



Figure 1: Official opening event of collectively designed and built open classroom – new social infrastructure in the Ledine neighbourhood in Belgrade. The image was taken in summer 2019.

Source: Škograd (RS)

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Abstract

This policy brief offers a practical, feasible action plan for how to preserve and enhance the provision of public education in deprived suburban neighbourhoods during a pandemic. Based on critical insights collected in the past year at the urban periphery of Belgrade (Serbia), the brief suggests a shift in perceiving public schools in deprived suburban neighbourhoods as perilous places for virus-spreading to instead considering them as places where the spread of the virus can be monitored and controlled. Empirical evidence shows that the government decision to close public schools in general in response to the COVID-19 pandemic is worsening the situation of marginalised suburban communities throughout Serbia, as schools are often the only public social infrastructure in these areas. This brief calls for keeping schools in such areas open as voluntary and community-based information hubs during pandemics, offering public health information to marginalised communities.

Closing or keeping open public schools during COVID-19 in Serbia:

finding the middle way

Introduction

Throughout the Balkans, processes of urbanisation characterised by informality and self-provision of housing are hindering social cohesion, with devastating results for the public good. In the deprived suburban neighbourhood of Ledine (meaning ‘wasteland’) in Belgrade, the process of systemic societal marginalisation is seen most vividly when looking at the local public school’s statistics: the last three enrolled generations of first graders (age of 7) are exclusively Roma students². In spite of remarkable growth in the past three decades, in which the neighbourhood has tripled in size, the number of enrolled children is decreasing with every generation while the school is becoming ethnically homogenous. The dominant culture of white orthodox Serbian families, and those identifying with it, ‘avoid’ the local school as it implies cultural contestation among parents and children with ethnically diverse backgrounds. This trend creates a strong social stigmatisation for those children whose parents are not able to ‘choose their school’, due to their socio-economic status. Consequently, the trend jeopardises how the public school operates because ‘ethnically segregated’ schools are not recognised by the Serbian legal system and are subject to ‘closure’. In such cases, a school lose its status and its belonging services such as school library and pedagogical and

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² By carefully following the enrollment trend in the past five years, we have spotted that since 2018 Roma children from most disadvantaged families are being enrolled in the local school. This observation is compared with the school statistic books and approved in several interviews organized with the school representatives. The widely recognized group of Roma students, however, is in itself a diverse category that gathers children from families with different religious backgrounds and different legal statuses (internally displaced people, refugees, deported returnees). What this group does share is the experience of poverty and state-based economic dependence, experiences of cultural deprivation, political underrepresentation, and everyday marginalization based on their and their parent’s ethnicity, skin color, language, and socio-economic status. All these experiences are exacerbated through the school enrollment process.

