PROGRESS FOR EVERY CHILD IN THE SDG ERA

Are we on track to achieve
the SDGs for children?
The situation in 2019

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Are we on track to achieve the SDGs for children?

The SDGs are universal in scope. Their call to leave no one behind puts the world's most vulnerable and marginalized people – including children – at the top of the 2030 Agenda.

But four years since world leaders committed to achieving the SDGs, are we on track to achieve the goals for children? Do we have enough information to know?
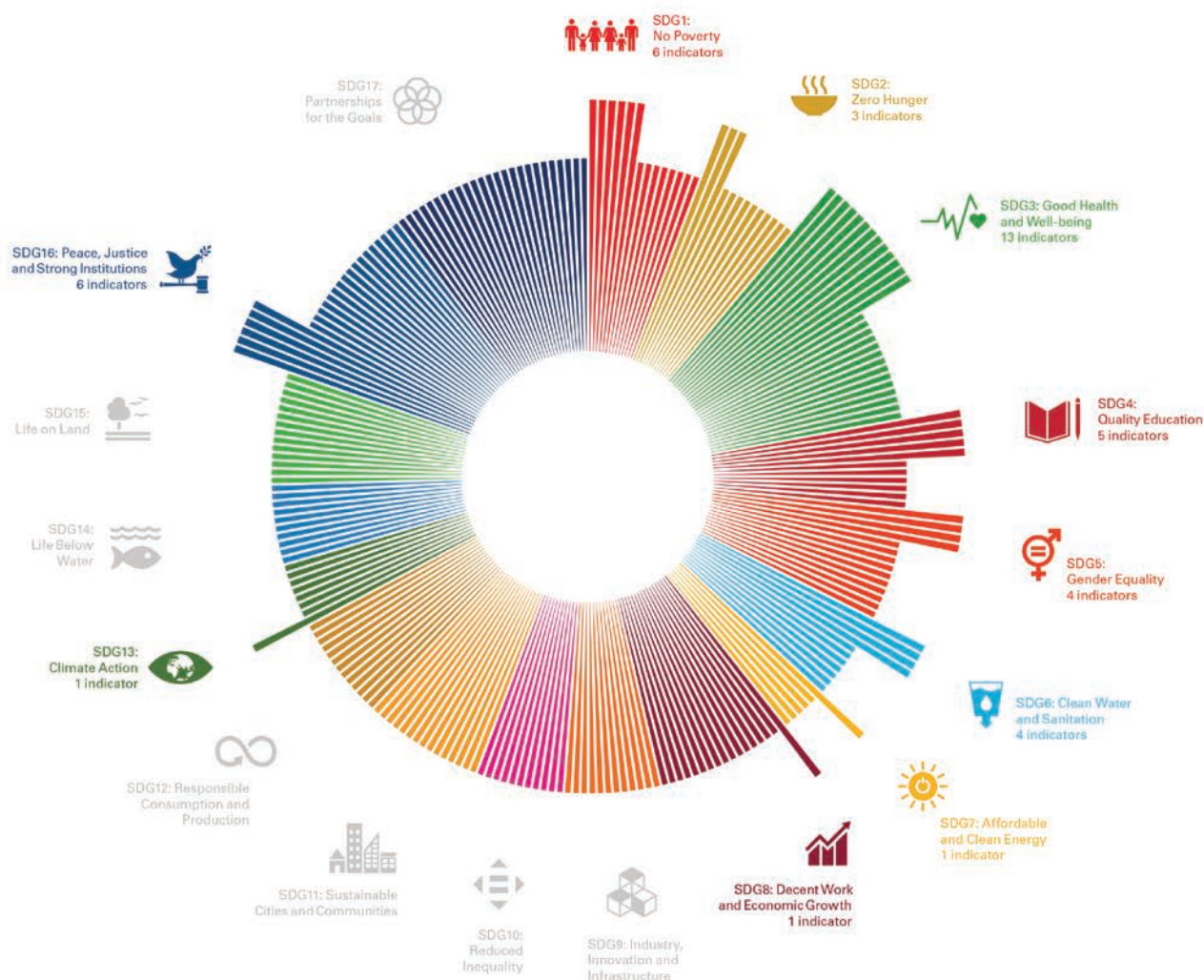
Progress for Every Child in the SDG Era, a report released in March 2018, assessed the world's performance to date, focusing on 44 indicators that directly concern the 2030 Agenda's most vulnerable constituency: children.

