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## COMMENTS ON THE PROGRESS REPORT OF THE FUTURES OF EDUCATION COMMISSION<sup>1</sup>

### A Contribution to UNESCO's Futures of Education Commission by the International Office of Catholic Education and the Global Pedagogical Network - Joining in Reformation

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This document is available among others at [www.GlobalCatholicEducation.org](http://www.GlobalCatholicEducation.org),  
<http://oiecinternational.com/>, and <https://www.gpenreformation.net/>.

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<sup>1</sup> This note was drafted by Quentin Wodon as part of his volunteer work for OIEC and the Global Catholic Education Project. The author works for an international development agency, but the views expressed in this note should not in any way be attributed to the author's employer, its board of directors, or the countries they represent.

## 1. Introduction

The work of the International Commission on the Futures of Education to rethink education in a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty, inequalities, risks and possibilities comes at an opportune time. Providing a quality education to all children leads to substantial benefits for individuals, families, and societies (see Annex 1 for a brief summary of some of these benefits). But in addition, improving the quality of education systems is essential to enable individuals, families, and societies to confront the challenges they face. Many of the themes and concerns expressed by the Commission in its Progress Report are shared by Christian educators around the world, whether they work in public, private secular, or Christian schools/universities<sup>2</sup>.

In particular, we agree with the Commission's statement in its progress report that: *"we cannot separate humanity from the planet and all other living beings. For sustainable futures we need to address inequality and improve the quality of human life without compromising future generations and the eco-systems of which we are a part. We also need to consider what it means to be human in the age of rapid technological transformation. Education is one of the crucial ways we rework our relationships with a more-than-human world. The possibility of an interdependent, caring, common future depends, to a great extent, on education. Education enables and strengthens paths towards a humanity that values diversity to build the common together."* These core themes and related questions echo the concerns and hopes emphasized by the World Council of Churches in 1983 in the *Conciliar Process for Justice, Peace and the Care of Creation* and the current *Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace* of all churches from the protestant and orthodox families. They also echo Pope Francis' recent encyclicals *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*. They were also expressed in the joint contribution<sup>3</sup> submitted in November 2020 to the Commission by the International Office of Catholic Education and the Global Pedagogical Network - Joining in Reformation (see Annex 2 on some of the common values of all Christian schools as outlined in that contribution.)

We also agree with the Commission that there is *"a vital need for many kinds of educational institutions including schools and universities to be sure, but also libraries, museums, community radio, public access television, spaces of the digital commons—as well as institutions not even dreamed of yet. In this institutional diversity, which extends to informal and nonformal education, we must find answers to old and new problems."* Broadening our understanding of education beyond what happens in the classroom to include the roles of the family and the community is also a key theme emphasized by Pope Francis, including in his remarks for the

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<sup>2</sup> On reformation schools, see for example Global Pedagogical Network - Joining in Reformation. 2017. *Establishing Common Ground for Protestant Schools Worldwide*. Hannover, Germany: Evangelical Church in Germany.

<sup>3</sup> Barber, P., M. Bertet, K. Czerwitzki, N. F. Fondzenyuy, I. Grau I Callizo, J. Choi, H. Hambrook, J. Herveau, A. Manalo, J. Mesa, A. Kastner, J. Laabs, S. Mutabazi, A. Muthigani, P. Richard, A. Scheunpflug, B. Sendler-Koschel, M. White, and Q. Wodon. 2020. *Christian Schools and the Futures of Education: A Contribution to UNESCO's Futures of Education Commission* by the International Office of Catholic Education and the Global Pedagogical Network Joining in Reformation, Rome and Hannover: OIEC and GPENreformation.

event on the Global Compact on Education held on October 15, 2020. It is also a theme emphasized in the previous contribution of OIEC and GPEN reformation to the Commission<sup>4</sup>.

