

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**PROGRESS ON CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING:
Centring child rights in the 2030 agenda
for every child, a sustainable future**

Acknowledgements

Report Coordination

João Pedro Azevedo, Chief Statistician and Deputy Director for the Data and Analytics Section

Report Core Team

Enrique Delamónica, Juliano Diniz de Oliveira, Sakshi Mishra, Sameen Wajid and Sarah Wilbanks

Programme Group Contributors

Genevieve Boutin, Solrun Engilbertsdottir, Thomas George, Orria Goñi Delzangles, Carlo Emmanuel Fong Luy, Nankali Maksud, Nicolas Reuge, Lauren Rumble, Harriet Torlesse, Natalia Winder Rossi and Vanessa Wyeth

Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and Monitoring Contributors

Rose Allen, Jan Beise, Savvy Brar, Claudia Cappa, Ayca Donmez, Lauren Francis, Attila Hancioglu, Chika Hayashi, Lucia Hug, Yves Jaques, Munkhbadar Jugder, Tatjana Karaulac, Tomiko Karino, Julia Krasevec, Estrella Lajom, Charlotte Lie-Piang, Vrinda Mehra, Colleen Murray Gastón, George Mwinnyaa, Sebastián Palmas, Lauren Pandolfelli, Nicole Petrowski, Alberto Pedro Sibileau, Friederike Schüür, David J. Sharrow, Tom Slaymaker, Turgay Ünalán and Danzhen You

Technical Report Team

João Pedro Azevedo (lead), Garen Avanesian (co-lead), Yoshito Kawakatsu and Yang Liu

Inputs and Guidance

Mark Hereward and Pernille Ironside

Oversight

Vidhya Ganesh, Director
George Laryea-Adjei, Director

Internal Consultation Group

Victor Aguayo, Zainab Al-Azzawi, Kerry Albright, Marcio De Carvalho, Ndeye Marie Diop, David Girling, Melvin Breton Guerrero, Gwyther Rees, Nona Reuter, Gary Risser, Shane Sheils and Camila Teixeira

Editorial and Production

Naomi Lindt, Editor, Small World Stories; Ross Hyzer, Copy editor, Small World Stories

Communications, Advocacy and Web

Karoline Hassfurter (lead), Benjamin Johnson, Qiaolong Lin, and Anshana Ranck

Design

Syaeful Bahri

Report Planning and Administrative Support

Andrea Curtis, Willis Demas, Julia Hanoman, Amy Lai, Anna Maloney, Dominique St-Germain and Robert Thomas

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Vidhya Ganesh, Director

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Division of Global Communication and Advocacy

Naysán Sabha, Director; Penni Berns, Sara Alhattab, Kurtis Cooper, Nicole Foster, John McIlwaine, Katarzyna Pawelczyk, Lynn Stratford, Helen Wylie, Dennis Yuen and Eric Zuehlke

UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight

Bo Viktor Nylund, Director; and Amanda Marlin, Chief of Editorial and Flagships

Private Fundraising and Partnerships Division

Carla Haddad Mardini, Director; Christine Murugami

Public Partnerships Division

June Kunugi, Director; Valentina Buj, Andrés Franco, Megan Gilgan and Barbara Rena

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for every child, a sustainable future



Shanti (36) and her daughter Hitanshi (5) are happy the family has a tap connection for their home and Shanti doesn't have to fetch water from far away sources.

Foreword



Catherine Russell
UNICEF Executive Director

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Catherine Russell".

In 2015, by adopting the 2030 Agenda, the global community vowed to work together to build a future where every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

As Heads of State and Government gather at this year's General Assembly, we must ask ourselves a critical question: Here, at the midpoint of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, how close are we to realizing the vision of a sustainable world for all? Among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, where have we made progress for children and where is acceleration needed?

These questions will frame the conversation at the important SDG Summit taking place during the General Assembly's high-level week. For children, the outcome of this Summit will be momentous. It will guarantee that every child can realize their right to learn, to live a life free from harm and poverty, and to have access to clean water and proper sanitation, empowering them to survive and thrive into adulthood.

To guide this pivotal gathering on the way forward for the SDGs and to ensure that children remain front and centre, UNICEF analysed the available data on progress towards 48 child-specific SDG targets. The findings, which are presented in this report, are a reminder of both our achievements and ongoing challenges, including the availability of quality data on child well-being. Today, at the midpoint of the SDGs, approximately one in three child-related SDGs have either been met or are on track to be met. Without acceleration, however, far too many children will continue to live without realizing their rights. In fact, at the current rate of progress, only one in

four children will live in countries where 70 per cent of child-related targets will have been met by 2030.

Every day, numerous and ongoing crises remind us that the planet is not becoming a better place for children. UNICEF's assessment demonstrates that in low- and high-income countries alike, the most disadvantaged children are still being excluded – including girls, children with disabilities, children living in poverty, and children affected by conflict and the climate crisis. These already-marginalized children are likely to see their situations further deteriorate unless we reinvest in our promise that we can and will do better.

The SDG Summit provides a critical opportunity to understand what is working, where it is working, and which areas demand swift and strategic investments to ensure children's rights are upheld in every country. We already know what will happen if we fail to focus our efforts on children: We will fail to meet the 2030 Goals. This report shows that transformative acceleration and progress are attainable.

Decades of achievement for children demonstrate that delivering results is possible with focused investment, political will and international collaboration. We have the knowledge and tools to make meaningful changes. Your commitments and actions today hold the promise of a brighter future, where every child's rights are realized and ardently championed.

To our leaders: the legacy of our times hinges on your dedication and the choices we make today. At this turning point, we must set a course of action that guarantees a sustainable future for every child in every country around the world.



On 2 August 2022 in Turucucho, Ecuador, Richard Yanez holds his two-year-old daughter, Aysel, as she swings on a pole outside their home.

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The Midpoint of the 2030 Agenda: A turning point for every child

“SDG progress is not about lines on a graph. It is about healthy mothers and babies; children learning the skills to fulfil their potential; parents who can feed their families. It is about renewable energy and clean air. It is about a world in which everyone enjoys human rights and human dignity.”