This brochure revisits the conclusions of that report, updated with 2018 data for a 2019 perspective. Our assessment is sobering:

- **Almost a billion (945 million) children live in countries where the SDGs remain out of reach.** The current trajectory of these countries puts them off track for at least two thirds of the child-related targets on which they can be assessed. Countries are most likely to be off track on goals concerning children's protection from violence. In terms of providing a safe and clean environment for children, countries are faring relatively better but still far short of the progress envisioned by the SDGs.

- **Many children remain effectively uncounted given the limited coverage of SDG data, but this situation is improving.** All regions have recorded increased data coverage on child SDG indicators since our 2018 report. Over the past year, the likelihood of a country having no or insufficient data to assess its trajectory towards a child SDG target has fallen from 62 to 56 per cent.

- **On average, 75 per cent of child SDG indicators in every country either have insufficient data or show insufficient progress to meet global SDG targets by 2030.** This brief calls for a step-change – both in assessing the situation of children everywhere, and using data to target our efforts to reach those at greatest risk of being left behind.
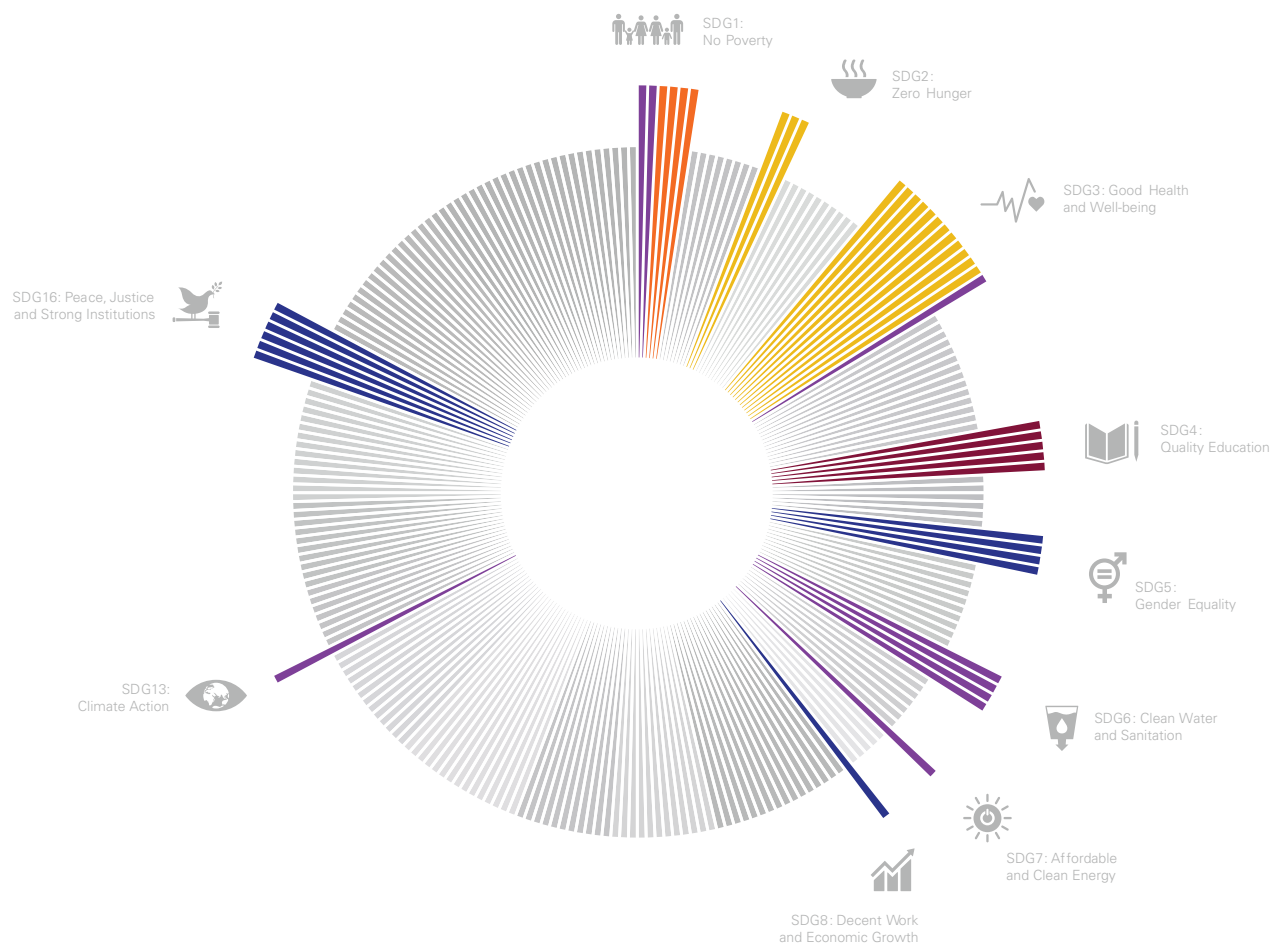
44 child-related indicators are integrated across the 17 Sustainable Development Goals

