

# Global Catholic Education Report

# 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



## Education Pluralism, Learning Poverty, and the Right to Education

Quentin Wodon  
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Cover photo: © Matteo Ricci School.

The cover photo shows secondary school students at the new Matteo Ricci (Jesuit) School in Brussels, Belgium. Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) was an Italian Jesuit priest and one of the founders of the Jesuit China missions. The cover photo was selected for three reasons. First, it expresses the dynamism of Catholic education as the Matteo Ricci School is a new school founded in September 2019. Second, it conveys the aim of Catholic education to reach underserved populations from all backgrounds. A majority of the students in the school are Muslim and many are from disadvantaged backgrounds. This relates to the core themes of education pluralism, learning poverty, and the right to education of this report. Third, the photo conveys the scope of Catholic education by emphasizing secondary education, the bridge between primary and higher education. The Global Catholic Education Report 2020 cover photo featured students in a primary school in Burundi as that report focused on Catholic K12 education which is growing especially rapidly in Africa. For this second report and future reports, Catholic higher education will also be included in the analysis. Different cover photos from various regions and settings will be used each year to illustrate the theme of the report that year.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: KEY FINDINGS

As the largest non-state provider of education in the world, the Catholic Church plays a significant role in efforts to achieve the fourth Sustainable Development Goal<sup>1</sup>. Yet this role is rarely acknowledged in global policy discussions, and these discussions rarely reach Catholic networks of schools and universities.

The Global Catholic Education Report is published annually, with two aims. The first is to make the experiences and role of Catholic schools and universities better known by the international community. The second is to bring to Catholic educators global knowledge and expertise from the international community on what works to improve education. There is much to be gained from stronger collaborations between Catholic schools and universities, governments managing national education systems, and international organizations. In a small way, the Global Catholic Education Report aims to promote such collaborations through better mutual understanding.

This report for 2021 is the second in the series. The first report published in June 2020 was dedicated to the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 crisis. As the crisis continues to rage, additional analysis of its impacts and potential responses is provided in this report. But the report also considers other topics. The main themes for this report are education pluralism, learning poverty and the right to education. In addition, while the first report focused only on K12<sup>2</sup> Catholic schools, this report also includes Catholic universities.

The report is structured into five chapters and a statistical annex. The topics for the five chapters are: (1) Enrollment trends in

Catholic K12 schools; (2) Enrollment trends in Catholic higher education; (3) Education pluralism; (4) Fulfillment of the right to education; and (5) COVID-19 crisis, challenges, and opportunities. This executive summary highlights key findings by chapter.

### Enrollment Trends in Catholic K12 Schools

Globally, the Catholic Church estimates that 35.0 million children were enrolled in Catholic primary schools in 2018, with 19.3 million children enrolled in Catholic secondary schools and 7.4 million children enrolled at the preschool level. Below are a few highlights:

- Enrollment in K12 education more than doubled between 1975 and 2018 globally, from 29.1 million to 61.7 million students (Figure ES.1). Most of the growth was concentrated in Africa due to high rates of population growth and gains in educational attainment over time.
- The highest growth rates are also observed for Africa, but growth rates are also high in Asia and Oceania. The growth rates in those regions are two to three times larger than those observed globally. In the Americas and Europe, growth rates tend to be much smaller, and in some cases are negative.
- There are substantial differences between regions in the share of students enrolled by level. Globally, primary schools account for 56.7 percent of K12 enrollment, versus 31.3 percent for secondary schools, and 12.0 percent for preschools. In Africa however, primary schools account for 71.3 percent of total enrollment. In Europe, they account for only 36.0 percent of K12 enrollment.

