On March 30, the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) held an international webinar on “the Epidemiology and Economics of Coronavirus”. This event sought to examine the implications of COVID-19 for public health and the SDGs, and make recommendations on policy responses. TUSDG experts, Jeffrey Sachs, Chair of TUSDG International Academic Committee, Professor of Economics at Columbia University, Gao Yuning, Associate Professor of the School of Public Policy and Management of Tsinghua University, and TUSDG researcher were invited to the webinar and shared their perspectives on economic impacts and management under the Covid-19.

Prof. Jeffrey Sachs making presentation

Prof. Jeffrey Sachs pointed out fiscal supports need to be given to front-line medical services, urgent social support during the lockdown, as well as financing for national budgets, states, cities and companies. The top priority at the moment is to cut the transmission of the virus, while developing effective therapeutics and vaccines, to control the virus eventually. He stressed that the shutdown stage brings enormous economic losses to countries, therefore it should last no more than 90 days ideally, and even less if possible. According to his rough guesstimates, output losses at this stage might be in 20-40 percent, and tax revenue losses might be 50 percent or higher; Annual output losses might be 10-15 percent, and tax revenue losses more than 20 percent. Budget deficits will therefore increase by much more than 10 percent of GDP. In face of the complicated economic challenges, the suggested financing instruments include but are not limited to large-scale sovereign borrowing, IMF financial instruments, urgent MDB concessional COVID-19 financing, debt standstill on developing countries’ sovereign debts. Finally, he warned that we must avoid a self-fulfilling run on government and corporate debt that occurs through downgrades by rating agencies and by financial market panic.
Assoc. Prof. Gao Yuning demonstrated that multiple economic activity indexes were in sharp decline under the impact of COVID-19, especially amid the lockdown. Small and micro-enterprises have been highly injured, facing challenges of plummeting annual revenue, cash flow breakdown, and layoffs. Thus, the core goal of this year’s macroeconomic policies should be to stabilize the employment. As for sector scenarios, two of the industries that suffer the most are amusement and recreation activities, and food and beverage services. Thus, the central government has implemented a package of monetary, fiscal, and land policies to mitigate the losses: the central bank has increased the quota of refinancing and rediscount by 500 billion Yuan to support the small and micro-enterprises; the State Council has speeded up in issuing local government bonds and special treasury bonds to support the work resumption; the authority of turning permanent basic farmland into construction land has been issued by the State Council to 8 pilot provinces (4 municipalities included) for 1 year. In addition, China is investing in the development of “new infrastructure projects” (such as 5G, big data centers, Artificial Intelligence, Industrial Internet, ultra-high voltage grid, etc.) in order to boost the recovery and growth of economy.

Over the webinar, experts and scholars from China, US, Brazil, Spain, Italy, Korea and other countries briefed on the status of the epidemic in their countries and on the government responses. Just as Prof. Jeffrey Sachs said in his ending remarks: “We absolutely need the global connectivity, compassion and cooperation to bring this horrible episode to a fast and successful resolution, success relative to the disasters and stresses and tragedies that are unfolding.”

Welcome to watch this webinar online via the link below:
https://sdgacademylibrary.mediaspace.kaltura.com/media/1_7rk3t6l7
On May 2, TUSDG co-organized “the International Webinar 4: Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 and Universities around the Globe”, which focused on the global practice of multi-stakeholder collaboration during COVID-19 and the accelerating international cooperation in higher education for the next decade. Meanwhile, this event is the 4th webinar of the “Online Education in the COVID-19 Response and beyond & Global University Online Teaching and Learning Webinar Series” for the 109th Anniversary Celebration of Tsinghua University, which covers four major themes on online course design, the quality of online education, the benefits of information and communication technology in education, SDG 4 and global universities. More than 6,000 global experts and scholars as well as teachers and students from home and abroad joined the webinar online.

The following is a summary of the insightful perspectives from all experts in this webinar.
Higher education plays a critical and unique role in addressing SDG4 and, even beyond, tackling global challenges.”

—— Yang Bin, Vice-President and Provost of Tsinghua University, Director of Board of Directors, TUSDG

The impact of this global epidemic and its societal disruption is enormous. There has never been a more urgent time to reinforce our cooperation and re-double efforts that support global governance and sustainable development. Today, in our final webinar of the series, we will take a step back and look at the bigger picture of higher education within the context of the SDG framework, specifically SDG 4 – quality education for all. Higher education plays a critical and unique role in addressing SDG4 and, even beyond, tackling global challenges. Ensuring equal access and maintaining quality education for universities under global crises such as COVID-19, needs innovation and cooperation from various stakeholders. During recent years, Tsinghua has implemented a global strategy to promote international cooperation and strengthen engagement with the global governance framework.

“There are four fundamental elements of the current education system— instructors, students, textbooks and classrooms will be changed dramatically in the future.”

