

**A G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Brief**  
**Interfaith Approach to Advancing Inclusive Education**  
**November 5, 2020**

**Summary: Call to Action**

The 2020 G20 Presidency Agenda calls on G20 leaders to “empower people, pave the way for a better future for all.” The G20’s 2020 theme, *Realizing Opportunities of the 21st Century for All*, is supported by a global consensus that inclusive education should be a core policy priority. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed ever-widening gaps in most societies where disadvantaged populations find themselves further marginalised during the crisis. This situation reinforces an urgent call for G20 leaders to review their national educational policies so as to support the goal that everyone in the society can realise their potential and thrive, in particular the most vulnerable children and young people, through inclusive education.

Inclusive education is widely accepted as an ideal, central to proven social goals for educational systems. It offers paths to enhancing students’ motivation for participation and learning, raising self- and other-awareness, reducing bias and stereotypes, enriching friendships with peers and relationships with others, increasing capabilities in team work, collaboration and conflict transformation, enabling a greater sense of belonging and community, reducing bullying and violence, and most importantly, improving wellbeing and opportunities for all. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates, widening gaps separate ideals and practices pertaining to quality and equality in education. Without inclusive and caring approaches, vulnerable children and young people are not only discriminated against within the current systems, they are also excluded from broader opportunities for learning and wellbeing.

Globally, during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, faith-inspired initiatives have played distinctive roles in advancing a values-based discourse and promoting spiritually meaningful approaches to respecting all children’s dignity and meeting their diverse needs. Faith/interfaith communities’ involvement in supporting the most vulnerable invites governments and global partners to consider how to ensure all children and young people’s right to education, and actively create conditions and environments, both online and face-to-face, and reach out to those at the margin. Faith-inspired educational initiatives are working in many settings to empower local communities to close the gaps resulted from school closures, lack of public services, and isolation. They also provide practical support to address the acute social, emotional and spiritual needs of children during this time. By engaging with religious leaders and faith/interfaith actors, G20 leaders, national governments, and their international partners can strengthen the 2020 G20’s vision of “*global cooperation to forge mutually beneficial solutions, face challenges, and create opportunities for all*”.

This policy brief highlights an ongoing need exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and makes an urgent call for G20 governments and their development partners to forge cross-boundary collaboration to jointly advance an agenda of inclusive education.

It first outlines the specific challenges confronting the global community at this time. Then, by drawing on relevant literature, insights from a recent research that surveyed faith-inspired organisations’ conceptions and approaches to inclusive and caring education, and proposals from a wider interdisciplinary consultation, this brief provides specific and implementable policy recommendations for the G20 leaders to consider at the 2020 G20 Summit in Riyadh.

## CHALLENGES

2020 has been marked by a crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions, which is affecting almost everyone on the planet. It accentuates an ongoing global hunger for social justice, and highlights widening gaps between ideals and practices pertaining to the shared goals of quality and equality in education. These gaps are evident across the most and least wealthy of countries. In particular, the pandemic has unmasked different forms of discrimination and exclusion that marginalise children and young people who already face severe disadvantages.<sup>1</sup>

*High levels of ill-being in the most vulnerable children and young people:* The disadvantaged groups in society have been most adversely impacted by the COVID-19 emergencies, especially those children and young people who are already vulnerable. With little to no systematic educational intervention, they are at higher risk of starvation, homelessness, physical and psychological abuse, sexual exploitation, and overall physical and mental ill-being.<sup>2</sup> Girls are particularly marginalised, with increased risk of pregnancy, child marriage, and physical and sexual abuse.<sup>3</sup> There is also growing threat of violence amongst young people, including gang exploitation and cyber bullying, as fear of difference and isolation spark hatred and narratives of blame.<sup>4</sup>

*Inequality in access to quality education:* With schools closed across 192 countries (in March-September 2020), affecting 9 out of 10 learners worldwide, deep divides in access to education have been brought to the fore.<sup>5</sup> Gender inequalities in education are more exposed during the COVID-19 outbreak, when domestic and household chores can prevent girls from accessing sufficient learning time.<sup>6</sup> Children with disabilities can be neglected in the online learning strategies.<sup>7</sup> Lack of consistent educational infrastructure, and inherent inequality in access to technology-based and online learning platforms, facilities, and resources have resulted in “a generation losing out”, most of who are from already disadvantaged families in all societies.<sup>8</sup> For instance, in Los Angeles, United States, 13% of high school students had no contact with teachers three weeks into the lockdown.<sup>9</sup> The digital divide is further widened between economically wealthier and poorer nations.