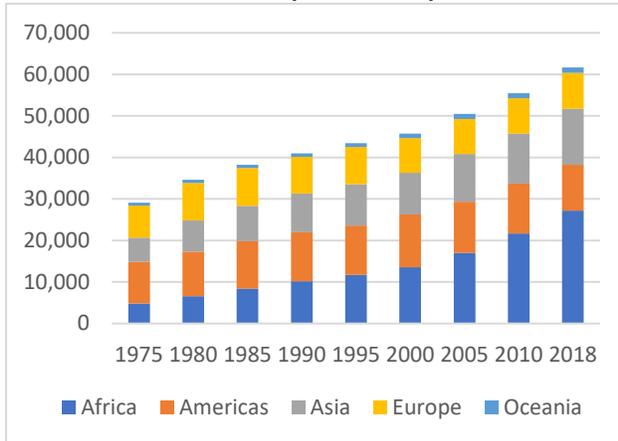
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<sup>1</sup> The fourth goal (SDG4) is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

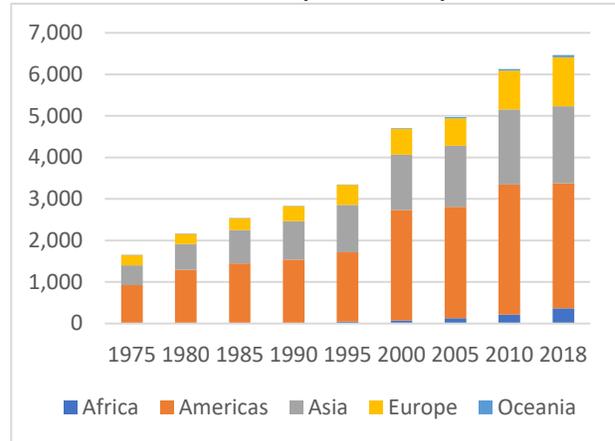
<sup>2</sup> In the United States, 'K12' refers to schools from kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. We use the acronym in this global report because it is short and handy.

Enrollment in Catholic K12 schools more than doubled from 1975 to 2018. For higher education, enrollment increased almost four-fold. Globally, there are ten times more students in K12 education than in higher education, but geographic patterns of enrollment and growth differ by education level.

**Figure ES.1: Total Enrollment in Catholic K12 Schools (Thousands)**



**Figure ES.2: Total Enrollment in Catholic Higher Education (Thousands)**



Source: Compiled by the author from the statistical yearbooks of the Church.

- India has the largest enrollment in Catholic K12 schools, followed by four sub-Saharan African countries: the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Kenya, and Malawi. Together, the top 15 countries in terms of enrollment size account for about two thirds of global enrollment in Catholic K12 schools.
- The highest growth rate in enrollment is for preschools. This is a positive development as research demonstrates that early childhood is a critical period in a child's education and investments at this time have high returns.

### Enrollment Trends in Catholic Higher Education

The Church estimates that it provided post-secondary education to 6.5 million students globally in 2018. This includes 2.3 million students in non-university higher institutes, 0.5 million students enrolled in ecclesiastical studies at the university level, and 3.7 million students enrolled in other types of university studies. Below are a few highlights:

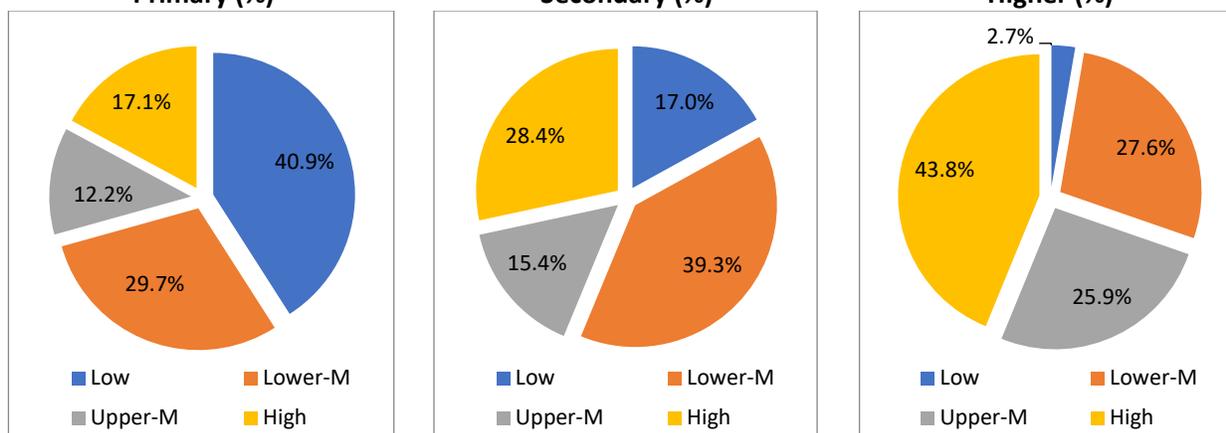
- Enrollment in Catholic higher education almost quadrupled between 1975 and

2018, from 1.6 million students to 6.5 million. Most of the growth took place in the Americas, Asia, and Europe. However, in proportionate terms from the base, the highest growth rates are in Africa (Figure ES.2).