SDG1: No Poverty — 6 indicators
SDG2: Zero Hunger — 3 indicators
SDG3: Good Health and Well-being — 13 indicators
SDG4: Quality Education — 5 indicators
SDG5: Gender Equality — 4 indicators
SDG6: Clean Water and Sanitation — 4 indicators
SDG7: Affordable and Clean Energy — 1 indicator
SDG8: Decent Work and Economic Growth — 1 indicator
SDG9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
SDG10: Reduced Inequality
SDG11: Sustainable Cities and Communities
SDG12: Responsible Consumption and Production
SDG13: Climate Action — 1 indicator
SDG14: Life Below Water
SDG15: Life on Land
SDG16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions — 6 indicators
SDG17: Partnerships for the Goals

Notes: The official list of SDG indicators includes 232 indicators on which general agreement has been reached. Please note that the total number of indicators listed in the global indicator framework of SDG indicators is 244. However, since nine indicators repeat under two or three different targets, the actual total number of individual indicators in the list is 232 (see <unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/indicators-list>). While all 44 indicators covered in this report relate to the SDG agenda, some marginally differ from those adopted in the SDG monitoring framework.

These 44 indicators are arranged into 5 dimensions of children's rights

SDG1: No Poverty

SDG2: Zero Hunger

SDG3: Good Health and Well-being

SDG4: Quality Education

SDG5: Gender Equality

SDG6: Clean Water and Sanitation

SDG7: Affordable and Clean Energy

SDG8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

SDG13: Climate Action

SDG16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

Survive + thrive   Learning   Protection   Environment   Fair chance

5 dimensions of children's rights

Every child survives and thrives

SDG 2: Stunting, wasting, overweight

SDG 3: Births attended by skilled personnel, under-five mortality, neonatal mortality, new HIV infections (children under 5, adolescent girls and boys 10-19 years), essential health services, MCV1, DTP3, *maternal mortality ratio, malaria incidence, adolescent birth rate**

Every child learns

SDG 4: Minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics in lower secondary, children under-five developmentally on track, participation in organized learning one year before primary, proportion of schools with access to WASH

Every child is protected from violence, exploitation and harmful practices

SDG 5: Violence against girls by intimate partner, violence against girls by someone other than intimate partner, child marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting

SDG 8: Child labour

SDG 16: Intentional homicide, *conflict-related deaths**, violence from caregiver, sexual violence on girls and boys under 18, birth registration

Every child lives in a safe and clean environment

SDG 1: Basic drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services

SDG 3: Mortality rate from household/ambient air pollution

SDG 6: Safely managed drinking water, safely managed sanitation services, handwashing facilities, open defecation

SDG 7: Clean fuels used

SDG 13: *Deaths from natural disasters**

Every child has a fair chance in life

SDG 1: Extreme poverty, below national poverty line, multidimensional poverty, social protection floors/system

* Five italicized indicators are excluded from a full assessment due to methodological or measurement challenges.

