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Lifelong Learning

Snapshots of learning cities' responses to COVID-19





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This collection of case studies is based on information provided during a webinar series entitled 'UNESCO learning cities' responses to COVID-19' which took place from March to June 2020, hosted by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.



Foreword

David Atchoarena

While the world has dealt with health crises and other forms of disruption to daily life before, it can be argued that the novel coronavirus has upended normality in a way that most of us have never experienced. Almost every citizen, service, institution and way of life has been affected. Over the last year or so, since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the virus a pandemic on 11 March 2020, the unprecedented health emergency brought by COVID-19 has precipitated innovative plans of action, with new endeavours likely to continue to emerge in the months to come.

As collective efforts to learn more about COVID-19 continue and the world negotiates new ways to live with the virus, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), whose mandate includes the promotion of inclusive education and lifelong learning, sought to understand and highlight the pandemic's impact at the local level. To do this, between March and June 2020, UIL hosted a series of webinars to explore how learning cities gauged the effects of this unique global health event in individual contexts and how they responded to the sudden, emergent and urgent challenges it posed.

In this publication, we present 13 responses by learning cities to the COVID-19 pandemic across five themes: city planning; continuation of education; culture; equity and inclusion; and public health. These snapshots span the world regions of Africa (Cameroon), Asia and the Pacific (China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of Korea), Europe and North America (Finland, Italy, Poland, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) and Latin America and the Caribbean (Brazil, Chile, Mexico). In these reports, which were composed by representatives of learning cities, a number of innovative and comprehensive initiatives are described. Each 'snapshot' in this publication is a case study of a COVID-19 response, comprising a general overview, a look at the process, and a summary of the outcomes and challenges.

Snapshots of learning cities' responses to COVID-19 is an opportunity to showcase local responses to an unfolding global issue. By producing this publication, UIL hopes to give visibility to these cities' efforts and to underscore the importance of continuous learning in times of crises. Moreover, it furthers the Institute's commitment to facilitating internationally shared experiences of learning at any age and, by extension, fostering the collective appreciation that intersectional education is one avenue through which human civilization tends to find its way forward.

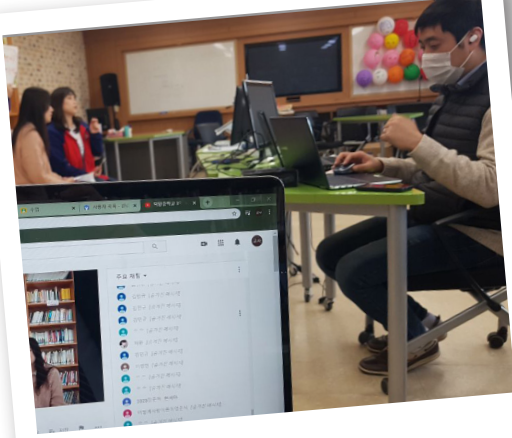
Thank you to all of the representatives who participated in these timely webinars, especially to those who provided the wide-ranging content to make this informative and reflective publication possible. UIL also congratulates each UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC) city for recognizing the centrality of education to its respective efforts. I hope this collection of different but connected stories will serve as inspiration for other societies that are taking steps to meet the challenges brought by COVID-19 or that are in the process of mitigating the effects the pandemic has had on governance, the economy, education and culture.

David Atchoarena

Director of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning

City planning





The COVID-19 recovery strategy of Goyang, Republic of Korea

Overview and objectives

The recovery strategy in Goyang, part of the Gyeonggi Province in the Republic of Korea, aims to transform the city into one that encourages 'distancing in daily life'. This concept emerged in the wake of the impact that the COVID-19 crisis had on the local community, small businesses, and the mental health and social lives of the city's inhabitants. With Goyang's educational and leisure facilities now open once again, the municipal government is looking at ways to adapt daily life that acknowledge people's experiences of coping with the pandemic. The recovery strategy was developed to carry out immediate actions aimed at supporting urgent needs, establish projects for the recovery of the city in the short to middle term, and detail long-term actions expected to bring benefits to the city beyond COVID-19.

Process

Step one of Goyang's strategy concerned the gradual reopening of schools, which called for additional staff and increased hygiene measures (i.e. enhanced cleaning, hand hygiene stations, etc.) to ensure the health and safety of students and teachers. In addition, over 140 thermal-imaging cameras to detect people's temperatures were installed in cooperation with the Goyang Office of Education, and almost 70,000 masks and thousands of antiseptic cleansers were provided. Moreover, all 1.07 million Goyang citizens received around USD 500 from the government, which also delegated an emergency fund to support vulnerable groups and provided tax support (e.g. tax reductions and deferrals) for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This was complemented by the 'Goyang Part-Time 6,000 with Hope' project, which aims to create over 6,000 jobs to not only respond to the current unemployment crisis, but also support the recovery strategy.

Challenges

Policies alone cannot respond to this crisis: solidarity, empathy, and cooperation across sectors (including the education and socio-economic sectors and civil society organizations) are essential and must be reinforced. One of the main challenges to the recovery of Goyang, however, is a disconnect between local stakeholders. Another challenge relates to finding ways to overcome the disruption to social life brought by the pandemic and the effect it has had on citizens' well-being. Lastly, there is a need to come up with public surveillance and control measures that respond to crises while safeguarding individual human rights. The Goyang government intends to secure funds to implement policies to address these challenges.