- Globally, students in universities account for most of the enrollment. Yet in India and Asia, there are more students in higher institutes. Globally, the shares of students enrolled in higher institutes and universities did not change a lot despite ups and downs. But among university students, the share of students in ecclesiastical studies has increased, especially in Africa, the Americas, and Asia. This is good news for the Church.
- Together, the top 15 countries account for four fifths of global enrollment. Enrollment remains highly concentrated in a few countries. The United States has the largest enrollment followed by three large middle income countries: India, the Philippines, and Brazil. Italy is next, probably in part due to historical reasons.

Data on enrollment are also provided by income group. At the primary level, most students in Catholic schools live in low and lower-middle (Lower-M in Figure ES.3) income countries. By contrast, Catholic higher education remains concentrated in upper-middle (Upper-M) and high income countries.

**Figure ES.3: Shares of All Students in Catholic Education by Income Groups, 2018**



Source: Author's computations.

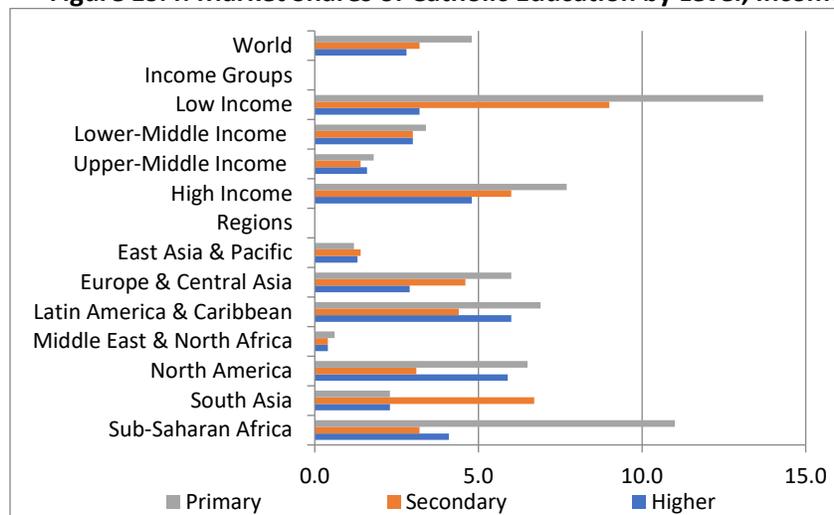
### Education Pluralism

In education systems that support pluralism, students or parents can choose the type of school or university they attend, as called for in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Given heterogeneity in priorities for what students should learn, education pluralism may also boost schooling and learning. The fact that there is heterogeneity is clear (otherwise all students would opt for the same type of education). What is less clear is the extent to which education systems are pluralistic. Rather than looking at inputs for pluralism (such as laws and regulations), we suggest a measure of education pluralism based on outputs, that is actual enrollment in different types of schools and universities. Below are a few highlights:

- There are clear differences in the priorities of parents for what children should learn in school based on the type of schools they rely on for their children. Examples are provided for Burkina Faso, Ghana, and the United States. There are also differences in the motivation for students to enroll in different types of universities. Education pluralism helps in responding to these differences.

- To measure pluralism, the basic idea is that too much concentration in education provision may be detrimental to school choice as well as educational outcomes, much as too much concentration in industry may be detrimental to customers. Conversely, more pluralism in provision is a positive.
- The measure of education pluralism (Box ES.1) requires data on market shares. While analysis is conducted at the country level, for manageability estimates of market shares and education pluralism are provided in the report for various regions and income groups using World Bank classifications.
- The market shares of Catholic education are at 4.8 percent, 3.2 percent, and 2.8 percent at the primary, secondary, and higher levels globally. In low income countries, they are at 13.7 percent, 9.0 percent, and 3.2 percent (Figure ES.4). For primary education, Catholic schools have a large footprint in sub-Saharan Africa (11.0 percent) and low income countries (13.7 percent).