Progress towards the global targets

Share of countries assessed on progress towards global SDG targets, averaged across indicators grouped into five dimensions of children's rights.
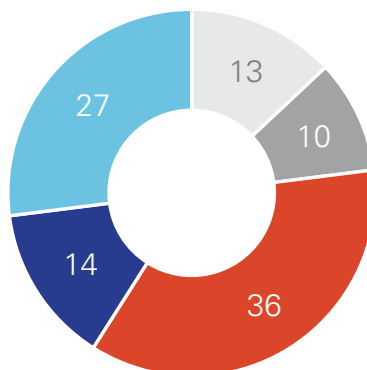
Survive+thrive

Progress against global 2030 targets is relatively strong, with a majority of targets already met or on track, among those for which there are sufficient trend data. Data coverage is also strongest among the five dimensions – with most countries reporting on most indicators.

The 12 indicators assessed here include tracking under-five mortality, malnutrition and new HIV infections, alongside interventions such as delivery care and immunization.
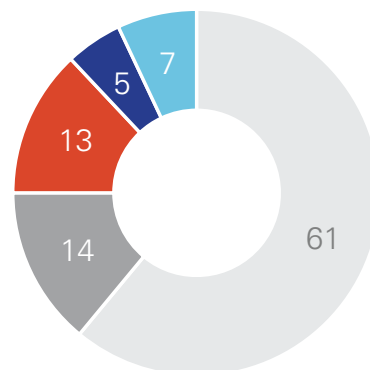
Learning

A minority of countries can claim to be on track. Data are insufficient to draw trends for the bulk of countries and indicators, reflecting the urgent need to institutionalize new measurement methodologies for learning.
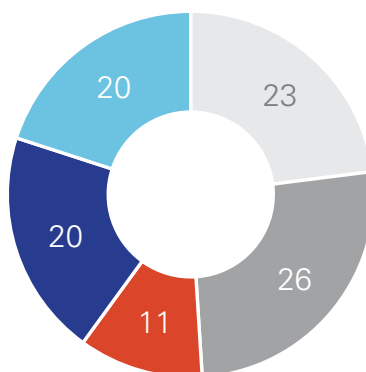
The five indicators assessed here include measuring completion of education from pre-primary to secondary, attainment of adequate learning outcomes, and access to WASH in schools.
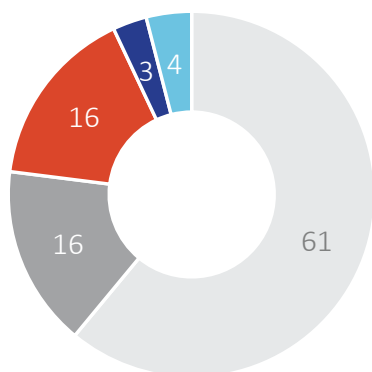
Protection

Very ambitious global targets and a relatively immature monitoring framework mean that a very small number of countries are on track to achieve only a few of the indicators analysed here. In most cases, data are insufficient to uncover trends.

The 10 indicators assessed include sexual and intimate partner violence against girls, violent discipline, child labour, female genital mutilation or cutting, child marriage, and birth registration.

Environment

Progress on this dimension is mixed, with a majority of indicator targets met or on track, among those countries and indicators with data. Still, many countries have insufficient or no data.

