



ASPBAE STATEMENT

Protect Education and Strengthen Solidarity in the Global Effort to Combat the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE) joins the global community in expressing its utmost concern on the Covid-19 pandemic that is causing unparalleled hardship on the lives of peoples around the world, leaving the most vulnerable groups highly exposed to the disease and to its dreadful consequences. Confirmed cases of infections and deaths continue to escalate globally, including in many developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region where health systems are extremely challenged. Hundreds of millions have lost their jobs or are at risk of losing their only means of livelihood. According to UNESCO, as of 3 April 2020, over 1.54 billion learners have been affected by closures of schools in 188 countries, representing nearly 90% of the world's student population. Wide-scale lockdowns would have also shut many Community Learning Centres (CLCs) and other adult learning and education programmes throughout the region.

We affirm that even in crisis situations, the right to education must be protected and learning must continue as it is one of the most important strategies for responding to this and other crises. Children, youth and adults need to be made aware of the constantly changing developments regarding the virus and its impacts, enabling them to – individually and collectively - cope and adapt to the crisis' fast-changing circumstances which have far-reaching consequences.

We support the efforts of UNESCO and governments in deploying distance learning solutions using appropriate technology and flexible learning approaches, including residential and community-based learning programmes. ASPBAE, however, notes that majority of learners from poor and disadvantaged households have no internet connectivity and lack the resources to access and acquire technology. This situation may further widen the digital divide and hasten the corporate capture of education technologies. Even now, there has been a rush among private ICT firms to aggressively promote and market their digital learning modules and platforms. We are likewise aware that ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, Dalits, adult learners, and other disadvantaged groups – especially girls and women from within these - are left out and further marginalised due to the absence of appropriate learning materials, language barriers, and institutionalised discrimination. We therefore call on governments, development partners and the global community to ensure free and open access to appropriate technologies and tools that facilitate distance learning and community-based learning programmes, offering context-appropriate quality education and learning to the most vulnerable and excluded groups.

Much is demanded of teachers, trainers and education personnel as frontline responders to ensuring the continuity of education under the COVID 19 pandemic. Their safety, well-being, job security, training and support should be guaranteed as priority, to empower them in their efforts to reach all, even the

hardest to reach learners i.e. those in rural areas, remote locations, those with special needs - through suitable, contextually appropriate means.

The enormous loss of livelihoods and income owing to the lock-downs and quarantines are keeping countless poor learners away from participation in education and learning activities. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), with school closures, as many as 368 million children around the world are now missing out on school meals from which they are dependent for their daily nutrition. Women endure multiple burdens in this pandemic as they deal with increased domestic work, bigger health responsibilities, and even added teaching load, as they struggle for food and livelihood to sustain their families. Social safety nets that put resources in the hands and control also of women - cash transfers, food assistance - and other measures that protect jobs will need to be ensured as essential elements to ensure continued learning.

We are concerned to see autocratic measures being taken that circumvent democratic and accountability processes in the emergency response in many countries. People's voices and agency should be strengthened and heard in shaping the responses to the crisis. Only then can sustainable, relevant and effective solutions be found; solutions that leave no one behind. We call on governments to adhere to internationally agreed human rights standards and adopt a rights-based approach in their response to this pandemic.

ASPBAE notes that governments are currently realigning their national budgets to address the health emergency and to provide social assistance to vulnerable groups. The budget cuts and realignments can be deep, and can impact on planned allocations to education. The expected additional budgets intended for the recovery phase of the health crisis to include stimulus packages to address massive economic losses, can further drain the low resource base especially of poor and low-income developing countries. We call on governments to strengthen their resolve in shoring up and safeguarding social sector budgets as countries will need to strengthen their health, education and social protection systems to fully recover from this crisis. We also call on the international community to mobilise much needed resources and institute measures such as debt relief to support low and middle-income countries in their efforts to invest in people through education – a critical strategy for economic recovery, growth, resilience and overall development.

ASPBAE stands in solidarity with other civil society organisations and the global community in fighting the Covid-19 global pandemic. We will cooperate with efforts to ensure continued education and learning for all children, youth and adults; by promoting truthful information and combatting disinformation and fake news; by helping build peoples' agency in shaping the response to the crisis and its aftermath; and by monitoring government accountability and international support so that countries emerge from this crisis with far better and more equitable education, health, nutrition and social protection for all.