**Figure ES.4: Market Shares of Catholic Education by Level, Income Groups and Regions (%), 2018**



Source: Wodon (2021i).

Globally, the market share of Catholic education is estimated at 4.8 percent at the primary level, 3.2 percent at the secondary level, and 2.8 percent at the higher education level. For primary education however, it is much higher in sub-Saharan Africa (11.0 percent) and low income countries (13.7 percent).

**Box ES.1: Education Pluralism**

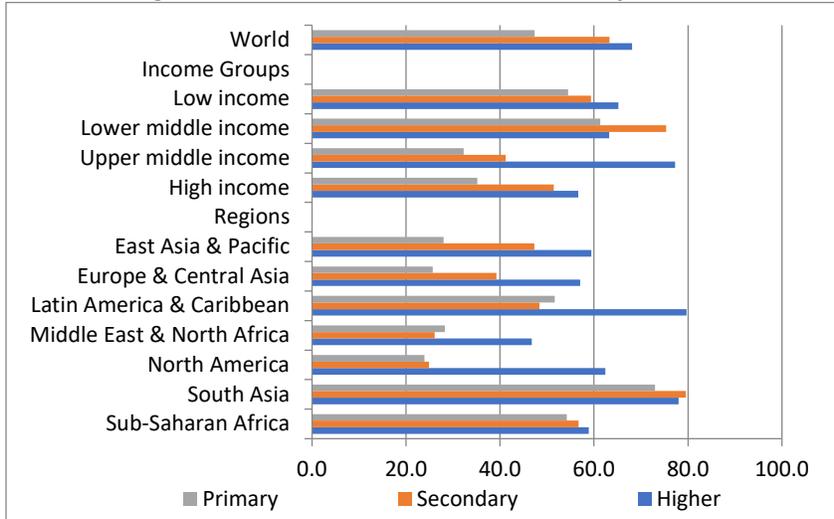
The normalized education pluralism index is  $NEPI = (1 - HHI) / (1 - 1/N)$  where HHI is the Herfindahl-Hirschman index, itself equal to the sum of the squared market shares of education providers. NEPI takes a value between zero and one. Higher values denote more pluralism. Computing the index requires estimating market shares. Data were already available on public versus private provision. The advance of the report is to identify Catholic education separately, noting that while in most countries Catholic schools are private schools, in some countries most Catholic schools are public.

- Globally, the normalized education pluralism index is estimated at 0.474 for primary education, 0.633 for secondary education, and 0.681 for higher education. Education pluralism tends to increase with the level of education being considered, especially for higher education where governments tend to have a lower market share.
- Education pluralism is higher in South Asia, in part because of a large market share of private providers in India. It is also comparatively high in sub-Saharan Africa for primary and secondary education. It is low at those education

levels in North America and the Middle East and North Africa (see Figure ES.5 for comparisons by region and income group at all three levels).

- Catholic education contributes to education pluralism. This is shown in Figure ES.6 by comparing estimates of pluralism when considering only two providers (public versus private) and three providers (disaggregating Catholic education). The contribution of Catholic education to pluralism is largest at the primary level, and smallest for higher education, in line with market shares at those levels. Within primary education, again in line with market share, the contribution of Catholic schools to pluralism is largest in sub-Saharan Africa and low income countries where pluralism without Catholic schools would otherwise be comparatively low.
- The normalized education pluralism index has limitations. Alternative measures could be proposed based on the literature on market concentration and sensitivity tests could be performed. But it is hoped that its availability will help promote and inform debates on these issues.