The eight indicators assessed here include reliance on clean fuels, deaths from air pollution and disasters, and access to safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene.
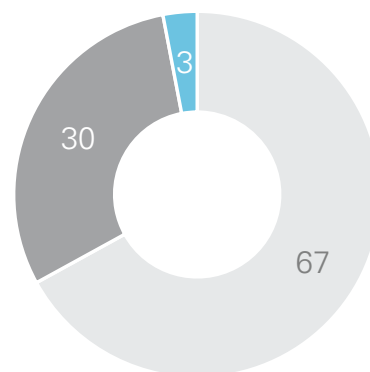
Fair chance

With many countries only now establishing baselines for standardized child poverty measures, it is almost impossible to assess progress on this dimension, so far.

The four indicators assessed here include monetary and multidimensional poverty rates and social protection coverage.

How to read the dials

The summary 'dials' used in this report illustrate progress in each of the five dimensions of children's rights, by country. Each dial represents a vast aggregation exercise, combining the performance of each country on each indicator in that dimension. For each indicator, countries are assigned to one of five categories, based on their progress towards the global SDG target and availability of data:

No data – data of sufficient quality, international comparability, coverage and recency are not available in UNICEF global databases.

Insufficient trend data – there are not enough datapoints to establish a trend and project to 2030.

Acceleration needed – based on current trends, the global target will not be met by 2030.

On track – based on current trends, the global target will be met by 2030.

Target met – the country has already achieved the global SDG target.

Progress in 2018

The state of progress against the SDG targets for children confirms the scale of the challenge ahead. The SDGs are highly ambitious and depend on transformational change if they're to be realized. In addition, data coverage remains only partial, which undermines our ability to assess whether such change is being brought about.

How has this picture changed over the past year? In these charts, we reassess progress on the five dimensions of child rights by comparing the state of play as recorded in 2018 and 2019. What we find is modestly encouraging.
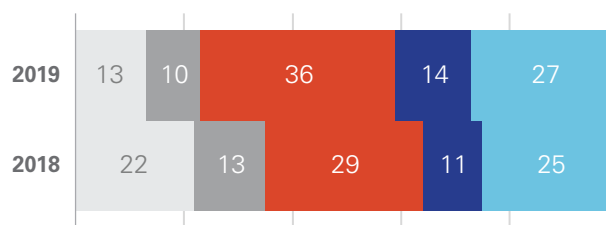
First, there has been a notable increase in data coverage, as reflected in the growing share of the horizontal bars that have transitioned from grey to colour between 2018 and 2019. This increase is greatest in the areas of Survive + Thrive and Environment – two dimensions that were already ahead of the others in terms of data availability. For the indicators captured under Survive + Thrive, the share of countries for which we have no or insufficient data to determine trajectories towards the SDG targets fell from 35 to 23 per cent. Under Environment, the same share fell from 58 to 49 per cent. By contrast, we see little or no evidence of improved data coverage in the areas of Learning and Fair Chance.

Second, where we have sufficient data to assess progress, we observe some improvements in progress towards the SDG targets. These advancements are most noticeable in the areas of Learning and Environment. For the indicators captured under Learning, the share of countries that are off track from targets fell from 60 to 52 per cent. For Environment, the same share fell from 33 to 22 per cent.
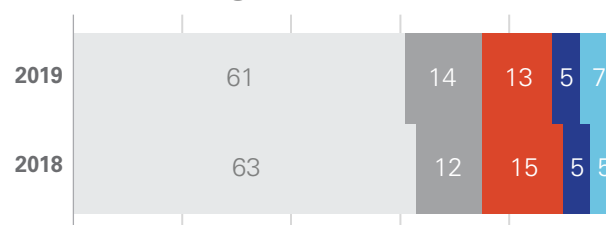
Last year, we hypothesized that limited data coverage might mask the scale of the challenge of the SDGs, as countries that were least able to measure progress may also be least able to obtain progress. We find no evidence of this in this report, with greater data coverage coinciding with a modestly improved outlook against the global targets for children.