Finally, we agree that *“public education ... does not refer solely to state-sponsored schooling. Public education must be seen, above all, as a way of reinforcing our common belonging to the same humanity while valuing differences and diversity.”* The Commission notes that *“the diversification of actors in the education sector should be welcomed as long as it enhances the capacities of public authorities and communities to harness the regenerative power of education to address the severe challenges facing humanity. Education is an individual practice and a collective endeavor.”* We believe that the co-existence of different school systems contributes to providing space for fundamental debates about the education that is provided to children and youth and how it relates to the questions of our times.

The very fact that different educational options are available to parents, as called for by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, helps in discussing alternative approaches to confronting the challenges faced by the world today. The issue of education pluralism was one of the core topics of the Global Catholic Education Report 2021 published in March 2021. In these comments for the Commission, after a brief summary of some of the findings from the Global Catholic Education Report 2021, we focus our remarks on the importance of education pluralism not only for the right to education, but also for societies and the world to promote the dialogue that is needed to confront the challenges they face.

## **2. Background: Findings from the Global Catholic Education Report 2021**

While the Commission may not focus its report on the contributions of any particular type of schools, we hope that its members are aware of the contributions of Catholic and Christian schools in particular in low and lower-middle income countries. We estimate that Christian schools serve of the order of 100 million students globally<sup>5</sup>. For Catholic education, more detailed estimates are available in the Global Catholic Education Report 2021<sup>6</sup>, according to which 62 million children are enrolled in Catholic K12 (pre-primary, primary, and secondary)<sup>7</sup> schools globally, with in addition more than 6 million students enrolled in Catholic higher education. A few findings from the Global Catholic Education Report 2021 are worth emphasizing to provide context (see Annex 1 for a broader estimation of the number of children and youth served by Christian schools and universities):

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<sup>4</sup> Barber et al., op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> See Annex 3 and Wodon, Q. 2020. How Many Students Do Christian Schools Serve Globally? *Global Catholic Education Knowledge Note*. Washington, DC: Global Catholic Education.

<sup>6</sup> Estimates are for 2018. See Wodon, Q. 2021. *Global Catholic Education Report 2021: Education Pluralism, Learning Poverty, and the Right to Education*. Washington, DC: Global Catholic Education, OIEC, IFCU, OMAEC, and UMEC-WUCT.

<sup>7</sup> The term K12 is used in the United States to denote education from kindergarten to 12th grade.

- Over the last four decades, enrollment in Catholic schools has been growing especially rapidly on the African continent, which now accounts for 55.3% of all students in Catholic primary schools in the world. Globally, according to the World Bank classification of countries, seven in ten students in Catholic primary schools live in low and lower-middle income countries (40.9% in low income and 29.7% in lower-middle income countries). By contrast, Catholic higher education remains concentrated in upper-middle and high income countries, as is the case for other universities, but those institutions can play a role for capacity building in the global south.
- The Catholic Church is responding to the rising demand for education in the global south. In sub-Saharan Africa, 11.0% of all primary school students are in a Catholic school. In low income countries, the proportion is 13.7%. The fact that Catholic primary schools serve proportionally more students in low income countries is good news for the mission of the Church to serve the poor. It also related to the emphasis placed by the Human Rights Council on technical cooperation and capacity-building efforts for girls and children in disadvantaged situations.
- Schooling is not enough however: we must also ensure that children are learning. In low- and middle-income countries, the World Bank estimated that 53% of all 10-year-olds (those in schools and those out of school) cannot understand an age-appropriate text. Efforts are needed in all schools to improve learning outcomes. This is essential for realizing the right to education, and requires technical cooperation and capacity-building efforts.
- The theme for the report is education pluralism, learning poverty, and the right to education. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that *“parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.”* Catholic schools respond to parental aspirations for an education that combines academic excellence with an emphasis on values and faith in such a way that students from all faiths are welcomed in the schools. The importance of pluralism for the work of the Commission is discussed in the next section.
- Catholic schools and universities aim to educate towards fraternal humanism. They are responding to Pope Francis' call for a Global Compact on Education (as discussed below), and seek to place their projects in a culture of dialogue and in the spirit of the education village. Yet today, their ability to continue to respond to the aspirations of students and parents is threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in countries where they do not get support from the state. In the United States, the pandemic has led to the largest reduction in enrollment in Catholic K12 schools in close to 50 years. Supporting Catholic education in times of crisis is essential to protect education pluralism. It also makes economic sense. Estimates for 38 countries suggest that Catholic schools and universities generate annual budget savings for these states of more than \$100 billion (in purchasing power parity). The long-term cost of not supporting Catholic schools and universities when they need support may be larger than the cost of providing support.