*Teachers’ stress and struggle to meet new demands:* The COVID-19 pandemic also impacted teachers as they struggled to hold their personal and professional lives together whilst coping with a wide range of educational challenges, such as the need to develop capabilities for responding to the unexpected, and meeting the demands of teaching online; finding time and space to support students who suffer from loneliness, anxiety and mental illness; and also dealing with their own fear of uncertainty, health risk, financial implications, and other vulnerability.<sup>10</sup> Some teachers feel that they need to put their own life and family wellbeing on the line, in order to carry out their duties. Students’ diverse mental health and wellbeing needs can put great pressure on teachers’ own welfare, and many teachers will require psychological support in order to care for and support their students.<sup>11</sup> Above all, teachers are confronted with a different way of teaching and learning as we re-imagine education in a post-COVID world where both initial and in-service teacher education and teachers’ continuous professional development are in need of innovation.<sup>12</sup> Such reform can better enable teachers to focus on the agenda of wellbeing and equal opportunity for all, over and above the need for passing exams and achieving grades. Likewise, it will help support a new generation of societal pillars who can contribute to the global *Building Back Better* agenda.

## GLOBAL AND FAITH-INSPIRED RESPONSES

In the light of the current global educational challenges prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, impacting 1.6 billion children and young people,<sup>13</sup> inclusive and caring education is recognised as paramount as students from many countries are returning to school. There is a global consensus that inclusive education should be a core policy priority.<sup>14</sup> Inclusive education is a key to enhancing students' motivation for participation and learning, raising self- and other-awareness, reducing bias and stereotypes, enriching friendships with peers and relationships with others, increasing capabilities for team work, collaboration and conflict transformation, enhancing a sense of belonging and community, reducing bullying and violence, and more importantly, improving wellbeing and opportunities for all.<sup>15</sup> In addition, increased inclusion at school level offers benefits for wider communities, improving mutual understanding, trust, civic participation, thus contributing to more cohesive society.<sup>16</sup>

Internationally, governments are putting expertise and resources together to ensure the health and safety of all students, teachers, families and wider communities.<sup>17</sup> They are working with local and international organisations to reduce the impacts on school uptake and access of school closures and wider social challenges for vulnerable children and young people. Many governments are acknowledging the need for concerted support targeting staff and student mental health and wellbeing, and upskilling teachers in online learning practices.<sup>18</sup>

However, from the perspective of 2020 G20 Summit's agenda, for governments to unlock their potential to realise *21<sup>st</sup> century opportunities for all*, they need to go beyond unconnected actions, and unite them under a values-based vision of inclusive education that places the flourishing of *every child* at its centre. Inclusive and caring education also unifies and supports three of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals 3, 4 and 5, i.e. health and wellbeing, quality and equality through education. A recent research survey has identified ways in which faith-inspired initiatives have been a key part in shaping and sustaining these visions.<sup>19</sup>

Whilst acknowledging the controversial roles of religion in societies, this finding supports a recognition that religious institutions, faith communities and interfaith networks have been pivotal in reaching out to the excluded, caring for the vulnerable, and encouraging equality in education.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, a wide range of faith-inspired initiatives have played distinctive roles to enrich and support local and national government strategies in inclusive education and community engagement.<sup>21</sup> Illustrations of faith-inspired educational initiatives include the Learning to Live Together manual, an Intercultural and Interfaith Programme for Ethics Education,<sup>22</sup> developed by Arigatou International in close collaboration with Global Network of Religions for Children, and UNESCO and UNICEF,<sup>23</sup> and the faith-inspired values-based and spirituality-focused education programmes in worldwide schools promoted by the World Bank's Education for Global Development initiative.<sup>24</sup>