Ensuring easy access to basic services in Milan, Italy

Overview and objectives

As part of its Adaptation Strategy for 2020, Milan introduced the '15-minute' initiative, the aim of which is to ensure the proximity of public services to the city's inhabitants, minimize movement (and therefore the risk of spreading the coronavirus) and reduce inequalities between neighbourhoods. This strategy, government officials say, must be part of the 'new normal'; that is, life post-COVID-19 and beyond. The initiative targets all citizens, especially those living in outlying neighbourhoods and where local services are insufficient. Though developed in 2013, the initiative was implemented as part of the Milan City Masterplan in 2019. And while its saliency increased during the COVID-19 lockdown and recovery phase, the measure is expected to create a better and more inclusive city overall.

Process

In an effort to expand its public and private services during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond, the city has invested in digital technology; introduced summer schools offering educational and recreational activities for both children and adults; and partnered with other cities in the Lombardy region to deliver healthcare to high-density residential areas with large elderly populations (Lombardy, with a population of 10 million people, was, at time of writing, the region in Italy hardest hit by the pandemic). The city is also beginning to rethink, in a structural way, service provision across different sectors after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Milan 2020 Adaptation Strategy has been developed as a public participation process and, as such, is still under development. To date, local residents have submitted over 2,900 suggestions, which are now being read and integrated into the final plan.

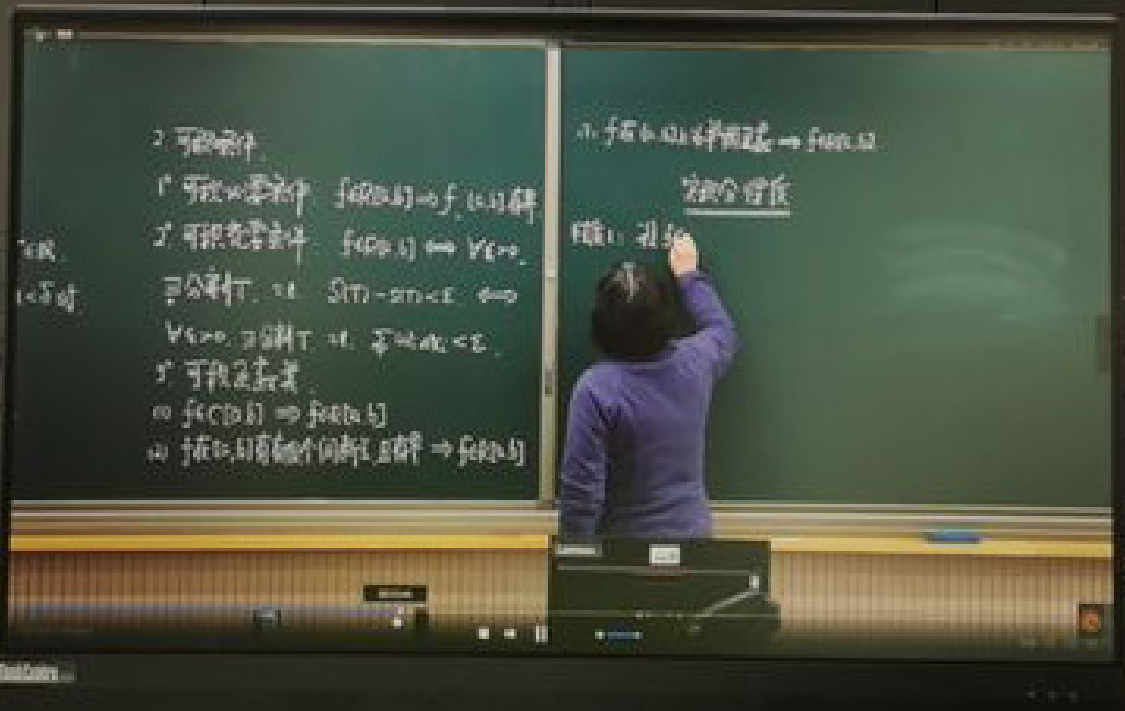
Challenges

Historically, the provision of services in Milan has been centralized and residents of the outlying areas had to commute to the city centre to access amenities. The Milanese are therefore used to gathering in central areas where services are available. It will take some time to change these habits.

In addition, social and urban degradation poses a challenge: Milan's outermost areas are often neglected. It is therefore of fundamental importance to increase the attractiveness of public spaces in these neighbourhoods if the strategy is to be a success. Doing so calls for increased spending and time; however, COVID-19-related economic instability has left the city with limited economic resources to finance interventions.



City planning





Reinforcing communication to promote homeschooling in Espoo, Finland

Overview and objectives

The Wilma app was designed in Espoo, Finland, to facilitate communication between families and schools. Easily customizable, some of its most popular features include information-sharing, course registration, monitoring pupils' attendance, and instant messaging. The app has been used by schools in Espoo for many years to share information about activities and allow parents and guardians to stay in touch with teachers.

