

Public appeal regarding the ensuring of the educational process during the COVID-19 pandemic

In the context of the state of emergency, young people's access to education is the matter of major importance and raises concerns about the ability of educational institutions to respond in a timely manner to the current crisis and to ensure the equal right to education for all young people in Moldova.

By signing and ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Association Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Moldova, and by approving the Sectoral Strategies in the field of education, the Republic of Moldova is committed to creating an inclusive education system and accessible to all, to provide a quality education and to contribute in time to the socio-economic development of the country. However, during the time of the pandemic caused by COVID-19, the traditional methods used in the education system limit the access of young people to quality education.

In this context, through the online platform U-Report Moldova, the National Youth Council of Moldova conducted a survey among 5247 young people (up to 24 years old) from all regions of the country to identify the obstacles with which they are facing in the learning process. Thus, we found that in the period of state of emergency, **the access of young people to quality education is limited, both due to the lack of information technologies and the Internet connection, especially among the students from socially vulnerable category, as well as due to the reduced capacity of teachers to use digital tools for educational purposes.**

To justify the above, we come up with the description of the problem and the set of measures to solve it.

Access of young people to quality education during the state of emergency (March 17 - May 15, 2020)

The problem: During the state of emergency, the access of young people to quality education is limited.

Cause 1: The access of young people to quality education during the state of emergency is limited by the lack of technologies and / or the internet among young people, especially among those in the socially vulnerable category.

According to the "U-Report" survey, conducted at the end of March 2020, attended by 5247 young people from all regions of the country, **45% of those surveyed said they know students who do not have access to technology and / or the internet and cannot practice online lessons.** According to the National Agency for Regulation in Electronic Communications and Information Technology, in 2018, **the penetration level of fixed broadband Internet access services was 17.5%**, with about 623,135 subscribers (up 1 pp compared to 2017) . At the same time, the penetration rate of **mobile Internet access services was 83%**. At the same time, there are indicators that suggest high inequality in accessibility and use of technologies. According to the NBS, in 2018, **the endowment of households with computers was 62% in the urban area and 42% in the rural area.** At the same time, the existence of one computer in a family where there are 2 or more students can also be considered a barrier since one computer cannot be used concurrently by 2 people with parallel online learning objectives. Moreover, 48.7% of households had access to fixed broadband Internet, of which 61% were from urban areas and only 39% - from rural areas. Thus, **there is a substantial discrepancy between access in urban and rural areas.** Almost 22% of rural localities do not yet have broadband access to fixed points. In some localities, the profitability of the investment in the broadband infrastructure is low and caused by the small number of households in the rural area, as well as by the degree of their dispersion. Therefore, **young people in these localities do not have access to digital education, either because of the high cost of the service or because of the lack of infrastructure.** In this context, young people from rural areas, and especially those from socially vulnerable families, are at risk of being excluded from the educational process.

Cause 2: The access of young people to quality education during the state of emergency is limited by the reduced capacity of the teachers to use the digital tools.

According to the aforementioned U-Report "Education on the distance" survey, only 48% of respondents benefit from online conferences with teachers during the quarantine period. The other young people surveyed self-study, based on the materials submitted by the teachers. In fact, this learning model causes dissatisfaction among 38% of young people, in the context in which the volume of homework becomes too high. Moreover, even if teachers make every effort to ensure the continuation of the learning process, about 19% of the young people surveyed believe that the limited ability of teachers to use digital tools significantly affects the quality of the online classes.

Effect 1: Young people from rural areas, especially those from socially vulnerable families, are at risk of being excluded from the educational process during quarantine.

According to the NBS, the young people between the ages of 6-19 constitute 531,000. Of these, 64% are in rural areas. Limited access to technology and the internet in rural areas, especially during the quarantine period, is a major obstacle in ensuring education for all young people. Moreover, the most affected are the young people from socially vulnerable families, who suffer from both the lack of technology and the lack of a conducive environment for development. Interrupting the learning process can lead to long-term consequences for young people, affecting the set of knowledge they acquire and their long-term decisions. According to a study conducted in 2016 by Jordan A. Carlsson, 10 additional days of schooling significantly increase the results of student assessment tests. At the same time, a 60-day interruption of the educational process reduces their chances of success. Thus, in the absence of digital tools, access to education is restricted for some young people in rural areas, which reduces the chances of success of young people in the long term and predisposes them to deviant behaviors.

Effect 2: Even among young people who have access to technology, learning outcomes are likely to decline.

The quality of education and especially the chances of success of the graduates are affected by the poor training of the teachers in working with digital tools. The long period of adaptation to the new environment and the lack of an online assessment system in the educational system make the learning process difficult for students. Moreover, despite the reforms of the education sector has implemented since getting independence, there is a continuous decrease in the success rates of the graduation exams of the gymnasium. More than half of the number of students are only partially proficient in reading, math or science and are far behind their peers in neighboring countries. The lack of urgent measures to remedy the situation can lead to an even more important decrease in the results of young people in education and may affect the educational and professional course of the graduates. In the same vein, given the limited conditions for inclusion and reciprocity of human interaction, teachers already report the low degree of interaction and receptivity of some students in the process of distance learning. Thus, the efforts made by the educators, on the one hand, are twofold, while the students' capacity for involvement decreases.

