and family dynamics do not have to be unidirectional and can be changed by policy interventions. In emerging and positive contrast, the *Sugira Muryango* programme in Rwanda, studied by Betancourt *et al.* (2020), provides indications of success in father-engaged early childcare within families living in extreme poverty. Betancourt *et al.* (2020) find improvements in a range of areas including child responsiveness, nutrition, hygiene, father involvement and reductions in violence. During COVID-19, the *Sugira Muryango* programme has pivoted deliver training protocols via WhatsApp. Simultaneously, a pilot is under way to remotely deliver early childcare support services at scale to families living in extreme poverty.

A further family contextual consideration, particularly relevant to the context of Latin America, is the changing nature of many households, including shifts away from traditional dual parenthood. For example, single-parent families headed by mothers (or even grandmothers) are increasingly common in the bottom of the income distribution across countries and communities.

In summary, practices of those who act in parental roles are clearly crucial during the first years of life, if nothing else, because they constitute the interaction very young children have with the world. Furthermore, they continue to be a non-negligible driver throughout all phases of childhood, and especially so during the pandemic, when household members are in close proximity with one another.

5.2 Policy action for education: supporting the formal learning of 5 to 18 year olds

For most children younger than 24 months, the context of the household environment is critical, and the household-specific considerations outlined above are at the crux of interventions. However, for older children, limited or even non-existent access to center-based childcare services constrains learning entirely. For the youngest children, remote learning, even when possible in terms of connectivity, is exceptionally challenging on multiple levels, including the required enabling environment (for instance, the time and attention of a parent) and achieving intended impact. As a result, institutions offering remote access need to design modes of delivery that address bottlenecks, ranging from the means of connections (tablets, smart phones or cell phones) to the environment where children live, including lack of help in dealing with the learning process in the home environment.

The specifics of each programme and intervention will depend on the age of the children and the specific context in which they live. These are difficult challenges, but they are ignored at Latin America's peril. Unless they are addressed with attention to detail in delivery and design (to avoid unintended consequences), the current situation is certain to exacerbate pre-existing differences and inequalities.

Online tutoring is a potential model to explore for children between 10 and 16. The idea is to find older students, possibly from high-quality universities, who would be willing to offer online tutoring to students that are particularly disadvantaged. Such an intervention is not exempt from problems. In developed countries, the design process has been challenging. The National Tutoring Programme in the United Kingdom enables schools to access subsidized tuition (through pre-approved tuition partners) for their most disadvantaged pupils, and for schools in the most disadvantaged areas to employ academic mentors for catch-up support for disadvantaged pupils. The network of an estimated 15,000 tutors for 250,000 students became available nationwide in November 2020, nine months after the first UK lockdown. Developing similar programmes at

scale for Latin America requires a large number of tutors, which might affect the quality of the services offered. An intervention of this nature would require a well-structured curriculum that is easy to deliver and focuses on the basics. Furthermore, it would rely on a targeting mechanism, possibly monitored by local schools, to select potential beneficiaries and then initiate and facilitate access to such schemes. Finally, it might be possible to design incentive schemes for tutors to participate and offer quality services. Despite the design and implementation challenges, a recent paper by Carlana and La Ferrara (2021) shows results from such an intervention in Italy. The programme, in which university students offered remote tutoring to high school students, was organized in a matter of weeks and demonstrated positive and significant impacts on student learning. Finessing design and delivery undoubtedly requires significant work, including potential collaboration across countries in the region.

A more general observation of tutoring programmes is that such interventions, when based on prosocial behaviours, as in the case mentioned above, can contribute to increased cooperation and a sense of belonging to a community, both for tutees and tutors. These benefits are non-negligible and foundational. They might be an important step to building a more inclusive society. Obviously, a curriculum delivered remotely or with tutoring by young students cannot fully make up for regular in-person teaching; that is one of the reasons it should focus on the basic skills. However, it could be a useful, scalable complement to the existing education system.

The challenge of digital poverty (access to infrastructure and connectivity) remains, and any remote delivery programme would need to address it. Through its *Swayam Prabha* programme, India has been providing services through the medium of radio televisions, on the assumption that this infrastructure would be more easily available and accessible. *Swayam Prabha* caters to students (ages 5 to 18) and teachers, providing curriculum-based educational content and ensuring multichannel accessibility, including internet, community radio stations, podcasts and television.

Overall, policies focused on delivery of education (irrespective of remote delivery or in-person delivery) must address the inevitable losses (past, present, and future) in curriculum content. As a result, policy measures worthy of consideration include intentional adjustments to the primary and secondary education curricula to prioritize the basics, reformulation of assessment methodologies, and even the potential addition of a temporary “foundation” year in the transition to secondary or further education, to equalize learning foundations and allow students to catch up.

5.3 Scale and impact: existing interventions, community participation and measurement

The pandemic is highlighting one of the largest problems faced in the construction of effective social policies and interventions: scale. This issue is particularly salient for policies aimed at improving the process of human development, especially during the early years. The challenge of scaling up is not merely one of financial resources and costs. It involves adapting and redesigning small scale deployment methods to ensure the same quality and depth of impact for a large population. Taking interventions proven to be effective from a small population to a large one requires a many people (often with limited specialization to deliver complex interventions) and incentives. This issue is particularly relevant for interventions aimed at changing individual behaviours in a range of microcontexts, ranging from the home to school. The effectiveness of these policies will depend on the availability of resources and, crucially, on participation at the local level and community and participants ownership instilled through suitable, non-distorting, implementation incentives and mechanisms.