During the COVID-19 crisis, use of Wilma increased significantly, as it served as the main channel of communication between families and schools. It soon became the main channel for sharing and accessing relevant school information and a key tool for supporting the use of online learning platforms, since most families in Espoo have access to information and communication technologies (ICTs). Teachers were instructed to use Wilma to contact students and families daily to inform them about procedures for remote learning. Moreover, the app was used to share joint guidelines for all schools to follow and to inform the community about food distribution systems.

Process

Schools took several steps to address the diverse needs of the community and ensure the inclusion of vulnerable groups. Technological devices and IT-skills training were provided to families in need, and social workers visited vulnerable youth to make sure they were not being left behind during the lockdown. Finally, for the most challenging cases, schools delegated an interdisciplinary team of professionals to support pupils at risk of dropping out.

Challenges

Establishing Wilma as the key communication channel between families and schools during lockdown meant including vulnerable families that lacked access to ICTs and the skills to use them. Children in those families were especially at risk of exclusion from the education system, which made cross-collaboration between families, teachers and social services crucial. In addition, it was important to strike a balance in the use of Wilma (content, frequency of messages, etc.), which was viewed previously as a means of communication rather than as an online learning platform. It was, therefore, important to ensure parents and guardians understood how to use the app efficiently.

Understanding how to foster a sense of community in the face of school shutdowns posed another challenge. Espoo is therefore working on an educational strategy to address crises such as COVID-19 in the future.



Lifelong learning continues in Wuhan, China

Overview and objectives

The focus of Wuhan's pandemic strategy is to support the community's return to work and education following COVID-19, inform citizens about pandemic prevention measures being taken, and promote mental well-being and offer counselling to those who need it.

The initiative targets all citizens of Wuhan and promotes lifelong learning for all. Promoting personal hygiene and a scientific approach to navigating COVID-19 is also a main goal of the initiative. Longer term, Wuhan hopes to foster good mental and emotional health and help citizens cope with the changes they experience in all areas of life because of the pandemic.

Process

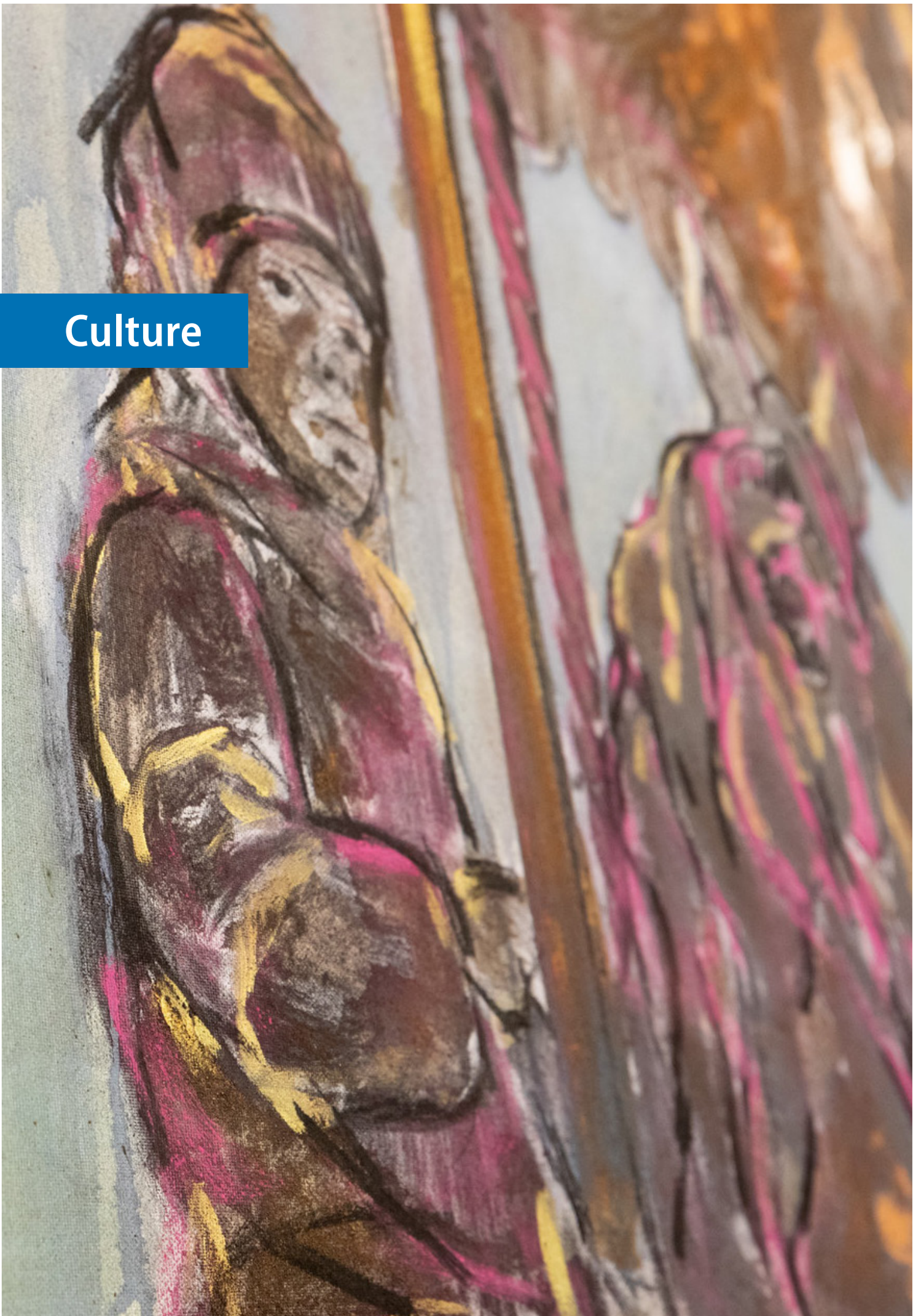
Various stakeholders were involved in advancing the strategy. The Wuhan Education Bureau, for example, issued several sets of guidelines to support schools, teachers and students in learning about preventive measures and looking after their mental health. Moreover, the bureau, together with the Wuhan Academy of Educational Science, organized a series of courses on health and hygiene targeted at children of frontline workers, students from families with financial difficulties, children in rural areas, and youth groups with sick or isolated relatives.