—
United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres¹

Every child counts.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development puts the principles of equality and non-discrimination at its heart, with a commitment to leave no one behind and reach those furthest behind first. This foundational tenet of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development embodies a collective pledge by nations worldwide to ensure that all individuals flourish in a sustainable environment where their rights and welfare are secured. Centring children in our efforts to drive sustainable development is a human rights imperative with the power to break harmful cycles of poverty and continued rights violations. Because the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are interconnected and interdependent, achieving them creates a pathway to systemic, structural and long-term change for every child.

Today, at the midpoint of this vision for a more equitable world for all, how successful have we been in bettering the lives of our most cherished asset – our children? What achievements can we celebrate, and which obstacles remain? What lies on the path ahead to ensure a brighter future for every child? How do we make this a turning point in our commitment to upholding children’s rights?

Progress on children’s well-being

To answer these questions, UNICEF examined the available data on the 48 child-related SDG indicators, which the agency regularly monitors. Organized around five domains of child well-being – Survive and Thrive, Learning, Protection from Harm, Safe and Clean Environment, and Life Free of Poverty – these indicators capture the breadth of children’s lived experiences. When viewed together rather than as individual sectors, they provide a rich, nuanced picture of children’s lives that tell us which children are thriving and which children are being left behind.

The data reveal a stark truth: Despite remarkable advancements in several areas of development, millions of children continue to face the harsh realities of poverty, inequality and social exclusion.

An initial snapshot (see Figure 1) shows that, globally:

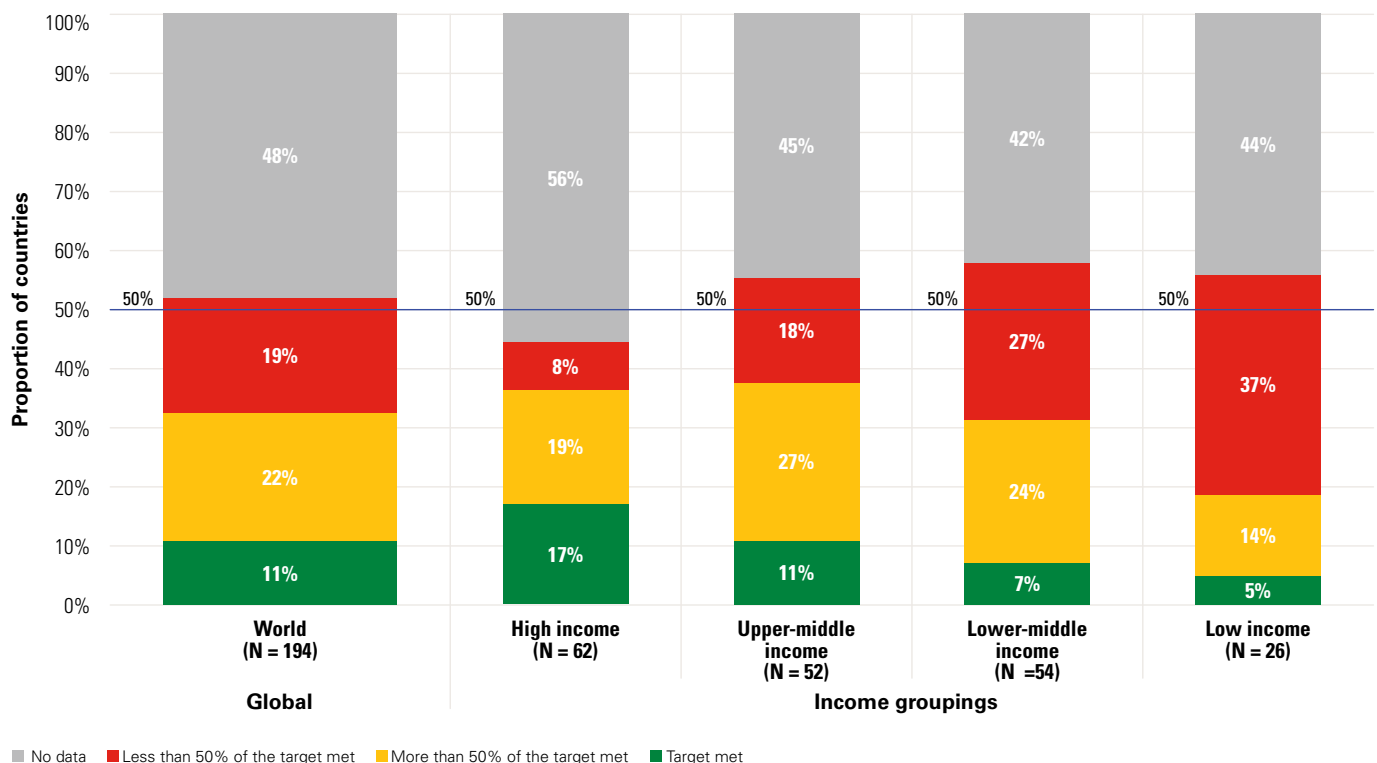
→ Today, approximately one in three child-related SDG indicators have either been met or are on track to be met (i.e., more than 50 per cent of their target value has already been accomplished).

- **What this means for children:** By 2030, only **one in four children will live in countries where 70 per cent of the child-related SDG targets will have been met.**

To realize the SDGs for children, swift action must be taken: Two in three child-related SDG targets either require acceleration or are not being monitored.

- Today, a child born in a low-income country is seven times more likely than a child born in a high-income country to live in a country where child-related SDGs require acceleration.
 - An estimated 150 million children – a mere 6 per cent of the child population – live in 11 countries where 50 per cent of child-related targets have been met, which is, the highest level of achievement globally.
- Different sectors and indicators show very diverse paths, from great advances to slow improvement to some, in some cases, unfortunate reversals.
 - Globally, there has been a remarkable reduction in child mortality (ages 1–4 years old), which has declined by 59 per cent since 2000. On the immunization front, global immunization coverage has shown steady increases since 2000. In 2022, coverage of the third dose of the diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis vaccine (DTP3) was 84 per cent and first-dose immunization against measles MCV1 was 83 per cent. Both, however, are short of the 90 per cent coverage target. And while most countries have made progress in terms of primary school completion rates, out-of-school rates regressed in 1 in 10 countries between 2015 and 2020. Additionally, at least one in three countries regressed in learning proficiency and in trained teachers at the pre-primary and primary levels.