During the pandemic, faith-based institutions and communities have been particularly active in identifying and helping those most at risk, engaging multiple stakeholders, and collaboratively making the provision of quality education more accessible.<sup>25</sup> For instance, Religions for Peace, UNICEF, together with other partners, jointly launched a multi-religious Faith-in-Action COVID-19 Campaign to involve religious leaders in global responses to the crisis.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, through its Faith in Action for Children campaign,<sup>27</sup> Arigatou International offered a series of online courses for educators from formal and non-formal educational settings to provide tools to support children's social emotional needs.<sup>28</sup> Grounded in universal human values, such as dignity, mutual appreciation, love, empathy, and respect, these faith-

inspired initiatives have played a significant part in filling the gaps wrought by school closures and isolation.<sup>29</sup> They are consistent with visions of learning that are core to the world's religious and faith traditions and multiple ways in which contemporary communities support the priority and objectives of Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>30</sup>

In an often values-shy political and economic climate, faith communities have articulated, encouraged, and modelled lived values to underpin inclusive and caring education through, for instance, advancing interfaith learning and teachers and caregivers modelling respect, care, empathy, equality.<sup>31</sup> Valuable lessons can thus be learned from faith-inspired initiatives. These may serve as the basis for compelling and evidence-informed recommendations for the G20 leaders as they consider educational transformation.

In particular, the IF20 Education Task Force's 2020 survey covering over 50 faith-inspired initiatives, literature review, and case studies have highlighted the importance of reconceptualising inclusive education as follows:

- 1) recognising and respecting the intrinsic worth of all children
- 2) being available and accessible to learners of all backgrounds, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, caste, religion, ability, sexual orientation, economic status, language, or beliefs
- 3) focusing on the whole child, and nurturing their holistic wellbeing, including the physical, social-emotional, intellectual, moral, cultural, and spiritual development
- 4) honouring students' diversity, valuing their difference, and being responsive to their evolving needs in all aspects of learning, development and wellbeing
- 5) creating safe and caring learning spaces and promoting cohesive learning communities
- 6) cultivating students' agency, and attending and responding to students' voice respectfully, appreciating what everyone brings to the educational setting, and advocating solidarity
- 7) empowering all learners to participate transformative collective actions in the community and beyond
- 8) supporting all children to thrive in the face of increasing uncertainty

Such understandings provide the basis for innovative proposals towards inclusive education that can inform policy recommendations to meet the challenges for social cohesion and mutual flourishing during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

## **PRIORITY AREAS FOR POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS**

Drawing on the IF20 Education Task Force's research report,<sup>32</sup> and the analysis of faith-inspired initiatives, and supported by a rigorous consultation process, this brief identifies three priority areas to explore in a cross-sectional effort to promote inclusive and caring education:

- A. Advancing wellbeing of all as the aim of education**
- B. Ensuring participation of all learners within richly inclusive learning environments**
- C. Aligning teachers' professional development with the wellbeing and inclusion focus**

We unpack these briefly below, posing three recommendations within each broad area.

## **A. Advancing wellbeing as the central aim/purpose of education**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, widespread reflection on global social injustices has stressed the ongoing need for all aspects of schooling to focus on nurturing the wellbeing of the whole-child. A faith-inspired emphasis on wholeness is rooted in a recognition of the diversity amongst all students and within each child. This central aim suggests that approaches to curriculum and pedagogy should be wellbeing-sensitive. Some governments, such as Australian, Finnish, UK, Bolivian, and Scottish governments, have provided a national framework for wellbeing in schools. Other countries, such as Bolivia, Bhutan, Mauritius, Malawi, Zambia, and Kenya have incorporated spiritual components into their conception of wellbeing.

### *1. Promoting wellbeing of all students in the learning community*

COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable populations worldwide. It further unveils the persistent social deprivation of marginalised groups who are often subject to structural discrimination due to their identities. Systemic transformation is required to shift educational priority to the wellbeing of all students. This suggests that the overall aim of education and relevant strategies need to focus on all aspects of the child's development, including the physical, social emotional, intellectual, ethical and spiritual. This is a values-based ethos, incorporating interreligious and intercultural education, ethical education, social emotional learning (SEL), and spiritual development.<sup>33</sup> In India, in partnership with the Delhi Government, Dream-a-Dream has developed the Happiness Curriculum, intended to strengthen the foundations of wellbeing for all students, and aimed at enriching teacher-student relationship in schools.<sup>34</sup> One million children in Delhi have benefited from this programme, including better student-teacher relationships, increased students' participation in learning, and greater capacity to focus in class.<sup>35</sup> In China, the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with UNICEF, Beijing Normal University, and the provinces in western China have developed Child Friendly Schools programmes, integrating SEL practices in ensuring students' wellbeing.<sup>36</sup>