In addition, the Wuhan Community Education College set up an open course on pandemic prevention and control to inform citizens and, through an exhibition entitled 'Design during epidemic by the Wuhan Urban and Rural Construction Bureau', showed residents how the city was dealing with the pandemic. In addition, the city libraries offered free art courses and community educators worked with key community actors to undertake localized recovery activities.

Challenges

The number of citizens requesting online psychological counselling was significant but understandable considering the city-wide lockdown that lasted for months. However, support networks were unstable, and not all vulnerable groups could access online mental-health counselling because of poor or no access to technology. Accessing education on mental health was also particularly challenging, as the availability of specific learning materials was limited.

Culture





The Familial Gdynia project of Gdynia, Poland

Overview and objectives

The Familial Gdynia project aims to help young children, teenagers and parents during the COVID-19 crisis. Each month since the onset of the pandemic, an estimated 1,000 participants have engaged in meetings, events and workshops. Following lockdown, many of these activities were moved online. The initiative offers diverse online activities, such as concerts, theatre, exhibitions and do-it-yourself projects. In addition, mental and other health advice (e.g. prenatal care and nutrition) can be accessed, along with stories for children and local news.

These activities are intended to encourage people to not only stay home and embrace the temporary shift in their lifestyle, but also to ensure they continue to have opportunities for personal and familial development.

Process

Once activities moved online, hashtags were used as 'calls to action': #importantconversation, for example, drew attention to the regular online sessions taking place with mental health experts and discussions about emotions, anxiety, death and loneliness; #otobajkafairytales connected to daily storytime sessions led by local actors; #childrenathome was a series of videos featuring ideas for games to play at home; #animacjeoli featured ideas for art projects; #comeonchildren linked to 30-minute animations for younger children; and #travellers shared ideas for outside activities. All videos were interspersed with important information on the pandemic and related restrictions.

Challenges

Challenges to carrying out the Familial Gdynia project included funding, communication issues as a result of implementors working from home, lack of equipment for conducting online meetings, and insufficient high-quality internet connectivity.



Online art courses in Glasgow, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Overview and objectives

In response to government shutdowns of education and arts institutions, the City of Glasgow in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in collaboration with the University of Glasgow, launched free short art courses. The initiative is not only aimed at students, but is intended also to enhance the well-being of society in general.

The online programme, 'Art is made in times of crisis or isolation', includes a series of 20-minute presentations, which examine works from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including Francisco Goya's *The Dog* from the artist's 'black paintings', Jacob Epstein's *Rock Drill*, and Duncan Shanks's sketchbooks. Also available are talks on ancient history and archaeology, such as *The Antonine Wall: Rome's Final Frontier*, in addition to a series of civic engagement lectures focusing on race and poverty.

Process

Course tutors and administrative staff involved in the short-course offerings at the University of Glasgow communicated with each other using Microsoft Teams, Zoom and email, and the marketing team at the university provided advice and support. 'Art is made in times of crisis or isolation' gave participants a common point of departure to internalize what is possible during periods of difficulty and indirectly encouraged them to find some semblance of opportunity for positive outcomes. The short course further initiated a connection to the present via stories from the past.

Generally, course tutors prepared the presentations and uploaded them to Microsoft Teams. Staff working within the Short Courses department at the university uploaded related talks and presentations to Vimeo and embedded each into a dedicated page within the Short Courses website.

Challenges

The need for collaborative action at a time when staff were working from home presented a major challenge and, working remotely, it was difficult for those involved in the initiative to prepare and develop high-quality online lectures. However, with the selection of effective platforms and support from the University of Glasgow's marketing team, the initiative proved successful.

Note: The above work, produced by artist Blair Cunningham as part of the City of Glasgow's collaboration with the University of Glasgow, is part of an ongoing series of imaginary islands that explore map-making as a process of creating imaginary spaces as much as detailing real places.