Figure 1. Status of the 48 child-related SDG targets by country income groupings based on latest available data



Source: Authors' calculation using UNICEF Global Database, accessed from Data Warehouse as of August 2023, <https://data.unicef.org/dv_index/>

Yet, due to limited data availability, there is much that remains unknown about how close or far we are from reaching the 48 child-related SDG targets: On average, national-level data are available for nearly half of these indicators. In high-income countries, there is a greater lack of child-related data that meet international standards when compared to data quality in low-income countries, in part because most monitoring in high-income countries relies on country-specific administrative data systems. This twofold problem – a widespread lack of data availability combined with a lack of quality data – compromises our ability to track children’s progress and identify the children being left behind.

The good news: Many countries are closer to meeting the child-related SDG targets

Change is happening. The data compiled and presented in this report allow us to weave a tapestry comprising more than 20 years of data from more than 190 countries across 48 indicators. The result is a comprehensive assessment that shows that the advancement of child rights and the systematic improvement of child well-being is possible. Though not equally distributed between or within countries or across indicators, improvements are noticeable in certain areas.

A significant number of countries with available data have displayed progress above national, regional or global averages. This recent progress must be contextualized, however, against distance to targets and the need to maintain and sustain achievement. Slow or fast, progress based on recent performance reflects each individual country’s initial conditions, national priorities, financing, ambition and commitments. In many low-income countries, recent progress has been comparatively strong due to a lower starting point and a firm national commitment accompanied with adequate financing. Meanwhile, many high-income countries are plateauing: In some cases, they are close to or have already met their target, while in others, finishing the ‘last mile’ is a challenge.

Across economic income groups – from low to high income – the principle of ‘leaving no one behind’ has become all the more critical. Falling short of reaching an SDG target is not just a gap on a chart – it points to real children and communities that are being left behind. This means that, in order to close these gaps and reach the targets, it is vital to identify those who are still systematically marginalized, excluded and discriminated against in society – such as girls, children with disabilities, children living in humanitarian or climate crisis, children on the move and families living in poverty – and move quickly to fortify the protection and fulfilment of their rights.

Across the various domains that encompass child well-being, significant disparities in progress can be observed. In the Survive and Thrive domain, substantial improvements have been noted over the past 30 years in child survival and development with about 60 per cent decline in under-five mortality and 45 per cent decline in malnutrition rates. Yet, challenges remain in areas such as maternal malnutrition, which is associated with nearly half of current child malnutrition cases in early childhood. Moreover, routine immunization has declined, with the COVID-19 pandemic intensifying the issue.

Data show that school attendance does not necessarily lead to acquisition of foundational skills, with 600 million children and adolescents not acquiring foundational reading and math despite the majority of those attending schools. The pandemic worsened this situation, likely resulting in 11 million more 10-year-olds lacking foundational skills.

What will it take for countries to achieve the SDGs for children? Benchmarking progress shows the advances made and the acceleration required to guide critical next steps.

The Protection from Harm domain also highlights continued rights violations. Though child marriage rates have fallen since the 1990s, 12 million girls annually are still married prematurely. Without change, another 100 million girls will suffer this fate by 2030. Furthermore, in the poorest countries, over 20 per cent of children are trapped in child labour, which restricts their access to education and infringes upon their rights.

Despite progress in the domain of Safe and Clean Environment, over 2.2 billion people remain without safe drinking water and 3.5 billion lack safe sanitation services. Every day, over 1,000 children die before reaching their fifth birthday due to unsafe water. And diarrhoeal diseases resulting from poor drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services result in a daily death toll of 700 children.

Finally, the Life Free of Poverty domain delves into child poverty and its lasting impacts, and examines access to social protection as a critical solution. Data from 83 countries show that approximately 30 per cent of children experience severe deprivations, while 15 per cent face multiple deprivations, jeopardizing their future opportunities and well-being.



Children are not spared by the current drought in the Somali Region of Ethiopia.

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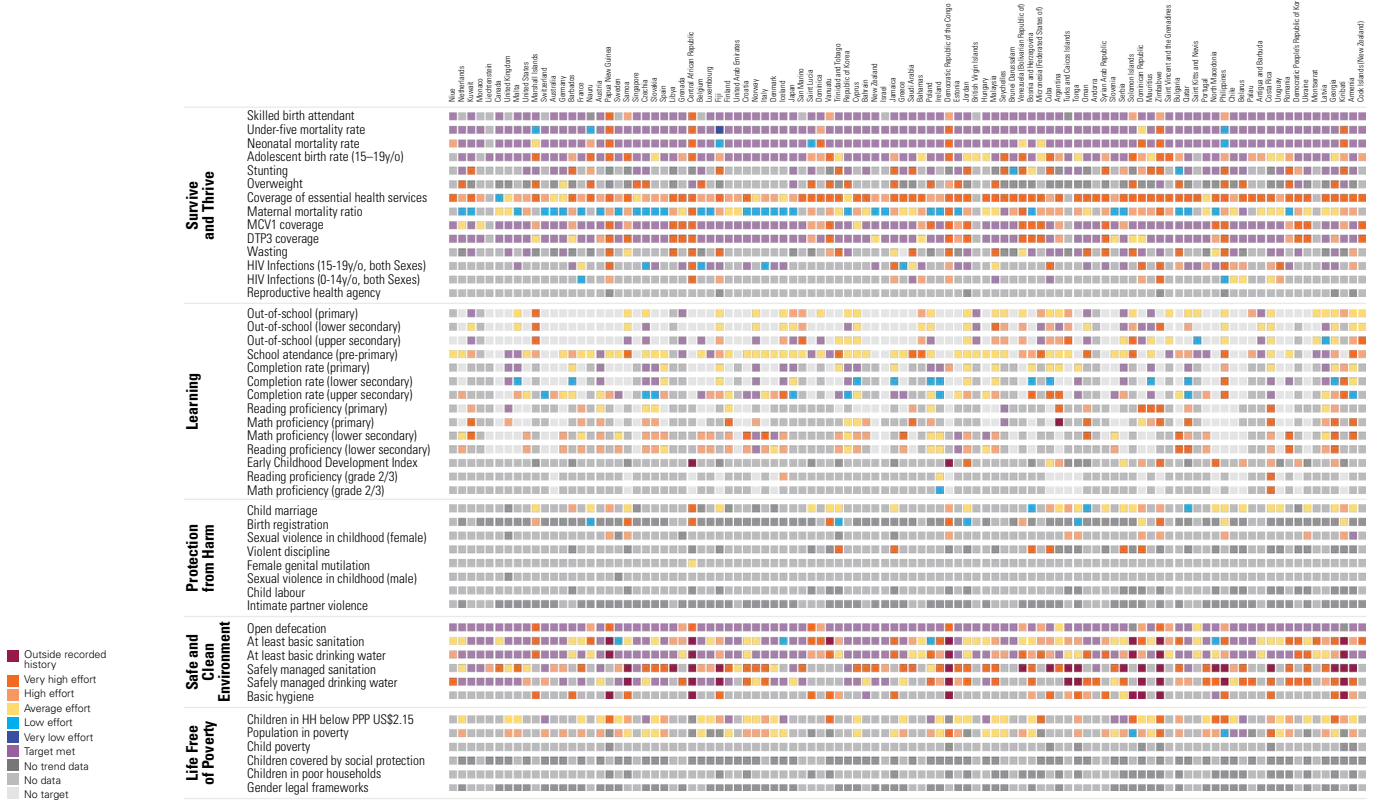