While these changes are welcome and should be acknowledged, they remain far short of the kind of progress we need to see if the SDGs are to be taken seriously. Some areas remain of particular concern. For instance, the state of data coverage under Fair Chance is dismal and has deteriorated modestly over the past year.
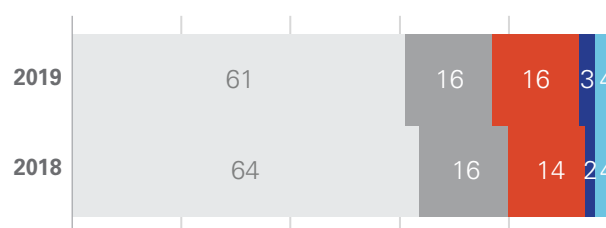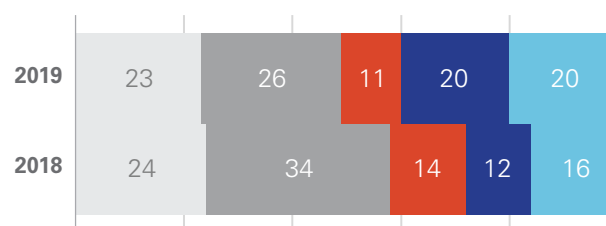
Survive+thrive

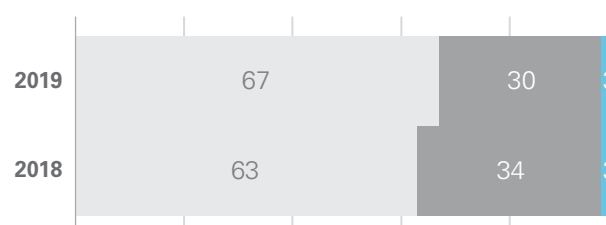|					
2019	13	10	36	14	27
2018	22	13	29	11	25

Learning

2019	61	14	13	5	7
2018	63	12	15	5	5

Protection

2019	61	16	16	3	4
2018	64	16	14	2	4

Environment

2019	23	26	11	20	20
2018	24	34	14	12	16

Fair chance

2019	67	30	3
2018	63	34	3

Universal agenda, universal challenge

SDG data manifest themselves differently in different places.

Consider two regions at opposite ends of the income scale: sub-Saharan Africa and Europe. Worldwide, sub-Saharan Africa has the most complete data across all child SDG indicators. But it is most off track towards meeting the targets. By contrast, Europe has a larger share of indicators where its countries are on track than any other region. But it ranks second worst among regions in terms of the share of indicators for which data are altogether missing.

Data gaps in high-income countries are due to a combination of factors. Some SDG indicators measure issues that largely do not occur in these settings (e.g., female genital mutilation/cutting) or data may not be collected even though the issues exist (e.g., child marriage). Conversely, data may be collected, but in a way that is not internationally comparable (e.g., violence against children). In other cases, data may not be reported to the SDG indicator custodian agency(ies).

In developing countries, the unavailability of data is typically attributed to weak technical and financial capacity,

although other factors including coordination failures and weak norms around data management and sharing are often equally relevant. Whatever the reason, scarce data about the situation of children constrain efforts to achieve the SDGs. And if incomplete data mask poor performance, the challenge is even greater than it appears.

Over the past year, all regions have recorded increased data coverage on child SDG indicators. The likelihood of a country having no or insufficient data to assess trajectories towards any given child SDG target has fallen from 62 to 56 per cent.

While the increase in data coverage is equally spread across all regions, there have been notable changes among regions in their trajectories towards the child SDG targets. As data have improved, the Americas region now appears much further from realizing the targets than a year ago. Countries in the region face a 20 per cent chance of being off track on any given child SDG indicator, up from 13 per cent a year ago. By contrast, more data has informed an improved outlook for sub-Saharan Africa. Countries in that region have a 14 per cent chance of being on track on any given child SDG indicator, which is twice the share from a year ago.