—— Yun-Mook Lim, former Dean of University College of Yonsei University, Professor of School of Civil and Environmental Engineering of Yonsei University

COVID-19 has had a tremendous impact on the global education system, spreading to
165 countries around the world with 1.5 billion students, accounting for 87% of the school-age population. The epidemic sooner made us realize that online lectures could be a practical solution to deal with these difficult times. However, it has brought up some vital questions that we need to take further actions on what preparations should be made for future education system, whether the current system and evaluation system are satisfied for future education development? How can we effectively integrate the existing education system with SDG4? Under the influence of COVID-19, we believe that there are four fundamental elements of the current education system—instructors, students, textbooks and classrooms will be changed dramatically in the future. Specifically, instead of knowledge transferring, instructors will become a knowledge sharer. Students will enjoy a more customized and individual way of teaching, rather than learning from concentrated, batch-based teaching. Textbooks will be no longer the only resources for students to study, media and online resources will be frequently used and integrated in education. Fixed space and time are not requested for teaching and learning, cyber space will be the classroom for students in future education system. During the last couple of months, we have made very short but intensive online teaching experiences because of the COVID-19 crisis. We should always remind ourselves of learning lessons from this epidemic and opening up a new avenue for the future educational system. Meanwhile, based on the contents of SDG 4, each country should build an education system suited to its own national conditions.

"Online Education during the COVID-19 Epidemic needs not only the technical infrastructure, but also the organizational preparation and mobilization."

——Zhu Xufeng, Associate Dean & Professor of SPPM of Tsinghua University, Executive Director of TUSDG

From the University level, Tsinghua University has taken decisive actions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 while maintaining educational excellence. At the beginning of the outbreak, Tsinghua promptly announced to postpone the start of new semester, but to launch online courses as scheduled for the overall teaching adjustment. Nearly 4000 courses have been delivered during the spring semester on schedule by the real-time, interactive and remote online teaching techniques. Setting up all courses online within 2 weeks marked the start of the profound transformation in teaching in Tsinghua. Later, facing the global development trend and responding to the national demand, Tsinghua
has joined hands with Vanke to build the Vanke School of Public Health, which is an essential step to cultivate young talents to lead the development of international public health in the future.

From the school level, the School of Public Policy and Management (SPPM) of Tsinghua University positively responded to the University call, and adopted proactive measures to against the COVID-19. It set up academic leading group; discussed the practical countermeasures and preparations for student registration, online teaching, admission, thesis defense, graduation; tested the online teaching system, etc. At the same time, SPPM has made concreate academic arrangements in terms of teaching across multiple time zones, compiling the instruction of online teaching and study for both instructors and students, opening online platform of student registration, personal tutor selection and paper submission, postponing doctoral qualification examination, launching online recruitment activities for graduates, etc.

From the university to the school, we have acted with the fastest speed, the most efficient actions, to ensure the teaching quality for students and to minimize the influence of the epidemic to fresh graduates. Thus, online education during the COVID-19 epidemic needs not only the technical infrastructure, but also the organizational preparation and mobilization.

“Leveraging information and communication technologies for SDG4 implementation in the COVID-19 pandemic.”

——Robert Parua, Education Programme Specialist of UNESCO Beijing Office

There are four main reasons why we advocate the use of information and communication technologies in education. First, ICTs are expected to broaden access to learning opportunities at different levels and varied educational contexts. Second, ICTs are hoped to improve the quality of knowledge acquisition, knowledge deepening, and knowledge creation, and the development of 21st century skills. Third, ICTs are believed holding potentials to equalize learning opportunities in favour of economically and demographically disadvantaged populations. Fourth, ICTs can reduce costs.

However, most developing countries are faced with limited policy and regulatory framework, absent institutional culture in open and distance learning (ODL), weak institutional capacity, the shortage of on-line or off-line learning platforms, as well as
lack of partnerships and coordination.

Therefore, we suggest some key policy recommendations on how to leverage ICT for SDG4 implementation in COVID-19 pandemic. First, ensuring equitable and inclusive access to broadband connection and digital devices for all, particularly for the poor, women and girls, and people with disabilities. Second, building the capacities of policy makers, education managers, individual teachers, especially school leadership in leveraging ICT. Third, promoting the free sharing and creative re-use of open educational resources and make digital textbook and learning resources accessible under open license. Fourth, seizing the emerging opportunities by adapting policies to embracing one-to-one devices, ubiquitous Internet connection, and mobile learning opportunities. Fifth, reviewing policy and regulatory framework. Sixth, sharing good practices and strengthen institutional partnerships.

“Education is moving towards an unbounded era—online education has no boundaries between countries and regions, and is not restricted by geography. Every citizen can enjoy online teaching resources equally.”