Muyila, 13, in his classroom at Ecole Primaire Luebo in Kamonia, Kasai Province, DR Congo, September 15, 2022.

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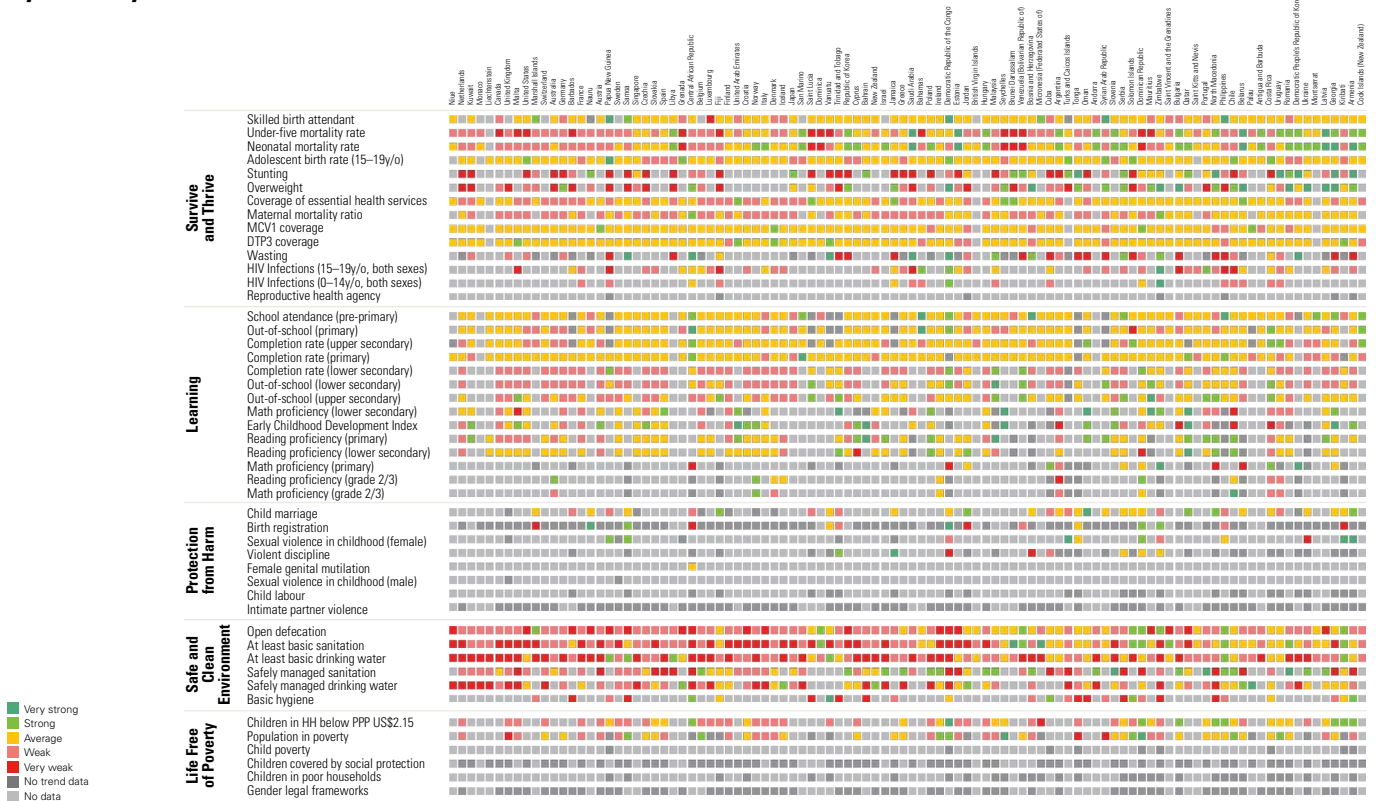
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Figure 2a. Heat map displaying benchmarking results of the effort required to meet 2030 targets on child-related SDGs by country and indicator



Source: Authors' calculation using UNICEF Global Database, accessed from Data Warehouse as of August 2023, <https://data.unicef.org/dv_index/>