The path for governments to support such a shift in focus can build on a wellbeing framework that outlines the renewed aims of education and the principles that guide the education system. This can be practically advanced with deliberate efforts that, in a strategic planning process, draw on the common values that exist amongst communities of faiths, and of no faith, and through inclusive consultation. The expertise of faith- and values-inspired organisations may be invaluable in supporting these processes to enable a more inclusive conception of wellbeing, which would serve as the basis for equitable and caring practices and actions in schools and communities.

### *2. Introducing inclusive curricula*

Fear and isolation, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and other social uncertainties, have heightened narratives of hate and blame, magnifying tensions and conflicts between people of diverse faiths, race, cultures, and traditions. To bridge interreligious and intercultural divides, challenge and prevent xenophobia and discrimination, and promote the wellbeing of all, schools need to be mandated and equipped to provide an inclusive curriculum which can enrich students' appreciation of difference, enhance mutual understanding and respect, and deepen empathy and compassion. Engaging students in meaningful encounters and relations

with those of different faiths, cultures, and traditions can better immunise them against stereotypes and prejudices. Inclusive curricula tend to open up spaces for dialogue about social issues from different perspectives/worldviews, further enriching students' empathy, open-mindedness, critical thinking and motivation to bridge differences.<sup>37</sup> In the UK, Birmingham City Council collaborated with local Council of Faiths in developing an Agreed Syllabus on interreligious education.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, the UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) Fellowship Programme aims at fostering intercultural exchange and interfaith understanding by engaging with young civil society leaders and professionals from Europe, North America, and the Middle East and North-Africa (MENA).<sup>39</sup> The involvement of religious leaders, and faith/interfaith actors and communities is a key to inclusive curricula, enabling students of different religions, faith traditions, and beliefs to become more conversant with diverse religious and cultural narratives, positive values, and humanising practices.<sup>40</sup>

Governments need to do this by reviewing and further introducing interfaith and intercultural learning elements into inclusive school curricula across all ages. The collaboration of local faith/interfaith actors in the design and development of school interfaith and intercultural curricula is imperative. Such collaborative efforts not only introduce inclusive curricula to schools, but also consolidate social cohesiveness amongst different faith communities. Partnerships with faith/interfaith communities are key to rebuilding trust after interruptions.

### *3. Prioritising collaborative and co-creative learning*

The COVID-19 crisis further reveals that the most vulnerable students are also disadvantaged by an overemphasis on academic achievements, standardisation through testing, and competitive school practices.<sup>41</sup> To ensure the inclusion of all students in quality education, and to nurture their wellbeing, innovative approaches, such as interactive, empathy-focused pedagogies, arts-based learning, dialogic collaborative learning, and project-based learning, are most desirable in 21<sup>st</sup> century classrooms.<sup>42</sup> Such transformative approaches put the student at the centre of education, and focus on cultivating human qualities key to wellbeing, such as critical thinking, appreciation of diversity, and positive relations with others. Collaborative and co-creative practices respect all students equally and are responsive to their socio-economic, cultural, religious, and other differences, and diverse needs. In Finland, inclusive pedagogies tend to focus on cultivating mutual trust, and facilitating collaborative project-based learning as in part nurturing students' wellbeing. Globally, in partnership with KAICIID International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, the World Organisation of the Scout Movement is introducing Dialogue for Peace to Scouting programme worldwide,<sup>43</sup> contributing to children and young people's wellbeing, whilst strengthening social cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

Governments need to promote collaborative and co-creative approaches to teaching and learning in schools. This can involve collaboration with religious and faith actors to introduce initiatives and practices of intercultural and interfaith dialogue in schools, peer-to-peer collaborative learning in classrooms, and opportunities within and beyond the classroom for students to express themselves through creative media, arts, and community engagement.