In addition, as an additional consideration that is not discussed in the Global Catholic Education Report 2021 but will be the focus of future work, Catholic and Christian schools more generally make special efforts to be inclusive and serve all children, including children with disabilities.

### 3. Education Pluralism and the Right to Education<sup>8</sup>

Christian schools work within the context of efforts to achieve the fourth sustainable development goal (SDG4). The primary responsibility for fulfilling the right to education and achieving SDG4 rests with the state, but this does not mean that the state should be the sole provider of education, or that different types of education should not be available to children and their parents. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes a provision on the right of parents to choose the type of education that their children should receive. Most countries allow different education networks to operate as long as they follow reasonable requirements. And in quite a few countries, the state funds those networks, including faith-based schools (and universities). When multiple education networks with different worldviews operate, parents have a choice in terms of where to send their children to school. This, in essence, is what we refer to as education pluralism.

Many approaches to the concept of pluralism (as applied to education or more generally) have been proposed, but a core idea is that it is more than mere coexistence or indifferent tolerance for various worldviews. It requires a frank, yet constructive dialogue between worldviews on issues confronted by communities, societies, and the world. For pluralism to be effective, conditions must be met. There must be freedom of religion and belief, but there also must be some level of what can be referred to as ‘religious literacy’, which requires individuals to understand not only their own belief system or faith tradition (including in terms of how it engages with other traditions), but also that of their neighbors<sup>9</sup>.

Religious literacy is perhaps nowhere as important as in the education of children and youth. Engaging in school with other traditions or worldviews in a thoughtful way matters because the education received as a child plays such a crucial role in shaping attitudes later in life. In an ideal world, education systems would promote religious literacy. This could be done in two complementary ways. Firstly, schools would promote dialogue between worldviews in their own midst. Secondly, at the level of education systems, parents would be able within reasonable bounds to choose the type of school that their child will attend. Unfortunately, this is not the case in too many schools, and too many countries.

Because what is measured has a higher likelihood of getting done, as the adage says, apart from arguing in favor of education pluralism, emphasis is placed in the Global Catholic Education Report 2021 on providing simple measures of education pluralism<sup>10</sup>. While measuring education pluralism may not be

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<sup>8</sup> This section is adapted from a post for the London School of Economics Religion and Global Society interdisciplinary blog (available [here](#)).

<sup>9</sup> See Stewart, W. C., C. Seiple, and D. Hoover. 2020. Toward a Global Covenant of Peaceable Neighborhood: Introducing the Philosophy of Covenantal Pluralism. *Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 18(4): 1-17.

<sup>10</sup> To complement existing approaches that focus on laws and regulations, education pluralism is measured “ex post”—looking at what type of education students actually receive, as opposed to “ex ante” on the basis of an assessment of whether laws and regulations are conducive to pluralism. In addition, a set of indices for the fulfillment of the right to education are provided. These indices combine data on educational outcomes with the proposed measure of education pluralism. These various measures are not perfect, and data to estimate them

crucial for the work of the Commission, the idea of education pluralism does matter if communities and societies are to promote open and frank dialogue inspired by different worldviews on how they can confront the major challenges they face. The “*compartmentalization of education into private spheres*” is a valid concern raised by the Commission, but education pluralism need not lead to such compartmentalization. Instead, education pluralism can be beneficial for “*educating publics.*” While pluralism can be experienced within a school, we believe that there is also value in having multiple types of schools operating within a community or society – the risk that a monopoly in the provision of education may lead to a monopoly in points of views on how to face future challenges is real.