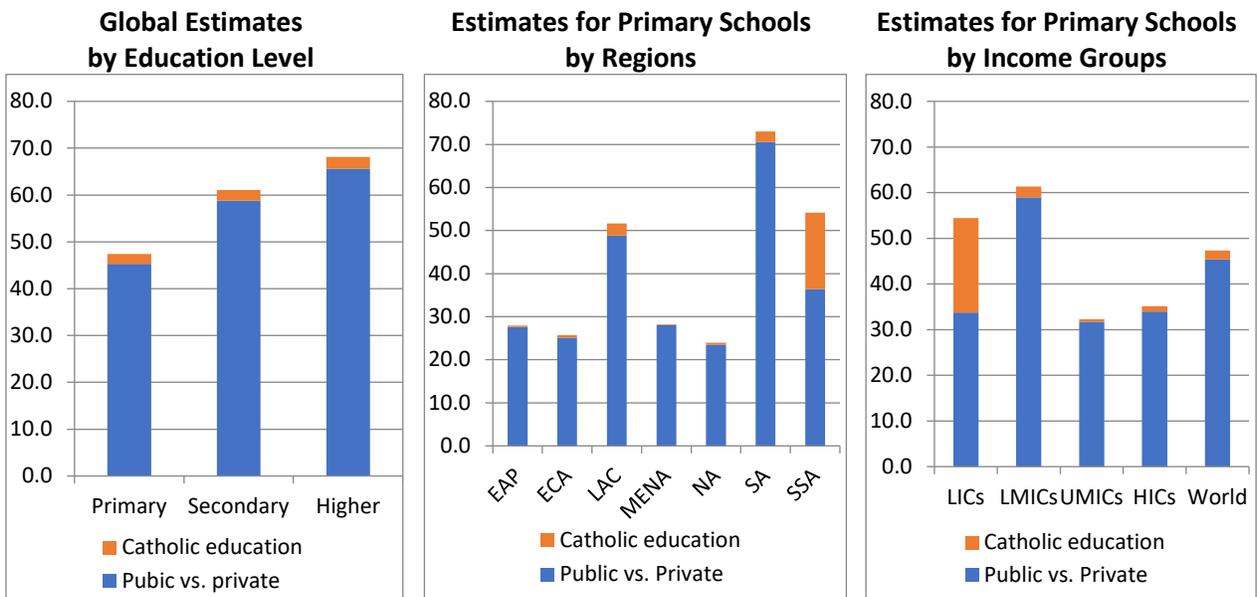
**Figure ES.5: Education Pluralism Index by Level, Income Groups and Regions, 2018**



Globally, education pluralism increases with the level of education, with the highest values observed for tertiary education. For all levels of education, pluralism is high in South Asia. It is also comparatively high in sub-Saharan Africa for primary and secondary education. It is low at those education levels in North America and MENA.

Source: Wodon (2020j).

**Figure ES.6: Estimates of Education Pluralism with and without Catholic Schools, 2018**



Source: Wodon (2020j).

Catholic Education contributes to education pluralism, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and low income countries where levels of education pluralism without Catholic schools would be comparatively low.

## Fulfillment of the Right to Education

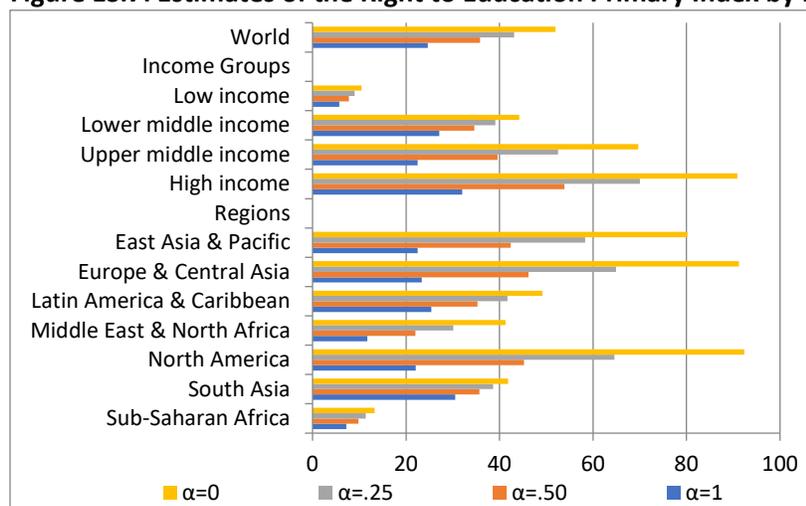
As for education pluralism, various measures can be used to assess the fulfillment of the right to education. In this report, rather than looking at inputs, we focus again on outputs and outcomes. We propose a set of measures of the fulfillment of the right to education that takes into account not only educational outcomes, but also pluralism.