## **B. Ensuring participation of all in inclusive learning environments**

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised significant issues concerning school uptake and attendance, in particular, in the most marginalised communities, and especially amongst

girls.<sup>44</sup> It also brings to the fore the divides between schools, parents, and communities, with parents and communities typically outsourcing education to schools with little day-to-day involvement in children's learning. The pandemic thus accentuates the vital importance of ensuring *Education for All*. To this end, education should be understood and supported as an eco-systemic endeavour that requires the engagement of all stakeholders – students, teachers, schools, parents and communities.<sup>45</sup> A shift towards an eco-system approach to partnership is feasible if it is grounded in mutually supportive interconnections between government, NGOs, faith communities and organisations, schools, families and children, as well as the media, businesses and enterprises, and academia, where everyone contributes towards the endeavour of inclusive education.

#### 4. *Engaging [all] young people and empowering student voice, agency and dialogue*

At this time of crisis, youth at the margins and students from vulnerable groups tend to feel unheard and unengaged, leading to cycles of disaffection, aggression, and crime.<sup>46</sup> Inclusive learning environments are essential to inspire youth engagement in education, increase relational resilience, reduce youth apathy, and strengthen students' voice, agency and social responsibility.<sup>47</sup> Youth engagement also helps connect young people to their communities and bring them closer to the diverse realities in their societies, with a view of transforming them.<sup>48</sup> An intentional investment in students' life skills, capacity for democratic participation, experience of lived citizenship, and social-emotional learning (SEL) will sever to empower all students.<sup>49</sup> An illustration is the UN Alliance of Civilizations' (UNAOC) Youth Solidarity Fund (YSF).<sup>50</sup> YSF provides seed funding to youth-led organisations that propose projects with innovative and effective approaches to intercultural and interfaith dialogue. Similarly, in Europe, the youth-led interfaith movement, *Coexister*, is active in contemporary pluralist societies in Germany, Switzerland, France, Belgium and the UK. The movement engages young people in inclusive, dialogue and collaborative practices that are non-confessional and non-partisan, aimed at exploring the good life in peace and harmony.<sup>51</sup> The key to youth engagement lies in regarding young people as active participants of learning and agents of social change, Engagement, above all, can contribute to the empowerment of girls, youths with special educational needs and disabilities, and other marginalised youths.

Governments can give priority to this objective by elaborating strategic plans that involve multi-agency partnerships (e.g. schools, families, social workers, counsellors, faith-actors, NGOs) to identify and target students at the margins, including vulnerable groups and girls. Student voice and social responsibility can be nurtured by setting educational policy consultation processes grounded in listening to the perspectives of students. Financial support to programmes aimed at engaging youth, nurturing student voice and confidence, and developing life skills and leadership qualities can speed the process of transformation. Likewise, more funds and time can be invested in creating spaces for SEL practices, and opportunities for collaborative projects that engage students' agency, and promote social coexistence.

#### 5. *Forming partnerships among schools, families and faith communities to support all children*

With schools closed during the Covid-19 pandemic or offering limited support, families, especially the most vulnerable, can face extreme strain in supporting of students' learning.<sup>52</sup> There is a clear need for building parents' capacities to support and ensure learning and wellbeing of their children. Faith communities have long been working to meet such needs by

mediating between schools, families, and children, and their part can be recognised formally in partnerships between families, schools, and local governments. A strong case is found in the Aga Khan Foundation's (AKF) approach to supporting inclusive learning.<sup>53</sup> During COVID-19 pandemic, AKF has partnered with families, schools, communities, and local government agencies, to reinforce the important roles played by all stakeholders, and provide advices and resources for families and educators to support inclusive education and learning. Equally illustrative is the work of the award-winning International Child Development Programme (ICDP) that focuses on formulating and nurturing constructive partnerships between families, and communities, including building parents' and caregivers' capacities to support children's wellbeing.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, in Philadelphia, United States, schools have been actively encouraged to create partnerships with faith-based organisations and faith communities since the late 1990s. These partnerships are guided by the needs of the schools and are sponsored by faith partners. Mentoring, sports, drama, games and homework assistance are the most common after-school activities supported by the faith-based partnerships. These cases highlight the potentials of collaborative partnerships in developing inclusive learning environments within which to nurture children's (and families') wellbeing.