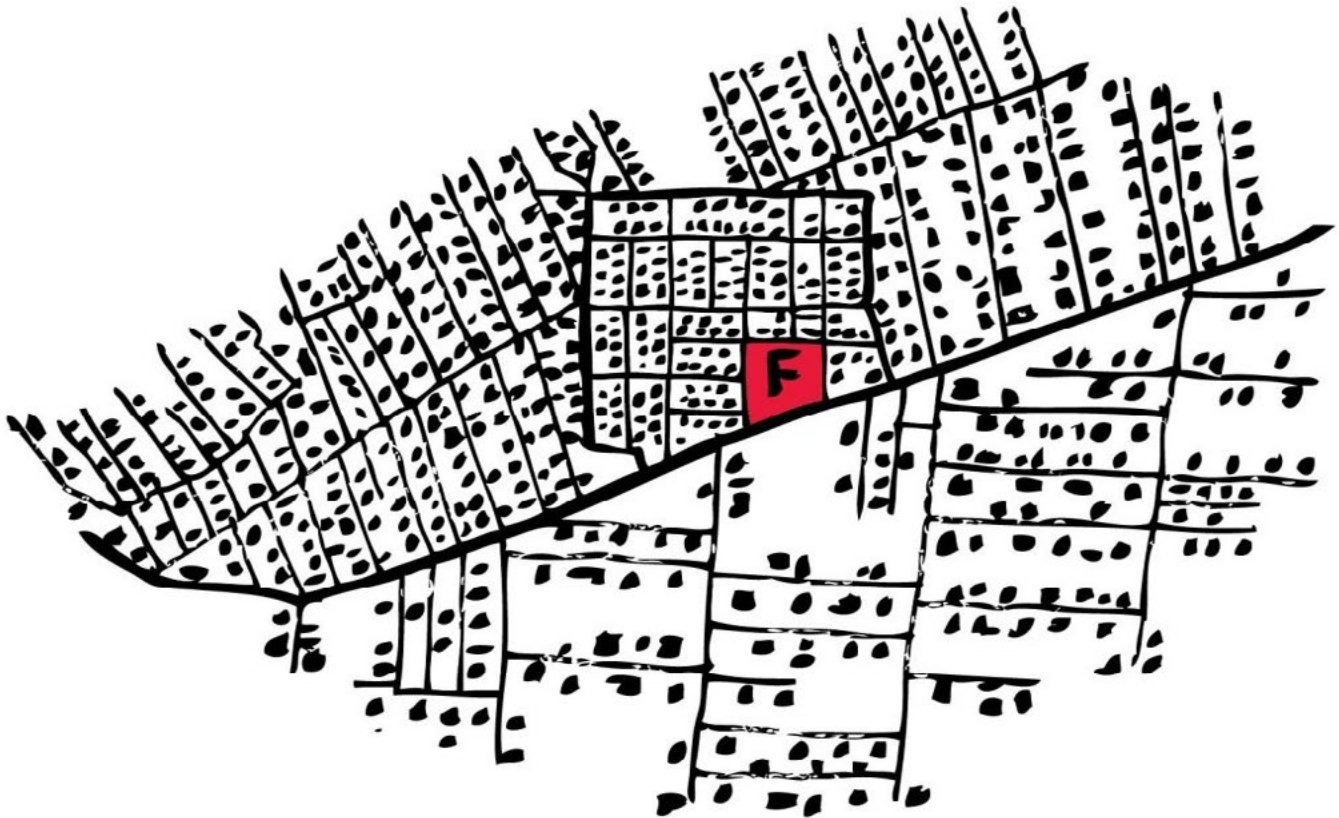


Figure 2: Urban morphology map of the Ledine neighbourhood in Belgrade. The field marked in red is the school courtyard – the only open public space in the area.

Source: Škograd (RS)

psychological support of students, and it is transformed into an outpost of the closest neighbouring school. For children for whom spatial availability of school services is of great importance this often means termination of the educational process.

The enveloping crisis of COVID-19 affected all geographies and social categories. Children of the Ledine, and similar neighbourhoods, are particularly affected by decisions made by dominant societies. For instance, decisions to embrace distance learning has led to shutting down the work of schools as the last refuges of public provision of education in these areas (see Figure 1).

The action-research project ŠKOGRAD (Schoolcity) deliberately positioned itself in the Ledine neighbourhood in 2016. It is currently working in partnership with the local primary school on developing and implementing context-specific extracurricular activities in the area. This policy brief is based on critical findings of the ŠKOGRAD project. It stresses the need to keep public schools in such areas open even in a pandemic, given their multiple roles in deprived communities.

Methodology

This policy brief is based on critical insights collected in the framework of the open-ended participatory action-research project ŠKOGRAD from Belgrade. The project gathers professionals from various fields (from spatial and social sciences) and institutions that work across disciplines, weaving together academic and hands-on approaches.



Figure 3: Official opening event of collectively designed and built open classroom – new social infrastructure in the Ledine neighbourhood. The image was taken in summer 2019.

Source: Škograd (RS)

The research has been conducted since 2016 in the format of an extracurricular programme of the *Schoolaboratory* summer school in the open public space of the Ledine neighbourhood. It has been theoretically discussed in the framework of a public debate programme ‘How We Build Škograd’, hosted by the Goethe-Institut in Belgrade. The results of this research are most notably presented in a publication *How we build ŠKOGRAD: Anatomy of the Infrastructure of Hope* published in 2019.