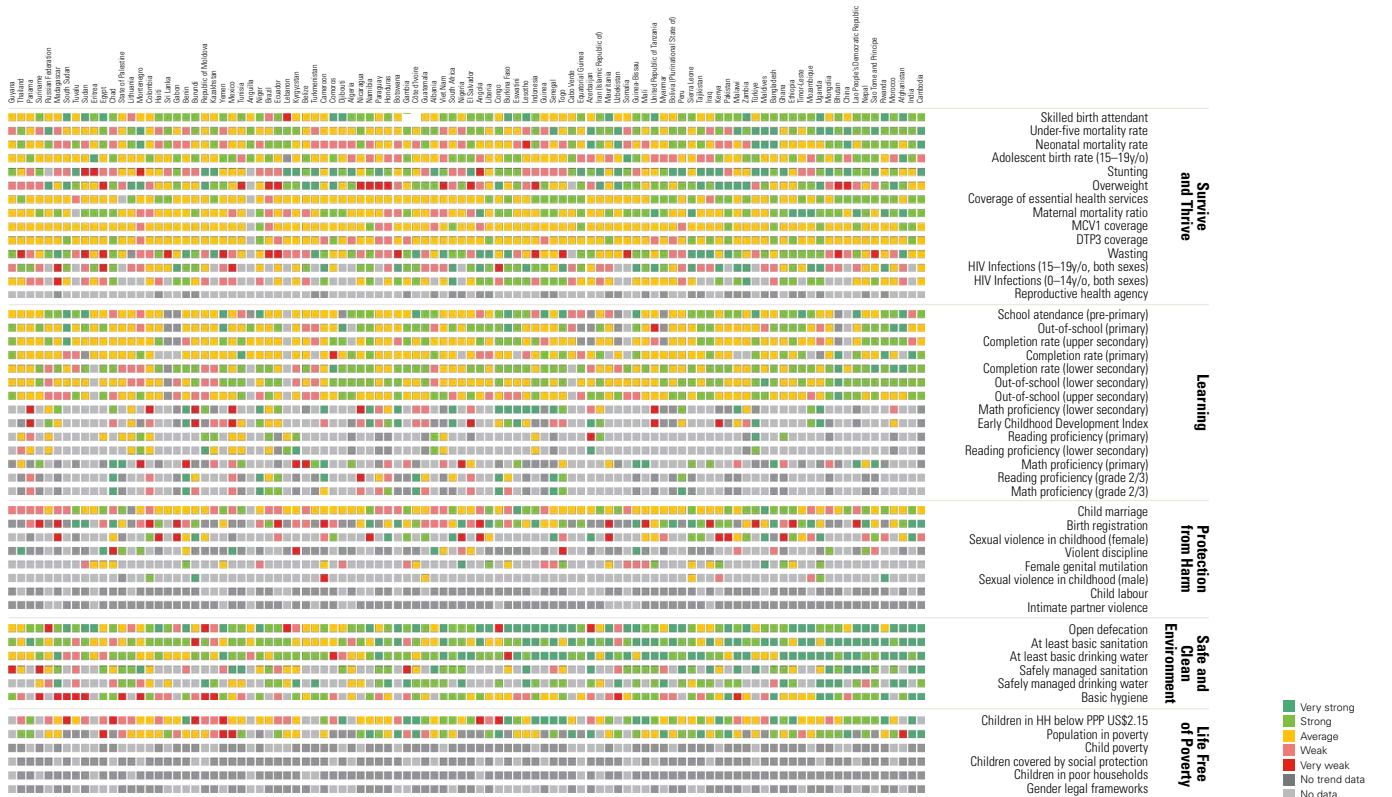
Figure 2b. Heat map displaying benchmarking results of the historical rate of progress on child-related SDGs by country and indicator



Source: Authors' calculation using UNICEF Global Database, accessed from Data Warehouse as of August 2023, <https://data.unicef.org/dv_index/>



Source: Authors' calculation using UNICEF Global Database, accessed from Data Warehouse as of August 2023, <https://data.unicef.org/dv_index/>



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A critical time to protect children's rights

Progress has been made. But closing the remaining gaps is more urgent and imperative than ever before. Why? Because the world is not becoming a safer place for children. Today, children are among those most affected by numerous ongoing and compounding crises – including an economic downturn, climate change and environmental degradation, public health emergencies and heightened levels of war and conflict – which often exacerbate one another. This interplay of shocks has been termed as a polycrisis. Polycrises typically impact the poorest and most marginalized with greater force – which means children's rights are in greater jeopardy.²

In children's lives, this polycrisis manifests as heightened risk of exposure to violence, exploitation and abuse; displacement; malnutrition and food insecurity; disrupted education; and limited access to health care, water and sanitation, social protection and social services, among other rights violations. The consequences of these harms and deprivations are often long lasting and perpetuate cycles of poverty, structural and systematic inequalities, and marginalization – thereby undermining every child's right to realize their potential and the vision of the SDGs.

At the same time, a normative pushback against child rights is taking place globally, including in intergovernmental forums, potentially compromising the integrity of international standards pertaining to children – for example, in relation to gender or civil and political rights. This regression threatens to roll back hard-won gains and further exacerbate existing inequities.

Benchmarking leverages the SDG indicator framework

At this midway point of the 2030 Agenda, it is critical that countries hone their strategies, fine-tune effective resource allocation and closely monitor their journey towards our shared vision of a better world for every child. The benchmarking of child-related SDG targets can help countries understand the effort and level of ambition required to reach their goals, which can then be met with concrete actions. By providing a comparative perspective, benchmarking allows countries to assess progress not only in absolute terms, but also in relation to regional partners and on a global level. This is vital for highlighting best practices, pinpointing where improvement is needed and fostering a sense of accountability.

The benchmarking exercises described in this report allow countries that are systematically displaying strong progress to be identified (see Figure 2a and Figure 2b). These countries are at varying distances to targets, however, and even with notable progress, some have considerable ground to cover to meet their targets. Close examination of these experiences offers insight into how other countries might accelerate progress in their own contexts.

These benchmarking metrics can be used in countries where national SDG targets have been set to have a conversation about whether those national targets are indeed both ambitious and realistic. And in countries without national SDG targets, a government might consider setting them to guide national policies and programmes. Such conversations are critical to help build a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities individual countries face and can inform a larger conversation with other development partners on how they can support progress towards child-related SDGs.

Assessing what's possible

If countries match the progress of the top-performing countries in their respective regions, the share of countries reaching the child-related SDGs by 2030 would triple. Comparing where countries stand today against where they aim to be by 2030, however, shows the enormity of the task ahead. To reach the 2030 targets on child-related SDGs, on average, countries will have to reach the level of the top performers of today. In some outcome areas, such as Protection from Harm and Safe and Clean Environment, the average expected acceleration needed to reach the target has not been observed in recent history (i.e., since the year 2000).