Proportion of country-indicator pairs (39 indicators for each of 202 countries) according to data availability and progress towards global 2030 targets

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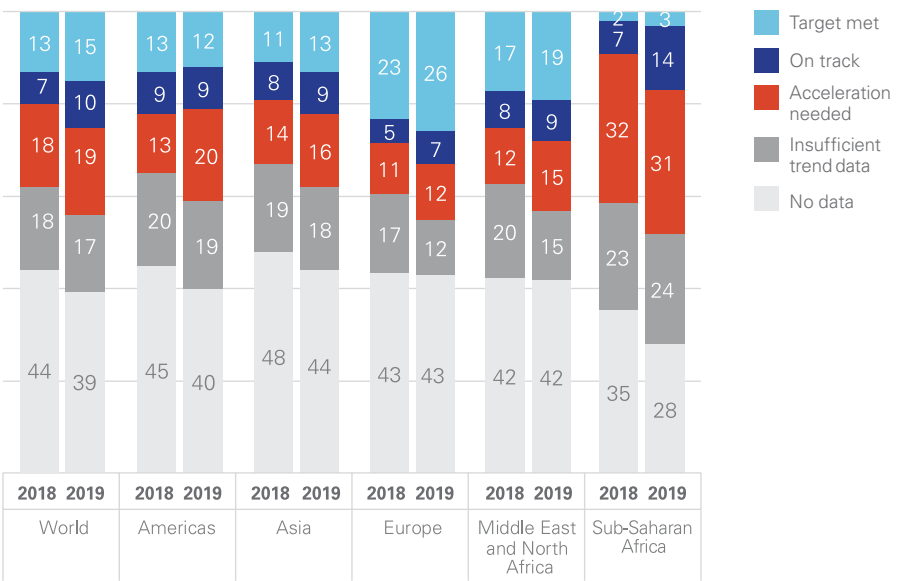
To change the situation of children, count them

There is much talk among the global development community of a data revolution in the making that can enable transformational change for the world's most disadvantaged and vulnerable people. But the data in our report tell a different story: The gaps in our knowledge are vast, and progress is too slow to achieve the SDGs. And despite the aspirations of the 2030 Agenda, at this stage, a great many children are being left behind. On average, 75 per cent of child SDG indicators in each country either have insufficient data or show insufficient progress to meet global SDG targets by 2030.

Reversing the cycle

The existence of data gaps across countries in varying economic situations demonstrates the lack of progress towards two more SDG targets – 17.18 and 17.19. These targets aim to strengthen data, monitoring and accountability, both to uphold the credibility of the SDG monitoring framework and in recognition of the powerful role data can play in driving change.

The analysis in this paper only considers global SDG targets. Yet the SDGs are most likely to drive change once they are localized at a country level. A forthcoming UNICEF analysis of 96 low- and middle-income countries shows that many global SDG targets have yet to be incorporated in national development strategies and plans. Country ownership of the SDGs is a vital principle, but is not yet well established almost a third of the way through the 2030 timeline.

This creates a vicious cycle of insufficient demand for and production of high-quality SDG data and statistics in the national context. The challenge now is to turn that around.

To avoid retelling this same story over the next 11 years, we need to make a step-change now – both in assessing the situation of children everywhere and using data to target our efforts to reach those at greatest risk of being left behind.

Four principles for better data

UNICEF has a long history of working with partners in pursuit of better data on children. This experience includes both successes and failures, teaching us some valuable lessons along the way. We have identified four principles that guide our approach to child data – and that we advocate other parties committed to monitoring the 2030 Agenda to employ.

1. What's counted, counts

If children's issues are measured and reported on, it's more likely that attention will be paid to them. That's why UNICEF invests heavily in the development of indicator methodologies, data collection and quality control, and advocates for open data. As custodian or co-custodian for 17 SDG indicators, UNICEF is responsible for supporting methodological development and data collection for key indicators concerning children. Our survey programme, the MICS, has a broader reach, capturing 33 SDG indicators – the most of any survey instrument. UNICEF is also leading global efforts to develop methodologies for new indicators beyond the SDG framework in emerging or overlooked areas, from adolescent mental health to participation to eating patterns. UNICEF maintains a treasure trove of over 200 internationally comparable and quality assured indicators that are freely accessible online and ready to be used in policy debates, evidence-based advocacy and planning.