Through a series of around 100 informal neighbourhood talks with the parents of the local school, around 20 co-productive workshops with children in the school courtyard, equally as many interviews and meetings with school personnel, several guided tours with the professional community, and the facilitation of up to 20 public events, the ŠKOGRAD project has utilised the open public space of the Ledine neighbourhood before and during the pandemic. These activities have offered opportunities to encounter children and neighbours of both the dominant and marginalised society. In five years, the project has managed to: a) build up trustful relationships in the area; b) save the school from closing down; c) trigger investments in the school infrastructure; d) map and co-produce social infrastructure in the area – see Figure 2; e) conduct further research on this topic; and f) get both local and international recognition. By recognising local resources, the project increased the capacities of the local community to navigate survival at the edge of citizenship in Belgrade.

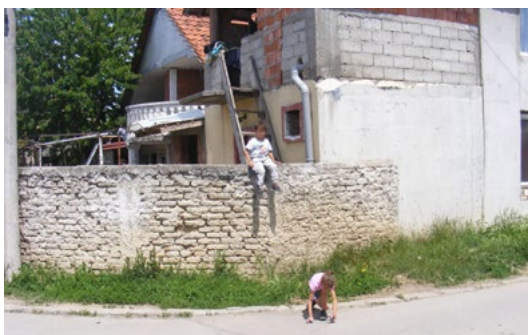


Figure 4: Self-provided sub-standard houses in the Ledine neighbourhood in Belgrade. The image shows the living condition of children who go to the local school.

Source: Škograd (RS)

Critical empirical evidence

The findings from the project turned out to be critical once the state introduced new measures³ in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, terminating the work of schools. Consequently, for the majority of children on the urban periphery without access to the internet or television at home, this decision meant a termination of the educational process. According to our findings during *Schoolaboratory 004* summer school (SK004), organised in September 2020 in the Ledine neighbourhood, this decision disregarded the fact that many children live in harsh poverty and are often exposed to mistreatments such as forced labour and domestic violence, as well as living in overcrowded and sub-standard houses (see Figure 4). For these children, school is a safe place, a way out of a harsh environment, and therefore, it is of great importance to recognise the school’s multiple roles as a key element for helping the children to cope through challenging times.

Furthermore, as a part of the new measures, schools were given special autonomy to determine their operational mode in times of a pandemic (paragraph 4.3.1 of the 2020 Act). While the intention of such a decision may be to optimise space, our empirical insights collected during SK004 show that it was used to legitimise further marginalisation of already disadvantaged children. Schools got a chance to organise their programme in two shifts for two groups – group A and group B – thus dividing classes in order to reduce the number of children per classroom. Organised interchangeably between the *in-school*

³ Act on Professional instructions for the organisation and implementation of educational work in primary schools in the school year 2020/2021, Reg. number 610-00-00674/2020-07, from 11 August 2020, Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, RS. Source: <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/?lng=lat>

teaching and the *distance learning*, the students at the school in the Ledine neighbourhood were divided based on their performance. Consequently, the children who ended up in group B turned out to be children who come from most disadvantaged families. Their capacity to follow distance learning is, according to our findings, non-existent, while their only chance to pursue education in school is limited to their group capacity. Using the educational programme for primary schools in this way has worsened the position of marginalised children and limited their capacity to equally participate in society. This policy brief, therefore, aims to change the perspective of the dominant society towards marginalised, less fortunate and deprived populations, particularly children, with the hope that existing policies might be amended to assure more equal opportunities for deprived suburban communities in the years after the immediate COVID crisis.

Policy recommendation

Issue

Closing down public schools in self-provided suburban neighbourhoods during the pandemic, based on the normative rationale of dominant societies, increases the vulnerability of children who do not have support at home and thus deepens the social gap in that society. In addition to interrupting the educational process, marginalised communities of such areas do not have proper access to information within their immediate surroundings. Their actions are often based on fake news, neighbourhood gossip and outdated information, which hinders their capacity to make informed decisions.