- Three measures of the fulfillment of the right to education are proposed at respectively the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. The three measures have the same logic. What differentiates them is that they are each anchored in a specific educational outcome for their level. They also each rely on measures of education pluralism at their level.
- The right to education primary index REPI is defined as the product of (1) the share of children not in learning poverty and (2) the normalized index of education pluralism at the primary level, with in addition a weighting parameter and a pluralism upper threshold for flexibility (see Box ES.2). Globally, the World Bank estimates that before the pandemic, only about half of all 10-year old children were not learning poor. In sub-Saharan

Africa and low income countries, the proportion was less than two out of ten.

- When no weight is placed on pluralism, the right to education primary index is simply one minus the learning poverty rate. As the weight placed on pluralism increases, the index decreases (in cases countries do may achieve full pluralism).
- Similar approaches are used at the secondary and tertiary levels. At those levels, in the absence of alternatives, the anchors for estimations are the lower secondary completion rate and the tertiary enrollment rate. For multi-country analysis, the same weights and thresholds in the formula for the set of indices should probably be used across countries. For country-specific work, weights can be specific to the country.
- Given lower educational outcomes and in particular higher learning poverty in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, these regions tend to have lower right to education indices, as do low income countries. Still, accounting for pluralism in measuring the fulfillment of the right to education at various levels makes a difference in the estimates (see Figure ES.7 for an example at the primary level).

**Figure ES.7: Estimates of the Right to Education Primary Index by Income Groups and Regions, 2018**



Source: Wodon (2020k). Note:  $z=1$ .

When a higher weight is placed on education pluralism, the right to education primary index decreases, in some cases substantially. For illustration, estimates are provided in Figure ES.7 for the full range of values of  $\alpha$ , but it makes sense in applications to use relatively low values for  $\alpha$  given the trade-offs these values entail.

### Box ES.2: The Right to Education Indices

The right to education primary, secondary, and tertiary indices are a function of a core measure of educational outcomes at each level and the normalized index of education pluralism at that level. Denoting the level of education by  $k$  and the educational outcome that serves as reference at that level by  $EO_k$ , the three indices are defined as  $REkI = EO_k \times (\min\{1, NEPl_k/z_k\})^{\alpha_k}$  with  $0 \leq \alpha_k \leq 1$  and  $0 < z_k \leq 1$ . For primary education, the educational outcome is the share of children not in learning poverty. Given data constraints, at the secondary and tertiary levels the educational outcomes are the lower secondary completion rate and the tertiary enrollment rate. In the formula,  $z_k$  is a threshold above which more education pluralism is not necessary beneficial anymore. The weights  $\alpha_k$  placed on pluralism provide some flexibility in terms of how much pluralism is valued. For each level of schooling, the normalized education pluralism index at that level is used.

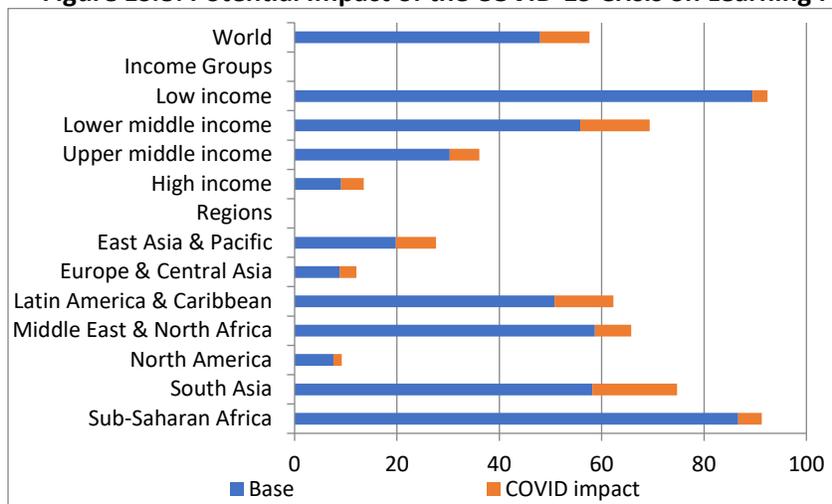
The indices at the three levels all take a value between zero and one. A higher value suggests higher fulfillment of the right to education at that level. Changes in the parameter  $\alpha_k$  reflect more or less emphasis on pluralism. When  $\alpha_k = 0$ , pluralism is not valued. When  $\alpha_k = 1$ , as much weight is placed on pluralism as on the educational outcome. It makes sense to choose values for  $\alpha_k$  that are small given the implicit trade-offs they denote between pluralism and the various educational outcomes. Finally, the framework could be extended. In analogy with the literature on monetary poverty, 'higher order' measures of the right to education could be considered. The much debated question of whether pluralism has a positive or negative impact on educational outcomes is beyond the scope of this report, but must be considered in future work. The question of what factors (including regulatory frameworks) lead to more or less pluralism also requires further inquiry. This will also be a topic for future work.