Creative initiatives against COVID-19 in Puebla, Mexico

Overview and objectives

When the pandemic reached Puebla, in Mexico, the municipality approached local designers, creative firms and representatives of the creative community to develop innovative projects to help the city cope with the effects of COVID-19. In response, more than 150 creatives from across the country – including those from educational institutions and entrepreneurs – participated in the initiative.

‘Creative initiatives against COVID-19’ is designed to generate responses to the emergency, foster individual expression and learning, and help the community reflect on the causes and effects of COVID-19. Moreover, the programme aims to provide further learning opportunities to university students and entrepreneurs and develop individual capacities to start ventures that will have a positive social impact in Puebla.

Process

The programme began in the second week of April 2020 at the initiative of representatives of local universities and Puebla’s Commission for Innovation and Design. The call was devised and launched at the international level with the help of representatives of the UNESCO Cities of Design Network. Moreover, a webpage was designed to disseminate creative projects aimed at addressing the effects of COVID-19.

Additionally, a fund of more than EUR 40,000 (about USD 48,000) was established in conjunction with the City of Puebla for a select set of projects. Directors of creative companies and teachers from the university consortium formed an evaluation committee that assessed 50 projects and identified three to be financed.

Challenges

During the development of the programme, it was difficult to secure financial resources: the annual budget assigned to the city and the commission was cut by 70 per cent and reallocated to purchasing medical supplies and supporting social assistance. This cut forced organizers to rethink the scope of the programme. In addition, organizers had to contend with very strict health regulations, which rendered several innovative projects ineligible for authorization from the health authorities.

Additionally, for those projects that were feasible, the participation of local companies and students was limited due to the closure of universities and companies, and communication between parties stagnated in the face of uncertainty caused by the pandemic. Moreover, it was necessary to adapt the website to public demand for specific and clear information.

Equity and inclusion





New partnerships to protect vulnerable areas in Santiago, Chile

Overview and objectives

Through Project Hope COVID-19, a five-month pandemic response initiative, UNESCO GNLC member Santiago provided financial and technical resources to support primary healthcare services in the community. The strategy was designed in such a way as to serve as a model for other municipalities throughout Chile.

Project Hope is an alliance between a university, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (UC); a mining company, BHP; the public sector (Chilean Government); and local primary health care services. Its aim is to improve COVID-19 responses in vulnerable areas across four municipalities: Puente Alto and La Pintana (both low-income municipalities in Santiago), and Antofagasta and Pozo Almonte in northern Chile.

More specifically, the objectives are to (1) increase access to healthcare for people with COVID-19 symptoms, (2) increase polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing for COVID-19 to 2,000 tests per day, and (3) improve follow-up of positive patients and their contacts.

Process

The project was planned and implemented in approximately two months; this comprised project design and organization, including identifying resources for proposed strategies and defining project work areas using a matrix organizational structure. This structure established the three areas of work (based on three defined objectives and the territories where the strategies would be carried out) and project teams, which were grouped according to project areas, team members' (i.e. the faculty, undergraduates and graduate students of UC) academic experience, and stakeholders with experience in project management and other areas.

Challenges

The project developers noted challenges in planning a strategy that addressed different moments of the pandemic. This called for the capacity to review and amend the initial plan depending on contextual changes. Generating alliances and building trust with local health services so that they accepted proposals and incorporated them into localized pandemic plans was also a challenge, as was adapting the project strategies to serve local realities in four partner municipalities, which required great effort from participating teams. Additionally, global shortages of PCR testing supplies posed a major problem and affected some local teams' trust. The need for urgent pandemic-specific responses and having to work almost 100 per cent remotely (hundreds of hours of teleconferencing) were also reported as major challenges.



The school meals programme in São Paulo, Brazil

Overview and objectives

The school meals programme, Coordenadoria de Alimentação Escolar (School Food Coordination, CODAE), is an emergency response organized by the Municipal Secretary of Education of São Paulo in Brazil to ensure families do not go hungry during the COVID-19 pandemic. The initiative includes three main actions. The first is the distribution of a pre-paid card that enables students enrolled in Bolsa Família, a social welfare programme of the Government of Brazil, and CadÚnico, a registry of low-income Brazilian families, to purchase groceries. The second action involves redirecting food items that are close to the expiration date to food banks for the Municipal Secretary for Social Assistance and Development (SMADS). Thirdly, parcels with pantry basics and hygiene kits are distributed by the Government of São Paulo to families in extreme poverty that are registered with SMADS. CODAE will be carried out for as long as the pandemic lasts.

The overall objective is to ensure all families have access to food items and hygiene supplies. This initiative targets in particular those families that have school-aged children, people with special needs, and those living below the poverty line or who are in extreme poverty.

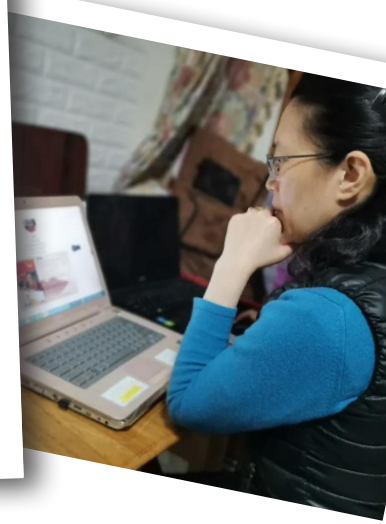
Process

On 23 March 2020, the redirection of food items began. In April, food cards became available and, by May/ June, the complementary parcels were distributed. These deliveries were strategically carried out to ensure that those who were most in need of such assistance were not overlooked and left to deal with difficulties exacerbated by the pandemic.