Recommendation

The recommendation is directed at the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, to be implemented by the school boards and municipal departments of social affairs as the public authorities at local level. Operationalisation requires no further funding as all requirements to which this brief refers are already in place.

How to achieve this

- Use and expand the existing structure of school boards which are usually composed of representatives of parents, local community leaders and teachers who already have a great deal of knowledge about the school community. The task of these school-based teams should be to:
 - 1 recognise the role of school in the daily routine of its community during a pandemic;
 - 2 recognise and map *social infrastructure* in a belonging area of a school;
 - 3 develop context-specific approaches for how to provide support to children and their parents who otherwise would not have the possibility to participate in the educational process; and
 - 4 prepare and provide relevant public health information to the community by establishing a routine and by using simple textual and visual language.

Keep the schools of deprived suburban neighbourhoods open as voluntary and community-based information hubs during a pandemic.

- The national government needs to make amendments to the existing policies in place – namely, the Act on Professional instructions for the organisation and implementation of educational work in primary schools, to allow recognition of the differentiated school system in Serbian society.
- The existing school statistics indicating the socio-economic status of parents of children could be considered as relevant, available data for identifying schools to be used in this way, and for determining a more careful and inclusive plan for preserving the educational process. The local municipal government where such schools are identified should provide a regular communication channel between their existing departments of social affairs and the school boards in order to establish official and timely information exchange with the local community at risk.

Rationale

Bearing in mind the role that public schools play in the lives of people who live at the edge of citizenship, it is of great importance to maintain, rather than to terminate, public provision of services to this social group. Public schools in deprived suburban neighbourhoods should be perceived as places where the spread of the virus in these areas can be monitored and controlled. Following recommendations of the national health organisation it would be possible to organise voluntary schools, offering a safe(r) environment for children who are otherwise excluded from the educational process. The term *social infrastructure* refers to a physical space that has the capacity to assemble people. It is a place where people already gather and engage in a common attempt to survive and thrive socially. Thus, recognising locally available spaces and programme resources that public schools can offer in such areas as social infrastructure will enhance the capacity of marginalised communities to survive through a pandemic while the development of a context-specific communication strategy will provide reliable, timely information needed for better decision-making.

Conclusion

Keeping schools in deprived suburban neighbourhoods open through a pandemic is a beneficial intervention in the lived experiences of some of the least privileged members of socially polarised societies in terms of offering programmatic help and safe(r) space. This brief is both a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and an attempt to ameliorate the apparent negative effects of top-down decision-making of Serbia's strongly centralised political apparatus and that of similar societies. It is a context-sensitive approach that aims to preserve and enhance the public provision of education based on available resources as a tool for enabling people to navigate survival at the margins of citizenship.

Some of the arguments used in this policy brief build upon arguments first presented in the work of Erik Klinenberg (2020) in *Palaces for the People: How to Build More Equal and United Societies*. Klinenberg was a Research Director for US President Barack Obama's \$1 billion programme to rebuild the region affected by Superstorm Sandy.

The long-term action-research project ŠKOGRAD is continually supported by the office of the Goethe-Institut Belgrade. The project also got the support of the Belgrade International Week of Architecture BINA in the framework of the pan-European project Shared Cities: Creative Momentum, which was co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union.

The research project Škograd won an award in the category of 'experiment and research in architecture' at the 42nd Architecture Salon of Serbia (2020). The jury recognised the project as a 'brave attempt to reduce social inequality in Serbian society while furthering research in the field of architecture and urban studies'.

The work of Škograd team was formalised over time. This policy brief is one of the first contributions of this kind by the Škograd Research Centre and is funded by the International Relief Fund of the German Federal Foreign Office, the Goethe-Institut, and other partners: www.goethe.de/relieffund

References and Further Reading

The evidence and the rationale for this policy brief derive notably from the following publications:

Joksimović, J., Milić, P. & Utvić, M., 2019. *How we build ŠKOGRAD: Anatomy of the Infrastructure of Hope*. Belgrade: Institute of Pedagogy and Andragogy, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade and Goethe Institute

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