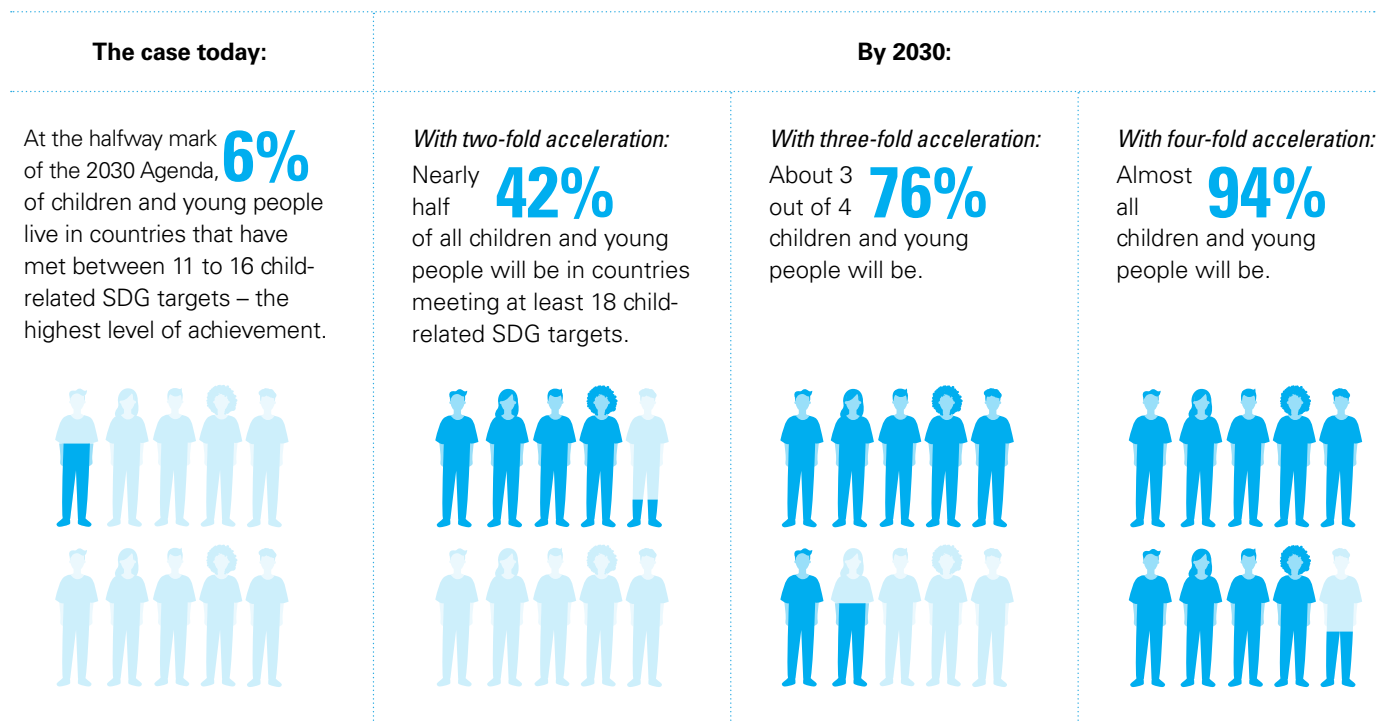
The UNICEF simulations presented in this report show that with focus and investments, accelerating progress towards realizing the vision of the 2030 Agenda is possible (see Figure 3). If countries double or triple their rate of improvement and match the strongest performance of their respective regions, the world can aspire to have 2.47 billion children – more than 90 per cent of the world's children – living in countries with at least 70 per cent of the child-related SDG targets met.

This would require strong political commitment and centring children in the SDG agenda, as it would necessitate doubling, quadrupling or even further accelerating the recent rate of progress. Regional data make clear this is possible. It can be done.

Accelerating action to achieve the child-related SDG targets is also smart from an economic point of view. Investing in children today and along the life-course strengthens countries' human capabilities and builds future generations who are fulfilled and can contribute to economic growth and national well-being. It also helps avoid the immense future societal costs associated with inaction.

Without accelerated action to achieve the SDGs, millions of children are at risk of being left behind.

Figure 3. Distribution of number of children and countries by number of child-related SDGs met in the world today, expected to be met by 2030 and met under different simulation scenarios



Source: Authors' simulations using UNICEF Global Database as baseline data, accessed from Data Warehouse as of August 2023. https://data.unicef.org/dv_index/
Note: Each icon represents 260 million, which is an estimate of the total population of children and young people up to the age of 19 in 2030

Balancing ambition with realism

Naming our aspirations while bearing in mind what we can actually achieve is important. Setting ambitious and realistic targets for 2030 and beyond provides a balanced, strategic way forward. It pushes us to achieve more with a high likelihood that we will succeed. Ambitious targets represent our ultimate goals. Realistic targets take into account what is feasible: concrete steps countries can take towards achieving these goals within political cycles, keeping in mind national contexts and initial country conditions. Realistic targets recognize that progress is gradual and depends on political prioritization and broad national coalitions that put children at the centre of policy debate.

Target setting should remain true to the highest ambitions while incorporating interim, achievable milestones to ensure the trajectory towards child-related SDGs remains clear. Moreover, adopting ambitious and realistic targets strengthens accountability by creating milestones grounded in the recent experiences of countries.



Mohammad Shah, age 9 refreshes himself at a new water tap at his home, with his sister Zarghune, age 6 behind him.

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Mobilizing political will

Reaching an SDG target – no matter how close or far it remains – and protecting and upholding every child's rights require a high level of political will on the part of governments in their capacity as duty bearers. Effective political engagement is intrinsically tied to financing prioritization of spending for children.

This political commitment must be informed and motivated by the fact that we cannot achieve the SDGs without making progress for children. It must also be informed by evidence: Evidence helps build a shared understanding about the challenges we face nationally, regionally and globally, and highlights opportunities for strategic acceleration. Evidence helps us see how the world can get back on track to realize the vision of the SDGs.

To transform this midway point of the 2030 Agenda into a turning point, decision makers must act swiftly and decisively in support of the protection and advancement of child rights. Without clear accountabilities on the part of states, there is no collection of data, enactment of policies or allocation of adequate financing to ensure that every child is able to enjoy the full spectrum of rights to which they are entitled. It is possible to garner and create political will. It has been mobilized in critical contexts, including in the COVID-19 response. But it needs to be maintained, sustained and monitored. NGOs, academics, civil society, the private sector, community leaders, and children, adolescents and youth themselves have a critical role to play in holding states accountable and highlighting the critical evidence revealing the current circumstances of their development. The benchmarking exercise in this report provides the kind of evidence needed to understand the situation of children and offers a framework for better discussions and plans to improve that situation.