A total of 476,566 cards were delivered between April and July to serve some 619,832 students. Of these, 325,896 are enrolled in Bolsa Família; 138,343 are from low-income families; 30,287 live in poverty, and 53,866 in extreme poverty.

Challenges

The main challenge faced during the school meals programme thus far has had to do with figuring out how to strategize the provision of immediate, real-time assistance to the most vulnerable students and families.



Supporting education for older people in Shanghai, China

Overview and objectives

Older people are among the most vulnerable to COVID-19. In light of this, Shanghai launched large-scale distance learning programmes for this group through a project called the Lifelong Learning Cloud. The programmes cover various topics, such as health and safety, cooking, entertainment, information technology, counselling, art, local history, and current affairs. Additionally, the programmes are intended to encourage participants to respond to the situation brought by the pandemic with a positive attitude of lifelong learning.

Specifically, two programmes were developed for the Lifelong Learning Cloud. The first was on emergency response measures: a series of courses on health protection and pandemic prevention. These courses were streamed through the Cloud Classroom alongside quiz-based contests on combating the pandemic by the Shanghai Science Education Promotion Centre working with universities for the elderly. The other programme featured diverse resources for individual districts of the city.

Process

The Lifelong Learning Cloud project was developed in three stages. The first stage, from January to February 2020, was launched as an immediate response to the public health emergency. Businesses and schools had to close their doors and, to meet the learning demands of the elderly, Shanghai integrated various top-quality learning resources in building the Cloud Classroom.

From March to May, the Shanghai Learning Network, the portal website of the city's lifelong learning initiative, carried out an in-depth analysis of learning demands in order to meet citizens' needs more precisely. Based on the platform's data and users' feedback, a second batch of learning resources were developed and introduced to the platform.

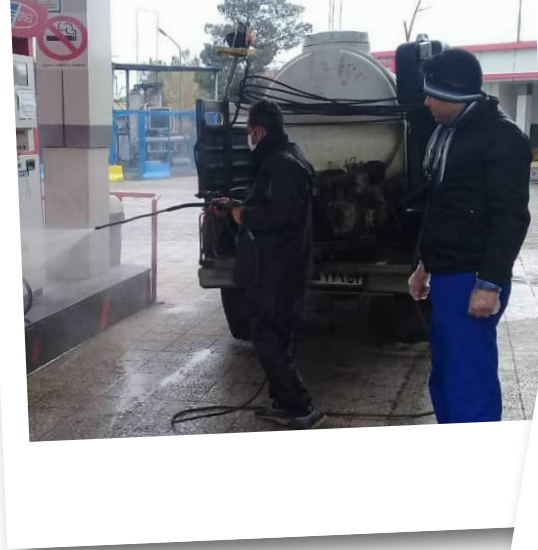
Finally, in the third stage beginning June 2020, the Shanghai Learning Network launched 'Live Online Classroom for Elderly Education in Shanghai'. The platform has enabled teachers from different districts to provide live online teaching and respond to participants in real time.

Challenges

Some older people were not familiar with using mobile phones and computers; providing guidance and assistance to improve IT literacy and ensure learners had access to and could use modern technologies was therefore necessary. In addition, the lack of teacher-student interaction in the pre-recorded online courses was problematic; this was eventually solved via the introduction of live online courses. Another challenge was figuring out how to continue distance education after the reopening of universities for older people. There is ongoing research and exploration on how to further respond to this challenge.

A group of five people wearing white protective suits, hoods, and masks are seated at a long wooden table. They are focused on their work, with some handling items in white plastic baskets. The setting appears to be a laboratory or a testing facility. The background shows a wooden wall and a perforated metal panel.

Public health



Public information campaign in Kashan, Islamic Republic of Iran

Overview and objectives

The TV programme *Every Home, A Health Base* is an initiative comprising various health-related educational content, as well as programmes designed to promote a sense of community among the people of Kashan. With the advent of COVID-19, *Every Home, A Health Base* was broadcast daily and played a significant role in raising public awareness and fostering higher standards of hygiene. It was a positive collaborative venture between the local education and health departments, which aimed to increase citizens' knowledge about COVID-19, including how to help sick relatives.

Process

Institutions, including the Kashan University of Medical Sciences, communication and public-relations specialists, the media, social activists, and religious and cultural experts, worked together to bring the project to fruition. Their efforts were promoted through other media, including advertisements, posters and social media. In their efforts to tackle the pandemic, local authorities looked to the programme as a platform for promoting measures to break the chain of illness, raise awareness and improve life expectancy. Importantly, citizens also contributed to the programme by sending in suggestions, ideas, video clips and educational content.

Challenges

There were some difficulties due to limitations related to the production and broadcast of the programme from provincial channels. These issues were compounded by the very demanding nightly schedule that was in place, in addition to the general context of operating during what was essentially a peak moment in the fight against COVID-19. Further, there were challenges with broadcasting the programme live from an open location due to seasonal inclement weather.