Ensuring a quality education for all young people, especially in times of crisis, calls for the efforts of all the participants involved in this process to be combined: central and local authorities, economic agents, school, parents, children and civil society. Therefore, the advocacy group "Tineret" (Youth), together with its partners, comes with a series of recommendations to increase the equal and non-discriminatory access of young people from Moldova to education.

Recommendations:

Based on the above, our solution is:

1. **To initiate the process of determining the way of conducting the graduation examinations of the secondary school cycle and the BAC** (also examining the online version of examination), based on a strategic action plan elaborated and consulted with the interested parts, as well as

- the development of a promotion mechanism and supporting graduation exams where school and university students will not be rejected or delayed.
2. **Provision by MECC with computers / tablets (as a loan or donation) and internet access for each student** in rural / urban areas, who is part of the socially vulnerable categories, or who is in the family with 2 and more children and don't have such utilities. Reference: the example from Estonia.
 3. **Subsidizing mobile Internet access services (and / or fixed, where possible) and providing free access to Internet networks for students in need during the quarantine period** (for example, serving the solidarity of Orange Moldova with teachers).
 4. **Enabling teachers in the digital teaching process** by delivering Training for Trainers training, so that teachers are properly instructed how to effectively use online education platforms.
 5. In the perspective of prolonging the state of emergency, **the elaboration of curricula and educational contents using the principles of e-learning.**
 6. **Use a unique learning platform / tool, such as Google Classroom (which is free).** The uniformization of the platform / platforms used for distance learning will create a comfort of the learning process, both for the teachers - and for the students, even after the period of emergency.
 7. **Developing a national learning platform with digital educational content and assessment tools** that can be used continuously in similar situations and not only.
 8. **Ensuring the accessibility of the educational process adapted to the needs of children and young people with mental and visual disabilities**, using educational material accompanied by the mimic-gesture and easy-to-read language, as well as the development of online training modules **including for linguistic minorities** (in Russian and so on).

Moreover, adapting the education system to the digital environment and ensuring access for all young people to this system is an important **opportunity to solve other existing problems, such as the lack of staff in rural areas and the uniformity of access to quality education.** In this respect, Law no.121 of May 25, 2012 on ensuring equality and Law no.60 of March 30, 2012 on the social inclusion of persons with disabilities provides for the implementation of accessibility guarantees to eliminate obstacles and barriers related to public facilities and services, such as transportation, information and communications.

During the pandemic, we do not neglect the need to invest in the health system, but we also believe that the education system also needs more attention because the results of it will produce effects in the future.

The National Youth Council of Moldova (CNTM) is an association structure with 51 member youth organizations that has the mission to promote the interests of young people in Moldova.

In the hope of an efficient collaboration, we assure you of all our consideration. For any questions or details, you can contact us at the e-mail address: ana-maria.beldiga@cntm.md or cntm.corespondenta@gmail.com.

The list of organizations supporting public appeal is attached.

Respectfully,
Roman Banari, General Secretary of
National Youth Council of Moldova

**List of organizations that support public appeal
on ensuring the education process during the pandemic COVID-19**

1. A.O. Asociația Institutum Virtutes Civilis
2. A.O. Promo-LEX
3. A.O. Alianța pentru Eficiență Energetică și Regenerabile
4. A.O. Centrul de Resurse Juridice din Moldova
5. A.O. Fundația pentru Dezvoltare din Republica Moldova
6. A.O. Platforma pentru Cetățenie Activă și Parteneriat pentru Drepturile Omului (CAP)
7. A.O. Tinerii pentru dreptul la viață (TDV)
8. A.O. Centrul pentru Jurnalism Independent
9. Uniunea organizațiilor invalizilor din Republica Moldova
10. Asociația de reabilitare a invalizilor din Republica Moldova
11. A.O. „Terra-1530”
12. A.O. BIOS
13. Asociația Femeilor pentru Protecția Mediului și Dezvoltarea Durabilă
14. A.O. Alianța INFONET
15. A.O. Eco-Răzeni
16. A.O. Asociația Internațională a Păstrătorilor Râului „Eco-Tiras”
17. A.O. „Consiliul Raional al Tinerilor din Florești”
18. A.O. Comunitatea Studenților Creștini din Republica Moldova
19. A.O. INTECO
20. A.O. Institutul European de Studii Politice în Moldova
21. A.O. INVENTO
22. Asociația Presei Independente (API)
23. A.O. Centrul de Informare și Resurse PRO BONO
24. Asociația pentru Guvernare Eficientă și Responsabilă
25. A.O. ECOTOX
26. A.O. Certitudine
27. A.O. Automobil Club din Moldova
28. A.O. Eco-Sor
29. A.O. Institutul de Politici Publice
30. A.O. „Mostenitorii”
31. A.O. Părinți Solidari
32. Platforma Tineretului Pentru Solidaritate Interetnică
33. A.O. Asociația Studenților Europeni AEGEE-Chișinău
34. Consiliul Raional al Tinerilor Fălești
35. A.O. PRINCIPII SĂNĂTOASE
36. A.O. Uniunea Elevilor din Moldova
37. A.O. Rețeaua Națională LEADER din Republica Moldova
38. Institutul pentru Inițiative Strategice (IPIS)
39. A.O. Mișcarea Ecologistă din Moldova
40. Asociația Jurnaliștilor de Mediu și Turism Ecologic din Republica Moldova
41. A.O. Centrul de Instruire și Dezvoltare Educațională
42. A.O. Centrul Regional de Mediu-Moldova (REC Moldova)