#### **4. Towards a Global Compact for Education**

In closing, we would like to share with the Commission some of the messages shared by Pope Francis on October 15, 2020 at an event for the Global Compact for Education<sup>11</sup>. Pope Francis reminded us that” *“To educate is always an act of hope, one that calls for cooperation in turning a barren and paralyzing indifference into another way of thinking that recognizes our interdependence... We consider education to be one of the most effective ways of making our world and history more human. Education is above all a matter of love and responsibility handed down from one generation to another.”* He emphasized the role that education can play to renew the bounds of solidarity and mutual respect: *“Education is a natural antidote to the individualistic culture that at times degenerates into a true cult of the self and the primacy of indifference. Our future cannot be one of division, impoverishment of thought, imagination, attentiveness, dialogue and mutual understanding. That cannot be our future.”* He ended his remarks with a set of eight commitments that he encouraged all of us, individuals as well as families, organizations, and governments to make towards a new global compact to improve quality education opportunities for all in school and beyond:

*“For these reasons, we commit ourselves personally and in common:*

*First, to make human persons in their value and dignity the centre of every educational programme, both formal and informal, in order to foster their distinctiveness, beauty and uniqueness, and their capacity for relationship with others and with the world around them, while at the same time teaching them to reject lifestyles that encourage the spread of the throwaway culture.*

*Second, to listen to the voices of children and young people to whom we pass on values and knowledge, in order to build together a future of justice, peace and a dignified life for every person.*

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globally are limited (at the country level, more detailed work can be done). But the hope is that the proposed measures help in showing how different countries are doing with respect to education pluralism, not just in terms of legal frameworks but also in terms of where students actually enroll.

<sup>11</sup> Remarks from Pope Francis delivered on October 15, 2020 through a video message for the event organized by the Congregation for Catholic Education at the Pontifical Lateran University on a Global Compact for Education.

*Third, to encourage the full participation of girls and young women in education.*

*Fourth, to see in the family the first and essential place of education.*

*Fifth, to educate and be educated on the need for acceptance and in particular openness to the most vulnerable and marginalized.*

*Sixth, to be committed to finding new ways of understanding the economy, politics, growth and progress that can truly stand at the service of the human person and the entire human family, within the context of an integral ecology.*

*Seventh, to safeguard and cultivate our common home, protecting it from the exploitation of its resources, and to adopt a more sober lifestyle marked by the use of renewable energy sources and respect for the natural and human environment, in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity, solidarity and a circular economy.*

*Finally, dear brothers and sisters, we want to commit ourselves courageously to developing an educational plan within our respective countries, investing our best energies and introducing creative and transformative processes in cooperation with civil society. In this, our point of reference should be the social doctrine that, inspired by the revealed word of God and Christian humanism, provides a solid basis and a vital resource for discerning the paths to follow in the present emergency.”*

## Annex 1: The Imperative of Investing in Education<sup>12</sup>

Ensuring the right to education is simply essential for the enjoyment of human rights in their indivisibility. The benefits from education for human development are especially wide-ranging.

**Labor market earnings and poverty reduction.** Education is key to escaping poverty. Men and women with primary education (partial or completed) earn only 20- 30 percent more on average than those with no education at all. But men and women with secondary education may expect to make almost twice as much as those with no education at all, and those with tertiary education may expect to make three times as much as those with no education. In addition, secondary and tertiary education are often associated with higher labor force participation (especially full-time work for women) and a lower likelihood of unemployment. Since labor earnings are key to avoid poverty, improving education outcomes – both in terms of educational attainment and learning – can reduce poverty dramatically.