Raising awareness of COVID-19 in Mayo-Baléo, Cameroon

Overview and objectives

In Mayo-Baléo, a commune in the Adamawa Region of Cameroon, local residents do not have access to information and communication technology (ICT), telephone networks or radio. The local government therefore teamed up with Equipes Mobiles d'Animation Populaire Urbaine et Rurale (Mobile Urban and Rural Popular Animation Team, EMAPUR), a local support network that promotes socio-economic integration and community education, to disseminate information about COVID-19. The aim of the initiative was to raise awareness about the dangers of the virus, with a focus on preventative measures, spotting symptoms of the illness, and knowing what to do if you suspect you might be infected.

Process

The initiative was planned in partnership with various stakeholders: regional teams coordinated by the local sub-prefect and mayor were sent out into the community to disseminate information. An estimated 300 residents per km² were given advice on the virus, including possible impacts on health and livelihoods. Though not formally indicated, this strategy is in line with Mayo-Baléo's ongoing efforts to foster an environment that allows for both individual and community-level participation in the general development of the commune.

The availability of adequate health and sanitation services and facilities was a prominent feature of this overarching government-driven process. Hygiene products, such as soap, hand sanitizer and protective masks were distributed to all schools, marketplaces, health centres and to vulnerable communities (e.g. older people and those with disabilities) as part of the initiative.

Challenges

Within this localized initiative, the main challenge was reaching out to every person in the commune. Forty villages comprise the Mayo-Baléo territory, some of which are difficult to access because of their remoteness, poor road conditions or the dangers of flooding. Additionally, there were the constraints imposed by COVID-19: since large gatherings can worsen the situation, teams had to be kept small to avoid the possibility of spreading the virus. This, in turn, meant there were fewer people working within the communities. Time was a third, interconnected, challenge. Taking into account social-distancing regulations, door-to-door visits – though time-consuming – were favoured. Nevertheless, the awareness campaign managed to educate the population of Mayo-Baléo about the virus, despite poor local communication networks.



Production of personal protective equipment in Osan, Republic of Korea

Overview and objectives

Osan City, Republic of Korea, launched the TTASUM Mask-Sharing Project in March 2020. The project aims to create a culture of companionship by raising and sharing citizens' consciousness of collective endeavour. Despite quarantine and social-distancing measures being implemented in response to the pandemic, concerns of a mask shortage were growing in the community. This project, wherein local citizens are provided with filter-replaceable cotton masks, was the municipal government's response.

Process

The city's disaster relief funds and lifelong education programme budget served as financial resources for personal protective equipment (PPE) production. The project was promoted within two separate groups: students only (to minimize the spread of the virus in schools so that they could remain open) and the general public.

Almost 100,000 filter-replaceable cotton masks were produced and distributed to 46,000 students from primary to high-school level. In addition, some 25,000 mask production kits, comprising mask-making and reference materials, were distributed to the general public to encourage independent mask-making and counteract the shortage of masks.

The Osan City Government uploaded video guidelines on its education portal website so that citizens could participate in the project while practising social distancing. Civic activists also offered lectures targeting those who had difficulties producing their own masks. By the end of the project, around 12,000 finished cotton masks were also donated to vulnerable groups.

Challenges

The primary challenge to the TTASUM Mask-Sharing Project was securing a budget, since the project and wider situation were unanticipated. However, the relevant departments in the city hall cooperated and helped to carry out the project within a short period. The voluntary participation of the local community proved to be the project's biggest success story. The Mayor of Osan also facilitated the project's success by promoting it heavily. The project coordinators advise any city intending to promote a similar initiative in future to consider the purpose and target of their initiative before taking administrative action and to establish a detailed, user-centred plan. The city must also provide the community with opportunities to engage in the project.

Conclusion

In this publication, we have presented reports from 13 learning cities across world regions. Through this compilation of responses to COVID-19, representatives who participated in the UIL webinar series between March and June 2020 – the months of the first lockdowns – demonstrate a range of approaches and resources that a well-thought-out COVID-19 response requires. Their different processes for mitigating the many challenges of this global pandemic cover health, governance, economy, education and culture.

Generally, all learning cities recognize the far-reaching and multi-dimensional disruption caused by COVID-19, which is yet to be fully understood. Core to their responses are the prioritization of awareness-raising among the populace, bridging the digital and technological divide in terms of infrastructure and skills, and the inclusion of vulnerable populations through new initiatives. This effort is aimed especially at developing each citizen's understanding of the pandemic's implications, informing and supporting them on current protocols, attitudes and behaviours that are effective at curbing its impact, and highlighting the importance of cooperation to regain some semblance of normality.

Following the initial outbreak of COVID-19, learning cities' responses have sought to adapt community life in a way that does not further compromise shared culture and, at the same time, does not jeopardize the progress made in controlling the spread of the virus. For this to work, balanced stakeholder relationships were established among governmental, non-governmental, academic, civic and other groups. Allowing for the participation and contribution of the general public was also key to the efficacy of solutions for insulating society while it undergoes rapid change.