### COVID-19 Crisis, Challenges, and Opportunities

The last chapter is devoted to the unprecedented negative impacts of the current crisis on students and education systems. Some impacts relate to school closures, others to the economic crisis leading to drop-outs or delays in pursuing one's education. Catholic schools and universities may be vulnerable in countries where they do not benefit from public funding, as some parents or students may not be able to afford tuition due to negative income shocks. The crisis is leading in particular to higher learning poverty and lower education pluralism, thus affecting the right to education negatively, especially at the primary level.

- Under a pessimistic scenario, World Bank estimates suggest that learning poverty could increase from 48.0 percent to 57.6 percent globally (Figure ES.8). Losses are smaller under alternative scenarios but still large. Students in Catholic schools are affected as most live in regions with low access to the internet (thus limiting the efficacy of distance learning) and little remediation.
- Estimates of losses in education pluralism and the various indices for the right to education proposed in this report are not provided due to insufficient data at this time. But education pluralism is likely to be reduced. In particular, many national Catholic education networks expect large enrollment losses. In the United States, the drop in Catholic K12 enrollment for the 2020-21 school year was at -6.4 points, which is unprecedented in nearly 50 years. Catholic universities may have seen smaller losses, at least for now, but many have been weakened financially. For some, as the crisis has led to an acceleration of a number trends affecting higher education, their long-term sustainability may now be in doubt.

**Figure ES.8: Potential Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Learning Poverty, Pessimistic Scenario (%)**



Source: Azevedo (2020).

Under a pessimistic scenario, learning poverty may have increased from 48.0 percent to 57.6 percent globally. Increases are smaller under two other scenarios (intermediate and optimistic), but in all scenarios a large number of children may become learning poor.

**Box ES.3: Has Catholic Education Peaked?**

Enrollment in Catholic schools and universities has grown almost continuously between 1975 and 2018. Yet since 2016, there has been a small decline due to lower enrollment at the K12 level. As the COVID-19 crisis may lead to losses in enrollment, global enrollment in Catholic education may reach a plateau for a few years. Yet in the medium and long term, enrollment should continue to grow. Growth in sub-Saharan Africa due to population growth and gains in attainment should compensate for potential losses in some other parts of the world. For higher education as well, we can probably expect growth in the long run.

The shift towards Africa is changing the geography of Catholic education in a major way. By 2030, projections suggest that close to two thirds of all students in Catholic primary schools and more than 40 percent of all students in secondary schools could live in Africa. For higher education, changes will be slower.

For education systems including Catholic networks of schools and universities to recover and to fulfill the right to education, policy actions are needed on three main fronts: (1) mitigating the impact of the crisis; (2) improving educational outcomes, including reducing learning poverty at the primary level (with

beneficial impacts at the secondary and tertiary levels); and (3) increasing education pluralism.

- Guidance has been provided by multiple organizations on how to respond to the immediate impacts of the crisis. Priorities include developing multi-modal distance learning, providing remedial education, ensuring safety when reopening schools, and protecting education budgets.
- To improve learning, a new World Bank blueprint suggests clear priorities for low and middle income countries. These priorities relate to learners, teachers, learning resources, safety and inclusion, and system management. The blueprint also suggests principles to guide reforms.
- The World Bank blueprint does not however discuss the role of private providers. Guidance should hopefully become available in the fall of 2021 from UNESCO’s upcoming Global Education Monitoring Report that will focus on the role of non-state actors. In the meantime, some guidance is available from the SABER initiative as part of its framework on how to engage the private sector.