Population, urbanization and migration

Going forward, strategies to accelerate results for children should also account for and build on the unprecedented population shifts the world is experiencing. These new dynamics are strong motivators for countries to rally political support for the advancement of children's rights and to improve the well-being of their children. Birth rates between now and 2050 are expected to decrease globally by 1 per cent to 4.1 billion, but significant variations by SDG region exist. Sub-Saharan Africa is forecast to see a 51 per cent increase in births compared to the previous three decades (comprising 30 per cent of the global total); meanwhile, the subregions of Eastern and Southern Asia could experience a 30 per cent decline in births. In sub-Saharan Africa, the youth population will rise by 47 per cent, while regions like Eastern and South-Eastern Asia will witness a 27 per cent contraction. Specific age brackets, like those aged 15–19 years, will see their population expand by 4.3 per cent.

Together, these trends emphasize the importance of development policies and initiatives. The demographic shifts, especially in Africa, stress the importance of investing in children's rights, service provision, welfare and development, and preparing for the workforce's future needs. Countries with declining populations should focus on sustaining essential services amid aging demographics.

Urban populations worldwide are set to rise to 6.6 billion by 2050, marking a 45 per cent increase from current numbers. Conversely, rural populations are predicted to decrease from 3.4 billion to 3.1 billion in the same period. Africa, despite having the lowest urbanization rate (44 per cent), boasts one of the fastest-growing urban populations. Notably, a large portion of the global urban populace resides in slums, approximately half of whom are children in regions like sub-Saharan Africa and Central and Southern Asia. This creates a pressing need to revamp development strategies tailored for urban settings, especially for the urban poor.

Global estimates suggest there are 35.5 million international child migrants, a number that continues to rise. By the end of 2022, 43.3 million children were displaced due to conflicts, the highest since World War II. Additionally, climate change poses a significant threat, potentially displacing 1.2 billion people by 2050. It is crucial to design policies considering the rights and varied needs of children on the move – e.g., those who are undocumented, separated from families, refugees or asylum seekers. Addressing conflict and climate change can mitigate forced movements and ensure better preparedness for inevitable displacements due to environmental factors.

It is against this backdrop that we must prioritize delivering results for children.

Resilient public financing and protecting children along the life-course

Guaranteeing the rights of children is an obligation of State parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This has implications for economic and social policies and, consequently, for the allocation of a country's financial resources and the alignment of financial systems to respect, promote and realize children's rights. Public expenditure – the largest source of SDG financing in developing countries – is the backbone of inclusive and sustainable financing for the SDGs in general, and the social sectors in particular. National budgets and public finance systems, including related fiscal frameworks, should therefore guarantee the prioritization and protection of investments in children.

Globally, however, the scale of underinvestment in children is deeply concerning. One in three children worldwide lack access to basic services such as health care, nutrition, education and social protection. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was estimated that an annual funding gap of US\$39 billion prevented the achievement of essential child-related SDG targets in low- and middle-income countries. To meet minimum spending benchmarks, low- and middle-income countries will need to spend an additional 4.7 per cent on health; 0.9 per cent of GDP on education; and 0.6 per cent on social protection. Failure to meet these minimum benchmarks is currently resulting in annual shortfalls of, on average, US\$513 per capita (health); US\$281 per child (education); and US\$66 per capita (social assistance, as a component of broader social protection). These average estimates mask the much greater shortfalls for social services in some regions, with low-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa at particular risk of falling further behind.³

At the national level, limited fiscal space, insufficient tax revenue and the constant trade-offs between debt repayment, infrastructure investment and social spending pose significant barriers to child-focused public finance. In this context, budgets that support children should be the last to be cut and the first to be protected. Moreso, the funds that are allocated for children are often insufficient, inequitably distributed and arrive too late in the life cycle. They are also weakened by issues such as misalignment, inefficiencies and absorption bottlenecks – both at subnational and national levels – which further diminishes the resources available for children.

In order to ensure adequate spending on children, governments should recognize the importance of aligning public finance systems to children's priorities, so that the broad range of resources – public, private, domestic and international – can expand and further complement state financing for children. It is therefore important to increase the focus, size and explicit prioritization of financing for social sectors and better align climate, development and humanitarian financing, while working to unlock private capital to support innovation and address critical gaps. Such collaborative and coherent efforts to achieve the SDGs – as SDG Goal 17 states – will increase the effectiveness of sectoral and cross-sectoral programmes. An example of the importance of this integrated approach, which was already endorsed through the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, can be observed in the 86 countries using the Integrated National Financing Framework planning and financing systems, which bring together public and private actors behind the SDGs at subnational and national levels.

Acceleration towards achieving the SDGs for children is possible, if investments and fiscal space for children are prioritized. This was experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when most of the scale-up of social protection programmes was done with existing fiscal space. There is, however, a critical gap in investments in children: A recent UNICEF report⁴ that examined public spending on children in 84 countries showed that current public support for children is simply inadequate. Additional work to ensure adequate, sufficient and efficient financing, particularly to social sectors, is critical.⁵ This requires a paradigm shift towards investing in children and supporting them across their life-course, with a specific focus on the early years.

Building resilience and response to crises, especially in fragile settings

The climate crisis – a burgeoning child rights emergency – is having profound impacts on children across the globe, threatening decades of progress in the advancement of child rights and in areas such as health, nutrition, education, social protection and poverty reduction. Nearly half of all children worldwide, amounting to a staggering 1 billion, inhabit countries extremely vulnerable to climate impacts. This crisis acts as a major driver in the increase in child poverty and is altering disease patterns in a disturbing way, putting over 600 million children at a heightened risk of vector-borne diseases like malaria and dengue fever, while also halting more than a decade of consistent progress in reducing mortality rates due to disease. The increasingly unpredictable patterns of drought, famine, flooding and forced migration are affecting access to food and water sources and increasing malnutrition, wasting, cholera and insecurity – hitting vulnerable populations such as children and pregnant women with particular force.

Emerging and recurring public health crises, including pandemics, are presenting further shocks to systems. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed severe deficiencies in health-care preparedness worldwide, undermining progress across SDGs and resulting in critical socio-economic impacts. As the crisis unfolded, even robust health systems were stretched to their limits. The disruption of services – in particular, closure of schools – adversely impacted not only many children's educational outcomes, but also their health, nutrition and psychosocial well-being. The crisis also made more prominent the critical care crisis, which was further exacerbated, with adverse effects on the lives of children, adolescents and caregivers.