This set of problems and challenges is particularly salient for education and child development, but it is also relevant in a variety of other contexts. The pandemic is shining a spotlight on these issues, but they existed well before the recent crisis. As Rajan (2019) writes in his recent book, "...[t]he central vehicle through which we transmit better policies to the people, the community, isn't working." The decline of the role of the community arises from a variety of factors related to the evolution of modern societies (around the world). However, given the issues caused by the current fragmentation of societies, made more acute by the pandemic, communities need to be revitalized and brought into the core of interventions. This will be key to the implementation and success of social policies, starting with pandemic-related policies that address public health issues and guarantee the economic and more general well-being of most sectors of society, including those worst hit by the pandemic. No doubt, such policies – if well designed and community-anchored – will continue to be relevant and resilient in other challenging circumstances, e.g. when the poorest are negatively impacted by new forms of production and economic organization.

A first step for policymakers and governments in reversing the decline of human development of Latin America's young is to truly leverage existing welfare programmes and infrastructures. This is not solely to deliver much-needed resources to those worst affected by the crisis, but to foster community participation and integration. As described, the structure of programmes like conditional and unconditional cash transfer programmes are a useful foundational starting point. Analogously, and as mentioned above, community-based child centers, such as the *Hogares Comunitarios* in Colombia or the Anganwadi Centres in India, are a trusted, important human capital channel to deliver resources and services, while at the same time promoting community participation and ownership.

Leverage of communities & existing infrastructures: community support and participation play an essential role in the best of times for the diffusion of support offered to specific sectors of society, not least the poorest and youngest. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, communication and support from the community, including trusted social change agents, act as a vital lifeline and enabler for human development and for pandemic-relevant behavioural norms. For this reason, governments should maximally leverage the infrastructure and networks of established programmes to identify specific, existing, trusted actors within communities to provide the ownership and participation that are vital for the success of human development interventions targeted at children.

The *Lista para Ahorrar* programme in Colombia offers a case in point, as a financial literacy intervention for poor households that leveraged the infrastructure of a CCT initiative, *Proyecto Capital*, to promote savings. *Lista para Ahorrar* additionally leveraged technology infrastructure and the *madres líderes* from the *Familias en Acción* CCT that was previously mentioned. *Madres líderes* are elected, trusted and serve as aspirational change agents who are typically better off and better educated than the female beneficiaries of the programme. As a prescient design for the requirements of pandemic-enforced remote access, *Lista para Ahorrar* combined a physical kit (of calendars, stickers, plans and simplified accounting books) together with rotating tablet distribution and regular SMS messages as nudges and reminders to save. In many ways, the design is well suited for pandemic-enforced remote accessibility, and it could be a source of inspiration and lessons for parenting interventions.

Remote interventions aside, the development of innovative, community-enabled approaches to facilitate a speedy and safe return to in-person learning is unequivocally optimal, for parents as much as for children. Many changes and innovations are needed to achieve such improvement. And to make that feasible requires a way to appropriately measure relevant outcomes and family environments. Measurement is key to the design and evaluation of effective policies, and much work is needed in this dimension. Measurement tools, some of which are new and some of which are still being developed, will have to cover two roles. Relevant outcomes and their determinants must be properly

assessed, using tools that are sensitive enough to catch the effect of interventions and innovation. Measurements that are easily deployable at scale can provide useful diagnostic tools that governments and policymakers could use to test the pulse of the situation. Several important initiatives, such as the Global Scale for Early Development, are under way and should be developed further (see Richter *et al.*, 2019).

6. Conclusion

The present and future human development of the youngest residents of Latin America hangs on the slenderest of threads of policy action and intervention. The status quo of school and nursery closures combined with digital poverty and lack of teleworkability is unequivocally tragic. Risks and repercussions abound, from missed stimulation in the home to lags in formal education, from physical violence to delayed motor skills development, from mental health and depression to gender parity reversal. All of these obstacles can lead to lags in cognitive and socioemotional development. And yet, the region has promising scope through systems, infrastructure, rich social norms and community fabric to innovate and avert this catastrophe. Innovation will be most likely to succeed in terms of sustainability, scale and impact with the leverage of existing, trusted and (partly) effective programmes (such as CCT programmes or *madres comunitarias*). Many of these programmes need improvements and innovations, especially to deal with the current pandemic. But success is feasible and will be determined, in great part, by the degree of community participation and ownership.

More generally, the key enabling condition of effective interventions to reverse Latin America's accelerating human development crisis will be commitment at all levels of government (community, local, municipal, state, national), with the support of bilateral and multilateral funding agencies, to systems-wide thinking, planning and acting to implement an integrated approach across all ages and for all key stakeholders. In vaccine development, bureaucracy has been bypassed, unlikely bedfellows have come together, and timelines have been compressed. Investments from governments and international financial institutions have been unprecedented, all triggered by the urgency of COVID-19. Human development interventions are arguably as vital as vaccine development. While attention is highly focused on COVID-19 protection, reduction of transmission and alleviation of shocks to the economy, especially on businesses, equal attention needs to be sharply focused on the young and their human development. If ever there was a time for unprecedented attention to, collaboration for and investment in human development for Latin America, it is inarguably, unequivocally now. The challenge issued to those with political and financial capital is this: instead of preparing the ground for a mass graveyard, build the foundations for a thriving marketplace of healthy, educated, informed and skilled talent, unhindered by accident of birth, that can contribute to enterprise, innovation and economic advancement.

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