**Child marriage, fertility, and women's health.** Not educating girls is especially costly. When girls drop out of school, they are more likely to marry or have children at an age when they are not yet ready to do so, physically or emotionally. This leads to a wide range of negative consequences not only for them, but also their children and societies as a whole. Keeping girls in school is one of the best ways to end child marriage and early childbearing. Universal secondary education for girls could virtually eliminate child marriage and reduce early childbearing by three fourths. By reducing child marriage and early childbearing, and providing agency for women, universal secondary education could indirectly reduce fertility rates in many developing countries. This, in turn, would reduce population growth, accelerate the demographic transition, and generate a large demographic dividend. Universal secondary education for girls would increase women's health knowledge and their ability to seek care, improve their psychological well-being, and reduce the risk of intimate partner violence.

**Child health and nutrition.** After controlling for other factors affecting under-five mortality and stunting, children born of educated mothers have lower risks of dying by age five or being stunted. By contrast, children born of very young mothers face a higher risk of dying by age five or being stunted. Thus, better education reduces these risks both directly and indirectly through its impact on early childbearing. By reducing household poverty, universal secondary education for mothers (and fathers) would again help reducing under-five mortality and stunting rates. Finally, children born of educated mothers are more likely to be registered at birth, a key right for children that affects other rights.

**Agency, decision-making, and social capital.** Better educated men and women tend to have more agency in their lives. Achieving universal secondary education would increase by one tenth women's reported ability to make decisions in their household. Better educated women and men report lower satisfaction rates with basic services, which may reflect better agency through a more realistic assessment of their quality. Educational attainment is also associated with being able to rely on friends when in need, and a stronger ability to engage in altruistic behaviors. This is not because those who are better educated are more altruistic, but because they are in a better position to be able to help others.

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<sup>12</sup> See Wodon, 2021, op. cit., for detailed references.

## Annex 2: Common Values - Catholic and Reformation Schools

In November 2020, the International Office of Catholic Education and the Global Pedagogical Network - Joining in Reformation published a joint contribution for UNESCO's Futures of Education Commission<sup>13</sup>. Below is an excerpt from the section on the aims of Christian schools in that contribution.

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Within a pluralistic and globalized world, the schools hold dear the following values:

**Quality of education and care for students:** The world [... is] faced with a severe learning crisis which is being exacerbated by the current pandemic. Christian schools are often recognized in their countries for the quality of the education they provide, not only in terms of academic performance, but also in terms of socio-emotional skill and the care teachers and staff provide to students.

**Equity in education:** The conviction that every person is equal before God also means that every person, regardless of his or her origin or financial means, must have access to quality education. Educational justice is therefore a central principle and requirement of Christian education [....].

**Social justice and preferential option for the poor:** The question of educational justice also means working for social justice - locally, but also globally. [...] The preferential option for the poor is a core value in Christian education, with many schools aiming to serve the least, the last, and the lost. The focus on the 'periphery' is related to a shared understanding of the importance of communion, dialogue, solidarity, and a sense of unity in diversity within the schools.

**Human rights education:** In the different Christian traditions, peace plays an important role. [...] Committing to human rights, teaching and educating about human rights, and addressing rights violations are a natural part of Christian education.

**Education for sustainability:** Sustainable development is another fundamental pillar of Christianity [...]. Education for sustainable development and a commitment to the preservation of creation are a matter of course of Christian education, as emphasized by Pope Francis' (2015) encyclical.

**Global dimension:** [...] Christian-sponsored schools aim to broaden the perspective of the local community towards the ecumenical, worldwide Christianity. This perspective promotes global empathy and a willingness to work together across national borders.

Christian schools aim to contribute to the fulfilment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, by preparing their students for a meaningful life in a pluralistic and globalizing world. They strive to work towards this goal in a number of different ways [...]:

**Christian schools educate with regards to human values:** Values such as tolerance, mutual care, solidarity, and mindfulness are central concerns in Christian service and charity. The schools aim to live these values and promote them in the community. [...]

**Christian schools promote personality and personal responsibility:** Christian education aims to strengthen "*the full development of the human personality*" [...]. The aim is to help all

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<sup>13</sup> Barber et al., op. cit.

children, regardless of their faith, to understand who they are [...] and how to serve this community.