Governments can advance their objectives by evaluating promising practices, and developing strategies and plans, including specific policy directives, that formalise community-driven partnerships that bring together schools, families, and faith-based organisations, and communities. This may involve the establishment of grant schemes to support promising collaborative partnerships.

#### *6. Strengthening links between schools, faith communities, and wider society*

Inclusive education depends on strong inter-school links and community partnerships, engaging in concerted efforts to support the most vulnerable.<sup>55</sup> These partnerships are regarded as part of the fabric of both the community and the school. When schools, relevant agencies, faith communities, local NGOs, businesses, and families work closely together, collaborative actions can enable young people to experience meaningful facets of their education, extending well beyond school exams. This can include youth employment, community service, active citizenship and broad efforts to identify and address the needs of society and vulnerable citizens. For example, the New Zealand government has integrated Maori religious values and spiritual practices in inclusive educational policies, not only uniting people of different faiths in inclusive learning communities, but also serve to meet the learning and wellbeing needs of all students.<sup>56</sup>

Governments should ensure such links and partnerships by reviewing current policies directed towards inclusion and community involvement, in an inclusive manner, with a view to elaborating focused strategies and appropriate policy instruments that promise to enhance both care economy and social protection infrastructure and that identify and assure funding for innovative collaborative community partnerships.

### **C. Aligning teachers' professional development with a wellbeing and inclusion focus**

Teachers and school leaders are core advocates for inclusive education. An inclusive vision of education locates the teacher as a mentor, facilitator, and guide, more than simply as an instructor.<sup>57</sup> Education can enable teachers to be more sensitive to students' diverse needs and create positive environments within classrooms and beyond to ensure inclusion and care



for all.<sup>58</sup> As the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore, these parts of the mentor, facilitator, and guide are also played by faith actors, community volunteers and caregivers within communities.<sup>59</sup> Post- COVID, teachers need dedicated support to develop the relevant capabilities to nurture children’s wellbeing and whole-person growth. Thus investment in the professional development of teachers and educators that focuses on helping them to reflect on their religious beliefs, values and world views, and to explore, uncover and discover their own inherent biases and judgements which they bring into a classroom as a role-model, and to interrogate their role as an educator in nurturing the whole child, are key to activating inclusive education.

### *7. Reviewing national capability frameworks for teachers’ professional development*

With mounting pressures on adequate funding, the most enduring investment in education is to support teachers’ professional learning.<sup>60</sup> To this end, a strong and contextualised Teacher Professional Development Scheme, which places holistic wellbeing at its core, is critical for teachers to advance their knowledge, attitudes, values, and qualities at a professional and personal level, reflect on teaching practices, and ensure their wellbeing. For instance, the OECD Teacher Well-being and Quality Teaching Project is a perfect elucidation of the imperative to connect teachers professional development with their wellbeing.<sup>61</sup> Likewise, the Irish government has developed Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018- 2023 that provides a definition of wellbeing, and an overarching structure encompassing the existing,

Governments should review their national capability framework for teachers’ professional development, in dialogue with religious institutions and faith-inspired organisations. Involving faith actors in dialogue can help evaluate the framework’s implications for pre-service and in-service teacher education, root the framework in the pluralist society, and develop shared vision and language in articulating what constitutes good teaching, the qualities, attitudes, and values desired, and competencies and capabilities required, to meet the aims of inclusive education. Such a review would also address how teachers and schools might further enter into dialogue with leaders of faith-inspired educational initiative to consider how to use the framework for educators’ self- and peer-evaluation, as well as whole-school evaluation.

### *8. Enhancing teachers’ awareness, sensitivity, and appreciation of diversity and inclusion*

As diversity increases across G20 countries and globally, education can help students connect with one another in deep, respectful, and compassionate ways, equip them with the arts of transforming conflicts non-violently, and enable them to contribute meaningfully to the thriving of their communities. This requires teachers to be more aware of their own values and attitudes, unseen biases and prejudices, and to appreciate rich diversity in their classrooms. For instance, the Kenya Ministry of Education and UNESCO National Commission are jointly developing professional learning opportunities to cultivate teachers’ awareness, sensitivity and capability in helping children learn to respect for diversity, and enabling young people to live peacefully in the diverse communities.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, UNAOC and UNESCO have co-created an interactive Media and Information Literacy (MIL) platform for teachers where resources can be shared, adapted, used and re-uploaded by users at will. They are organised around the model Media and Information Literacy Curriculum published by UNESCO, available in 9 languages. The aim is to facilitate intercultural/interreligious dialogue and mutual understanding through MIL. Such initiatives can truly support teachers to embody values of respect, pluralism, tolerance, and empathy, appreciate inclusiveness, and attune their

pedagogical approaches to inclusive and transformative practices.