2. Country ownership

A country won't treasure a measure calculated by others, assigned to it or obtained through an obscure process. For this reason, UNICEF plays an active role in the country-led global governing body overseeing SDG measurement, the IAEG-SDGs. Through this body, we promote country participation in the verification of internationally comparable measures and the use of transparent and replicable indicator methodologies. UNICEF also advocates for the localization of SDG targets and adaptation of global indicators, alongside efforts to build capacity to collect and analyse data. We believe that the global community is doing far too little to support this localization process, to the detriment of the 2030 Agenda.

3. The primacy of country systems

Countries are most likely to feel a sense of ownership of data when that data emerges from the routine or administrative systems used to manage and deliver services. Yet this poses an obvious problem: We know that routine data systems in developing countries are rarely mature enough to provide reliable measures on their own. UNICEF considers the building of these systems to be a critical long-term goal, which it can support through regular programmatic fieldwork. However, this doesn't mean that progress in developing routine data systems can or should wait until after 2030. UNICEF is currently testing a maturity model to inform the investment of step-wise developments in routine data systems that can yield quicker results. We are also investing in efforts to combine administrative data with separately obtained estimates of populations in small areas to enhance their accuracy and usability.

4. Coordinated investments

For all the talk of a data revolution, new funding for data is hard to find. PARIS-21 estimates that the cost of measuring all the SDGs is an extra US$1 billion per year. This is hardly beyond the combined efforts of governments around the world and public and private donors. Yet so far, ministries of finance, official donors and foundations seem unpersuaded, continuing a pattern of investments that are too often project specific and disjointed. The continued existence of data orphans, such as Botswana, betrays a lack of global coordination and conviction in global data investments. UNICEF believes that development actors should invest in a more coordinated and sustained manner, working with national statistical systems to put in place a minimum data foundation in each country. That foundation would encompass SDG monitoring, nationalization and reporting; survey schedules; coordination of line ministries; strengthening of core administrative data systems; and core programmes on data analysis and use.

UNICEF's role in international statistics

Strengthening data on children and monitoring the SDGs requires multiple actors to each play their part. UNICEF's role is focused on the provision of critical public goods intended to benefit the entire community. These public goods can be categorized into those that are global or national in scope.

Global public goods

Global indicators: UNICEF collates, quality assures and makes publicly available internationally comparable measures of over 200 indicators, undertaking country consultations, aggregation and – where necessary – estimating or modelling.

Methodological development: UNICEF leads the development of methodologies for new indicators on frontier issues concerning children (e.g., internationally comparable measures of stillbirths, eating habits and adolescent mental health) through expert consultation and field testing.

Data governance: UNICEF is an active member in the global statistical governance system, where we promote the principles for better data described in this report. UNICEF is an observer or participant in various Member State and inter-agency bodies, including the Statistical Commission, the IAEG-SDGs, the Committee of the Chief Statisticians of the UN and the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities. UNICEF is currently the chair of management and technical groups of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Household Surveys.

National public goods

MICS: UNICEF oversees and continues to develop this high-quality, low-cost, government-led, SDG-aligned nationally representative household survey programme to support national development planning and reporting.

Administrative data systems: All service delivery systems generate and use data to manage and monitor the provision of services to people. These data can then be aggregated and used for statistical reporting. UNICEF supports data capacity building and data use in its sectoral programming, deploying a combination of proven and emerging tools and approaches.

Humanitarian situations and situations of fragility: Resilient data systems help countries to weather shocks by enabling those unforeseen disturbances to be accurately assessed and for disruptions to service delivery to be minimized. UNICEF works to strengthen the resilience of routine data systems and to assess and deploy data from non-traditional sources, such as drones and satellites.

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