Cities, therefore, evaluated and anticipated the needs of the general public, but were especially attentive to those who experienced vulnerabilities that typically existed before the onset of COVID-19. From school-aged children to the elderly, including those living below the poverty line or with disabilities, initiatives were largely built around the social issues vulnerable people face. While everyone has been affected in some way or other by the pandemic, not everyone has been affected to the same extent. As such, services had to be sensitive to needs, whether they pertain to access to technology, personal protective equipment (PPE), social welfare and services, distanced socialization, professional counselling or support for recovery planning.

Furthermore the majority of the cases show how the pandemic highlighted issues that existed before COVID-19 – bureaucratic, geographic and economic concerns, for example, played a significant role in pre-COVID-19 activities and have continued to do so during the pandemic. In fact, these represent major themes for challenges faced during the planning and implementation of cities' initiatives. COVID-19 has acted as both inhibitor and accelerator, wherein new initiatives have in some cases struggled to achieve desired effectiveness and reach and, in other cases, have rapidly precipitated compromises and even unlikely collaborations. Nonetheless, all initiatives featured in this publication have been enacted and have benefited target groups. The sum of these collective efforts is commendable.

The local experiences reported in this publication highlight the benefits not only of finding ways to live with a pandemic, but of appreciating the nuance of change while remaining optimistic about the future. Moreover, this pandemic, like other challenges before it, is but another opportunity – an invaluable learning experience that will leave an indelible mark on people's lives.

Based on these snapshots of learning cities' responses, a number of emergent lessons may be taken into consideration when planning, designing and implementing initiatives in response to COVID-19.

- **Cross-sectoral collaboration is key:** Partnership has been necessary to navigate the pandemic and conceptualize responsive solutions. This means a range of stakeholders should be involved, including key decision-makers, creatives, a range of professionals (from health, communications, finance and academia) and groups targeted by new initiatives, especially the most vulnerable.
- **The pandemic is new but the underlying issues are not:** The major issues that have come to the fore in cities in the past year have been shaped by the threat of COVID-19, but in most cases they existed before the onset of the pandemic. Issues such as inequality, access to local services, availability of job opportunities and health risks have been prominent in cities for many years. While taking into account the immediate and unique dangers of the COVID-19 virus, learning cities' responses should start with an assessment of these underlying issues, which have become more visible and burdensome as a result of the pandemic.
- **Inequalities fuelled by COVID-19 are intersectional:** The multi-dimensional effects of COVID-19 are not experienced equally by all local people, even those within the same community. Factors such as gender, sexual identity, ability, age, income level, and access to infrastructure and services should be accounted for in any outreach programme that is created. The people who fall within various subgroups based on these factors are already disproportionately affected by issues external to COVID-19, and so the inequalities fuelled by COVID-19 will have a disproportionately negative impact on people who are affected by intersectional factors.
- **Mental health is a major concern:** Social isolation, social distancing and quarantining are new behaviours to which many are still adjusting. While limiting transmission is crucial to beating this virus, the conditions to achieving this take a toll. Whether anxiety, depression, loneliness or clinical illness, it is beneficial to – as far as possible – integrate specialized counselling services in programmes implemented by learning cities.
- **Improve the resilience of learning systems by strengthening distance learning:** In the face of this sudden and unexpected crisis, cities have had little choice but to move the vast majority of learning online. This has had an impact on learning across all modalities (formal, non-formal and informal) and all age groups. Where online learning has proven problematic – i.e. where poverty, low levels of digital skills and/or a lack of digital infrastructure have impeded access to technological devices – other forms of distance learning have been utilized, such as the delivery and collection of physical learning resources to and from homes. Whether health-related or otherwise, cities are likely to face more crises in the years ahead, and any efforts to strengthen distance learning now will make local learning systems more resilient in the face of future crises.
- **Start at the level of the local community:** In every learning city, local people require initiatives to raise awareness, build morale, preserve community spirit and promote general health. While the COVID-19 pandemic has demanded swift action from national and local governments, it may be more sustainable in the long term to approach implementation in increments. This means starting at the grassroots level – in local communities across the city – and building from there. Such community-led solutions involve local people and are, as a result, more sustainable and therefore less susceptible to possible shortfalls in budgets and financial capacities. With the likelihood of limited resources as learning cities emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, local communities will be key to recovery.



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Snapshots of learning cities' responses to COVID-19 provides insight into how learning cities have coped with the COVID-19 pandemic. During this global crisis, actions to contain the spread of the virus and mitigate its worst effects have spanned all sectors of public life. When it comes to education and learning, fundamental changes have been made at short notice, including a sudden shift to distance (including online) learning. Cities around the world have developed their own initiatives for the continuation and extension of education – both formal and non-

formal – as well as promoting public health, redesigning public spaces, preserving culture and providing targeted support to vulnerable populations. In many cases, cities have been able to identify and react to local needs with speed and flexibility. In this short publication, which builds on a series of webinars hosted by UIL in 2020, 13 case studies of learning cities' responses to the pandemic are presented. In each case, an overview of the initiative is followed by a quick account of its process and challenges, in order to reveal what has worked well, why and how.