Governments should include training modules on diversity and inclusion for all teachers' pre- and in-service professional development, with a focus on pedagogical tools to develop inclusive, appreciative and collaborative learning practices and environments. Regular in-service professional development opportunities that support teachers to explore unrecognised biases, prejudices, and judgments in classrooms are also desirable. This process should involve local faith/interfaith groups to target cultural, religious, and institutional obstacles to inclusion.

#### *9. Enabling teachers to facilitate transformative, collaborative and dialogic learning*

Achieving an inclusive vision requires that teachers engage in innovative practices, such as the facilitation of transformative, collaborative and dialogue-based learning, which foreground relationships and embody the values of inclusivity, respect and mutual appreciation. Inclusive pedagogy is often strengthened through a community of practice so that teachers can experience and internalise dialogic and collaborative learning in co-creative inclusive spaces, and through peer-to-peer mentoring, professional sharing, and connecting with multi-disciplinary expertise.<sup>63</sup> Given the sudden focus through the COVID pandemic on digital learning, and the widespread challenges this has posed to teachers,<sup>64</sup> this should include upskilling all teachers in the pedagogical use of digital technology that sustains sensitivity to and care for the child at its centre. At the same time, digital access can mean increased students' access/vulnerability to discriminative, divisive, and even extremist discourses. So teachers professional learning will include helping students build resilience to hate-based narratives online and offline. Aga Khan Foundation was amongst the first to respond to such needs, and has developed free online courses aimed at helping educators gain new ideas, skills, and strategies about how to lead inclusive learning environments using real-life illustrative practices from around the world.<sup>65</sup>

Governments need to take deliberate steps to provide time, space, and resources to ensure that all teachers are trained and continuously mentored in facilitating inclusive, collaborative and dialogue-based learning both in classrooms and online. This requires ringfenced funding for pre- and in-service training, developing tools and mechanisms to keep teachers connected, and spaces for sharing good practices and supporting each other, including collaboration with relevant faith/interfaith groups who have experience in providing inclusive learning spaces.

## **CONCLUSION**

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented and global crises in education. This comes on top of widely recognised challenges to the quality and inclusiveness of education systems in virtually all nations. The crisis disproportionately affects the most vulnerable, who are, in most societies, already severely marginalised. During the COVID-19 linked school closures, problems were starkly revealed but innovations also took place. Among others, religious institutions, faith-based organisations and communities, and interfaith networks in all corners of the globe stepped in to bridge gaps with bold efforts to reach out to the needy, especially those children and young people who are at risk of being excluded, abused, and exploited. Faith-inspired educational initiatives have played vital roles in some settings in coordinating with national and global efforts to ensure inclusive education.

This offers an invitation for the G20 governments to collaborate closely with local and global religious communities, faith-based organisations, and interfaith networks in reflecting

deeply on the opportunities presented by the COVID-19 crisis in terms of co-creating a culture of inclusion and caring in education. Faith-inspired initiatives not only offer values-based educational services to ensure the inclusion of the most vulnerable, and care for them; they also provide additional educational resources, deep understanding of the needs and lived realities of the local communities, and close connection with religious leaders, faith actors and influencers, and families. The G20 governments have clear responsibilities to proactively build bridges that link diverse faith-inspired educational initiatives across convictions and beliefs to draw on their rich experiences. Dialogue with religious leaders and faith actors and influencers about policies concerning inclusive and caring education is paramount to the G20's vision of realising opportunities for all.

In the light of their creative and pathfinding approaches and actions to support inclusive and caring education, and their potential to support educational transformation towards wellbeing, the G20 Summit should consider mechanisms to invest and support the essential research to better understand the impact of faith-inspired educational initiatives, with a view to collaborating with religious leaders and faith actors and influencers in policy dialogues and educational programme implementation.

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