- And as a final word of caution for policy makers, estimates for 38 OECD and partner countries suggest that in 2016, Catholic schools provided US\$ 63 billion in savings for national budgets, with an additional US\$43 billion in savings from Catholic universities versus a situation in which students would enroll in public institutions. The estimates are substantially larger when taking into account all private schools. Preventing a weakening of Catholic and more generally private education due to the crisis is not only good for education pluralism, but it may also make economic sense for countries and national budgets.

## Conclusion

The damage caused by the current crisis is massive. Students in Catholic schools and universities are also affected. For some Catholic institutions, the crisis may be an existential threat, especially in countries where they do not benefit from state funding. Yet these institutions contribute to better educational outcomes including lower learning poverty at the primary level. They also contribute to education pluralism and the right to education.

Education pluralism, and in particular the issue of school choice, are contested issues today. In order to contribute to debates on those issues, this report proposed a simple measure of education pluralism inspired by the literature on industrial concentration. Instead of looking at whether legal and other conditions for pluralism are in place, which is the traditional approach, the measure is based on observed market shares for providers of education. It is essentially a factual or 'positive' measure as opposed to a 'normative' measure (acknowledging the limits of the distinction between the positive and the normative). Said differently, simply measuring the level of education pluralism in a country based on market shares does not entail an assessment as to whether there is 'enough' pluralism or not.

That type of assessment should take local context into account when the measure is applied to any particular country.

In addition, the report also proposed to combine the measure of education pluralism with data on educational outcomes, such as the learning poverty measure of the World Bank for primary education, the completion rate for lower secondary education, and the enrollment rate at the tertiary level. This led to a set of indices to assess the fulfillment of the right to education. This is more of a normative approach, which calls for flexibility in terms of the weight to be placed on pluralism, as well as the level of pluralism that could be considered good enough (beyond which the benefits of a higher level of pluralism may not be large).

As any new approach to measurement, the particular approach suggested in this report remains tentative. But it is hoped that it will promote useful debate. While the approach was applied globally in this report, it can be used for country level work, taking into account the particular context of a country.

This report is the second in an annual series. Readers who commented on the draft of the report suggested a range of topics that could have been considered, but will need to be discussed in future reports given space limits. One important topic is the identity of Catholic education, especially in contexts of pluralism within schools and universities. Another is the potential implications of the Global Compact on Education called for by Pope Francis. A third topic is how to bring together the 'education village' or the various stakeholders of Catholic and other forms of education, including not only students and teachers, but also parents, alumni, and more broadly communities. Still another topic of interest is the performance of Catholic schools and universities, not only according to traditional measures related to standardized tests, but also in other areas that relate to integral human development. Finally, one last topic that requires attention is whether Catholic schools and universities manage to reach the poor and vulnerable.

On all those topics as well as on the topics discussed in this report, more research, dialogue, and policy guidance are needed to fully realize the value that Catholic education can bring to national education systems. But conversely, those involved in Catholic education today must learn from a range of good practices that emerge from international experience. This is why the last chapter of the report suggested a number of approaches based on lessons from international experience on how to cope with the negative effects of the current crisis and 'build back better'. Promoting not only a better understanding of Catholic education in the international community, but also a better appreciation among those engaged in Catholic education of what they can learned from the experience of the international community is a key aim of this report and broader the Global Catholic Education project (see Box ES.4).

#### **Box ES.4: The Global Catholic Education Project**

[Global Catholic Education](http://www.GlobalCatholicEducation.org) is a volunteer-led project to contribute to Catholic education and integral human development globally with a range of resources. The website went live symbolically on Thanksgiving Day in November 2020 to give thanks for the many blessings we have received. Catholic schools serve 62 million children in pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools globally. In addition, more than 6 million students are enrolled at the post-secondary level (data for 2018). The Church also provides many other services to children and families, including in healthcare, social protection, and humanitarian assistance. Our aim is to serve Catholic schools and universities, as well as other organizations contributing to integral human development, with an emphasis on responding to the aspirations of the poor and vulnerable. If you would like to contribute to the project, please contact us through the website at [www.GlobalCatholicEducation.org](http://www.GlobalCatholicEducation.org).



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