

Beware: major risk of privatization of world education!

With the coronavirus crisis, many actors of civil society fear that the "merchants of education" will rush to take advantage of the opportunity offered by this crisis. This is a high-risk issue that could turn education into a simple market and once again penalize the poorest.

UNESCO is organizing a [Global Coalition for Education- COVID 19](#) response and is calling for massive use of distance education and digital means to ensure the educational transition.

“The Global Coalition for Education launched by UNESCO aims to foster inclusive learning opportunities for children and young people in this time of sudden and unprecedented disruption to education”. It brings together governments, multilateral agencies (the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Food Programme and Education Cannot Wait), as well as the private sector, including specialists in digital technology and data management. While it is undeniable that distance education is part of the responses to the crisis, the weakness of civil society, beyond the business sector, raises the question: how can we envisage a "global coalition for education" without the educational actors themselves, the community of learners and teachers?

A sudden interest in education from private actors

This is a godsend for private actors who are jumping into the breach. Among the companies at the forefront of this Global Coalition for Education are Microsoft, GSMA, Weidong, Google, Facebook, Zoom, KPMG and Coursera. Most of them have already been convicted of abuse of dominance, tax evasion, or selling related products. Multinationals' sudden interest in education is causing concern among members of civil society who fear that education, a Human right and a public common good, might become a market like any other.

The strong presence of the private sector raises questions for us. Of course, the private sector can support the efforts of States and share the technologies and digital innovations at its disposal. However, we must ensure that their contributions are regulated and that they meet the objective of ensuring free, quality education for all (objective of sustainable development 4). However, nothing is less certain at the moment.

What will the price for public education be?

Microsoft, GSMA, Weidong, Zoom Video Communication, KPMG, Coursera, Google and Facebook...It is difficult to see a mere philanthropic wish for education in their presence within the Global Coalition for Education. Their ambitions to position products, gain new beneficiaries and eventually new market shares are evident when we look at their pedigrees. Some of these private players are already present in the education sector and have already turned it into a lucrative market such as



Bridge International Academies, the low-cost education multinational chain. Indeed, long before the current situation, education merchants were ready to "sell" distance service, "standardized" educational content, subscription offers hidden behind falsely free ads or promises of special COVID mutual aid 19.

By joining forces in this global coalition, States, and Ministers of Education in particular, have a very strong responsibility to regulate these private actors and in particular for profit actors, so as not to undermine the public character of the right to education, so that it remains a common good and not a "product", or even worse, a commodity.

The presence of these companies raises ethical and democratic questions

Beyond this, ethical and even democratic questions are raised by the entry of certain groups into the field of education with regard to their virtual monopoly on the Web and the management of information flows and social media. According to the [Open Education Initiative](#) "free online courses, for example, cover up business models in which companies exploit their users' data to offer them products and services, a so-called "surveillance capitalism"". <https://aberta.org.br/>

For Solidarité Laïque and many of its partners, the discourse of the World Coalition is not equal to the real threat of the possible privatization of education.

"While UNESCO's intentions are clearly admirable and necessary, the Global Education Coalition has empowered commercial technology actors and the global education industry to become a global infrastructure for education during and after the coronavirus outbreak too. Whether their services are desirable or not in the current context or beyond, clearly this coalition is enabling private tech businesses to expand their reach and influence in public education" according to [Code Acts in Education. https://codeactsineducation.wordpress.com/2020/04/01/new-pandemic-edtech-power-networks/](https://codeactsineducation.wordpress.com/2020/04/01/new-pandemic-edtech-power-networks/)

Focus: which companies are involved in the Global Coalition for Education Covid-19? (PDF. In French) <https://www.solidarite-laique.org/app/uploads/2020/04/Les-entreprises-au-sein-de-la-Coalition-Mondiale-pour-lEducation-Covid19-2.pdf>

Written by Carole Coupez, Deputy General Delegate of Solidarité Laïque

Solidarité Laïque is involved in the Francophone network against the commodification of education and in the International Consortium on the Privatization and Commercialization of Education. The objectives of these networks are to promote reflection, debate and mobilization in the face of the worrying increase in private actors in education.

Private sector



GSMA



Microsoft



Weidong



Google



Facebook



KPMG



Coursera



Zoom



Moodle



Huawei



Vodafone



Bridge International
Academies