**Christian schools strive for high-quality education and upbringing:** Every student should be encouraged to achieve his/her full potential. Christian schools strive for an education grounded in science, but also in a hermeneutical understanding of foundational religious texts [...].

**Christian schools aim to be a place of refuge for children and young people:** Christian schools should be places where parents know that their children and young people will be safe. Attention and respect for the rights of children are important concerns. Violence in school, including the risk of sexual abuse, is simply not acceptable in the schools.

### **Annex 3: Christian Education Institutions May Serve Over 100 Million Students Globally<sup>14</sup>**

The focus of the Global Catholic Education Report 2021 is on Catholic schools and universities, which are estimated to serve close to 62 million children at the preschool, primary, and secondary school levels, and more than six million youth at the higher education level. Other Christian institutions also serve a large number of students globally. Estimating how many is a bit of guesswork given the lack of detailed statistics on enrollment in non-Catholic institutions. Yet based on simple assumptions, it is likely that Christian education institutions serve at least 100 million students.

To see why, denote the number of students in Catholic schools and universities by SCA and the number of Catholics by PCA. An implicit parameter capturing Catholic investments in schools and universities in proportion of the Catholic population is defined as  $ICA = SCA/PCA$ . To estimate the number of students enrolled in non-Catholic Christian schools, information is needed about the number of non-Catholic Christians (PCR) and their investment parameter (ICR). If estimates of these two variables can be suggested, then we would have  $SCR = PCR \times ICR$  and the total number of students in Christian institutions would be  $SC = SCA + SCR$ . The same approach would work with multiple groups of non-Catholic Christians. When sufficient data are available, disaggregating estimates by denomination could generate more accurate estimates overall.

Based on simple calculations using data from the Pew Research Center, of a total of 2,383 million Christians projected for 2020, there may be 1,194 million Catholics, 284 million Orthodox Christians, 874 million Protestants, and 31 million other Christians. These values are slightly below estimates commonly cited. For example, it is often suggested that there are more than 900 million Protestants. Applying an annual growth rate to data on baptized populations from the statistical yearbook of the Church yields 1,354 million Catholics in 2020. Yet for both Catholics and Protestants, there is often a drop in faith affiliations between the time of baptism and adulthood. The fact that the estimates are a bit smaller than commonly cited figures may simply reflect that drop.

The investment parameter ICA is estimated at 5.7 percent for Catholics with  $SCA = 68.2$  million and  $PCA = 1,194$  million. GPENreformation, the organization that federates (many)

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<sup>14</sup> See Wodon, 2020, op. cit.

Protestant schools, suggests that there may be 25 million students enrolled in Protestant schools globally, of which 10.5 million are affiliated with GPENreformation. This generates an investment in schools and universities parameter for Protestants of 2.9 percent ( $2.9=25.0/874$ ) or half the value for Catholics. For various historical reasons, this seems reasonable. Note however that the value of the parameter may vary substantially between denominations. For example, for the Seventh-day Adventist World Church, a fast growing denomination that is very active in development work, data are available to suggest an investment parameter of 8.8 percent, which is much higher. What might be the investment parameter for other Christian denominations? Apart from Ethiopia, most Orthodox Christians live in European countries that were under communist rule not conducive to faith-based schools and universities. Assume for simplicity that the investment parameter for Orthodox Christians is 0.50 percent. For other Christians, assume a parameter more in line with Protestants at 2.50 percent. This would result in a total of 95.4 million students in Christian schools and universities globally.

That estimates does not include students in non-formal education programs. That number should be at several million students globally. For example, on top of serving 0.8 million students in its primary and secondary schools, the Fe y Alegría network by itself already provides non-formal education and training to 0.5 million additional students. The Catholic Church also operates globally 9,295 orphanages, 10,747 nurseries, and 3,225 other education centers. Other Christian denominations also operate similar institutions. Overall then, including students in non-formal education programs, it seems legitimate to suggest that Christian institutions serve 100 million students globally, and possibly more.