——Zhan Tao, Director of UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education

We should think about the implications of future education after COVID-19. First, our education system was unprepared for the sudden coronavirus outbreak, and a more resilient education system will be requested in the future. Second, online education and digital education are the future of education. Online education should not be simply regarded as a part of education system, but a vital cornerstone of our new world of digital education. Third, the current direction and model of education should be changed. Instead, a new world that can effectively integrate the physical world and the digital world will be a new angle for the future education development. Furthermore, there have been many disasters in human history, yet there is always bound to be a rebirth and development afterward. This time, I believe that there will be a rebirth and development on digitalization, such as digital economy, digital technology, and digital education, etc.

Education is moving towards an unbounded era—online education has no boundaries between countries and regions, and is not restricted by geography. Every citizen can enjoy online teaching resources equally. In this way, higher education will go universal,
as university resources will be shared with the public as a public production, which is exactly the original intention of university.

Tsinghua University, as one of the top universities in the world, takes the lead in sharing university resources with the public, allowing the public to enjoy Tsinghua’s teaching resources, values and culture. If all resources can be provided in different languages in the future and weaken the public's barriers to communication, in this case, higher education will definitely go digital, international and universal in the future.

“International cooperation is facing a serious and fragile moment, as well as major challenges under the COVID-19. Strengthening cooperation is the only solution to tackle such negative phenomena and challenges.”
——Ngaire Woods, Dean & Professor of Blavatnik School of Government of Oxford University

International cooperation is facing a serious and fragile moment, as well as major challenges under the COVID-19. First, the political obstacle. The inability of some countries to effectively control the outbreak has led to a sharp decline in public trust. At the same time, the government’s failure to have full information on the virus has caused to uncertainty about its policies, leading to panic and fear in some countries and communities. Second, the economic obstacle. The epidemic has plunged governments and companies into a debt crisis that has not only spread rapidly but also caused serious inequalities. In particular, people living in fragile environments or in crowded homes are the most vulnerable to the pandemic, but we have limited ways to help them. Third, the challenge of international relations. National governments blame each other for failing to control the outbreak.

Strengthening cooperation is the only solution to tackle such negative phenomena and challenges. First, we should recognize that all human beings are fighting a common enemy—the COVID-19. Despite the accusations made by governments on the pandemic, researchers from various countries still join hands in research cooperation, which shows that the bounds between academic institutions and universities are strong and crucial. Even when politicians are creating real tensions between countries, research collaboration still moves ahead. Therefore, fighting the common enemy effectively together is the only way to prevent politics going down with spirals. Second,
compared with the 2008 financial crisis, the economic reconstruction after the COVID-19 are facing greater challenges. Countries should actively invest in each other and work together to establish a market where all economies can grow. Meanwhile, even if there are differences in political systems among countries, universities should play an important role in educating people to learn from each other, learn lessons from history, and strengthen international academic cooperation. Third, countries ought to strengthen the relationship between central and local governments; and scholars should actively participate in scientific research, share their research findings, and help countries fight the pandemic with scientific evidence.

“It would be better to consider providing free education for the Tier 2—technical and tertiary education for all.”  
——Xue Lan, Dean of Schwarzman College of Tsinghua University, Co-Director of TUSDG, Professor of SPPM School of Tsinghua University

The Experience of Schwarzman College at Tsinghua University has taken effective measures in response to the COVID-19, including getting students settled safely; developing and implementing contingency plans; selecting online platforms and getting technical support; training on the online platforms operation; delivering courses online; conducting assessment of the learning outcome, etc. However, there are some reflections on Schwarzman College’s experience that we need to take into account. First, mentality—we need to change the stereotype of nothing can replace the experience of human to human interactions. Second, technology and facilities—the quality and stability is not good enough. Third, institution—certification of higher education has to be carefully guarded due to information asymmetry problem. Fourth, learning environment—when teaching and learning is physically separated, the teacher has little control over the learning environments which may vary from one learner to another. Fifth, the cost of online education infrastructure and content development.

In this case, how can we use what we’ve learned from COVID-19 to accelerate SDG 4? First, ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. It includes early childhood, primary, and secondary education (literacy and numeracy); technical (skills for work), vocational, tertiary and adult education; global citizenship education for sustainability and equity. By setting
up safe and inclusive learning environments, providing scholarships for higher education and teachers’ training and working conditions, these targets can be reached. Second, the government has stipulated that all Chinese citizen are able to enjoy nine-year compulsory education free of charge. Based on the current technological development and the breakthrough of people’s mentality, it would be better to consider providing free education for the Tier 2 education for all, including technical (skills for work), vocational, tertiary and adult education. At the same time, we should redesign knowledge and skill structure to allow flexible combinations of modules. It is certainly that we will face many challenges during this process, such as the change of people’s mentality, the improvement of technical infrastructure, the requirement of a flexible learning environment (part-time learning), and the expenditure of infrastructure and content development. However, the vital challenge is institutional, which requires continuous discussion and support from institutions and relevant government authorities of higher education.

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