Through the last 30 years, the number of countries engulfed by violent conflict has escalated drastically. More than 450 million children worldwide – or one in six children – are living in a conflict zone. This grim reality has left more than 30 million children displaced and, in violation of international law and standards, exposed to violence, including gender-based violence, as well as abduction, abuse and exploitation. Children are also deprived of their liberty, with lasting effects on their mental health and development. Moreover, compared to children in non-conflict settings, children in conflict settings are more than twice as likely to be undernourished and without clean water; twice as likely to die before age 5; and more than three times as likely to be out of school, compounding the protection risks they face.

Lessons learned from past disasters and recovery processes underline the continued need to enhance the preparedness and resilience of communities, systems and services. It is important to build resilient infrastructure, systems and services, such as schools, health centres and water and sanitation facilities that remain functional amid natural and human-made shocks. Systems and service providers critical to protecting children's well-being must also be equipped to absorb the added costs of climate change⁶ and to effectively anticipate, prepare and respond to specific shocks.

Mainstreaming sustainability and risk-informed approaches across all national policies and programmes is of utmost importance in effectively addressing the challenges of conflict, displacement, climate change and environmental degradation, unsustainable energy use and disaster risks. This is essential because children and young people are disproportionately affected, which can jeopardize their well-being and access to essential services.

We're running out of time. We must act now to build a sustainable world that protects the rights and future of every child.

Leaving no child behind: Delivering results with equity

Continued inequities within and between countries mean that children's rights are not universally recognized. When inequality exists, all children do not have the opportunity to fully enjoy the spectrum of rights to which they are entitled. For instance, children living in different kinds of geography face widely varying outcomes. Rural children are typically at a disadvantage, often facing limited access to health, education and social services compared to their urban counterparts. Rural girls often fare worse than rural boys. There are also stark inequalities among urban children – not just between urban boys and girls, but also in terms of socio-economic characteristics and across formal and informal settlements. Poor urban children can actually fare worse than poor rural children as crowded living conditions and lack of access to safe water in poor urban areas offset any potential increase in access to services.

Harmful gender norms and discrimination perpetuate inequalities. Adolescence is a pivotal moment when the paths for girls and boys diverge considerably. Adolescent girls assume an unequal share of care work, compromising their transition to and completion of secondary education. They face greater barriers accessing health facilities including sexual and reproductive health information and services. This heightens their risk of malnutrition, unwanted pregnancy, HIV and AIDS. Child marriage – which affects one in five girls globally – is more common among those from the poorest households, living in rural areas and with the least education. National legislation can either promote non-violence and more equal outcomes or entrench laws and policies that exacerbate gender inequalities between girls and boys.

Averages and aggregates often mask disparities that exist between groups, thus solely relying on these may deepen inequalities. If targets are not universal, it is important to implement policies that intentionally strive for inclusivity and equality to ensure the often-relegated groups do not remain behind or indeed 'invisible'. When driving improvements, it is crucial to identify those that are not being reached by advancements. Progress, therefore, must be grounded in the principles of non-discrimination, equality and equitable opportunities, with an emphasis on detailed analysis and disaggregation of data, to ensure all groups are inclusively prioritized.



On 31 October 2018 in Tellippalai, Sri Lanka, mental health counsellor Sugarna Kanagratnam (centre) speaks with participants of Shanthiham, a mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) organization focused on post-conflict areas in the northern and eastern parts of the country.

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Improving data production and use: Better knowledge and evidence to drive action

One of the complex challenges impacting the rights and well-being of children is a less visible yet pivotal issue: data gaps. Reliable and actionable data play a central role in supporting the full realization of child rights in all contexts. Data gaps exist for a majority of the SDG indicators relating to children. Figure 1 showed that across more than 190 countries, there are no data for approximately 50 per cent of the 48 child-related SDG indicators.

Even when data are collected, they are not always used to inform policies in line with international human rights standards and in support of child rights realization. Data that are used effectively – in the right hands at the right time – can transform how decisions about programme and service delivery are resourced and planned. Data should be collected and used at subnational levels, which is where many crucial decisions concerning children's lives are made.

UNICEF has played a vital role in closing data gaps. As a custodian for 19 SDG indicators, UNICEF supports governments worldwide to collect and analyse high-quality SDG data on children, filling essential data gaps related to child marriage, early learning and drinking water quality. In addition, UNICEF supports countries to implement the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), the national-level statistical operation that supports the largest number of SDGs (a total of 38).

Together, we have made commendable progress in making these data available to monitor and report on SDG progress. For example, the United Nations Statistical Commission approved a UNICEF-led international classification of violence against children this year in a landmark decision, putting in place operational definitions for all forms of violence against children. This endorsement marked an essential step towards addressing violence against children globally.

Countries must continue to invest in their data systems, build capacity and implement technology to improve data collection, monitoring and analysis along every child's life-course. Accurate and timely data are crucial to identify necessary interventions, set ambitious and realistic targets and monitor progress towards reaching these goals.

Data protection practices must also be strengthened nationally, regionally and globally to ensure that as we harness the opportunities of data and data technologies to narrow the digital divide, we also protect children's privacy, safety and integrity.

A brighter future for every child

Supporting the full realization of child rights in all contexts is a legal obligation of all State parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child; it is also an ethical imperative, and of critical importance to building the human capability needed for sustained growth and progress towards equitable, efficient and just societies. Through ambitious, realistic planning grounded in political commitment and national, regional and global partnerships, we can create an environment that enables tangible, large-scale results for children. A child-rights approach will not only help us accelerate progress towards realizing the vision of the 2030 Agenda, but also act as a road map for long-lasting change.

Together, we must:

- ✔ Build political commitment at the national level, forge broad national coalitions and foster community-led platforms for children
- ✔ Match action with ambition
- ✔ Generate and use evidence for children
- ✔ Strengthen commitment towards sustainability and climate action
- ✔ Make financing work to accelerate progress for children

UNICEF looks forward to working with our national, regional and global partners to build a brighter future for all with child rights at the centre.

UNICEF works in the world's toughest places to reach the most disadvantaged children and adolescents — and to protect the rights of every child, everywhere. Across 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive and fulfill their potential, from early childhood through adolescence. And we never give up.



United Nations Children's Fund
Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and Monitoring
Data and Analytics Section
3 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017, USA

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For the full report and any updates to the data, see:

