



**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

Progress on Children's Well-Being: Centring child rights in the 2030 Agenda is produced by UNICEF Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and Monitoring

Vidhya Ganesh, Director

This report is the result of collaboration among many individuals across UNICEF. The report team thanks all who gave so willingly of their time, expertise and energy – in particular:

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

The report team would like to give special thanks to **Nicholas K. Alipui** for his work as UNICEF SDG Sherpa seven years ago and for motivating the team to think about this report at this crucial juncture, and **Omar Abdi** for his encouragement and support throughout the conceptualization and production of this report.

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

Contents

Foreword **i**

Executive Summary **1**

Introduction **17**



Chapter 1. Assessing the well-being of children **19**

Overview of child well-being today **19**

Measuring progress towards reaching the child-related SDG targets: Methodology and key findings **28**



Chapter 2. Using the SDGs to drive national-level conversations: The role of benchmarking **37**

Moving beyond traditional assessments **37**

Investing in children today and in their future **48**

Bending the curve: What does recent progress tell us is possible? **49**



Chapter 3. Obstacles that threaten the 2030 vision for children **53**

Today, children are living in a time of polycrisis **53**

Inequity **57**

Financial barriers to realizing the child-related SDGs: Four key challenges **62**



Chapter 4. Solutions: What needs to be done? **69**

A common path towards upholding every child's rights: Critical considerations	69
Fortifying policies and institutional frameworks: Key recommendations for increasing attention to crisis and fragile settings	71
Addressing critical pockets of exclusion: Equity and leaving no child behind	75
Improving data production and use: Better knowledge and evidence	77
Increasing investments: Public finance, resilient systems and child rights across the life-course	78



Chapter 5. Child rights at the centre of the 2030 Agenda: A call to action **83**

Build political commitment within countries via broad national coalitions	83
Root ambition in reality and take action	84
Strengthen commitment towards building a livable planet for every child	84
Prioritize knowledge and evidence for children	85
Make financing systems work to accelerate progress	85

ANNEX 1. List of SDG indicators by thematic groups **86**

ANNEX 2. Using anchored rank distribution to benchmark country level and performance on child-related SDGs **88**

Endnotes **94**

Figures

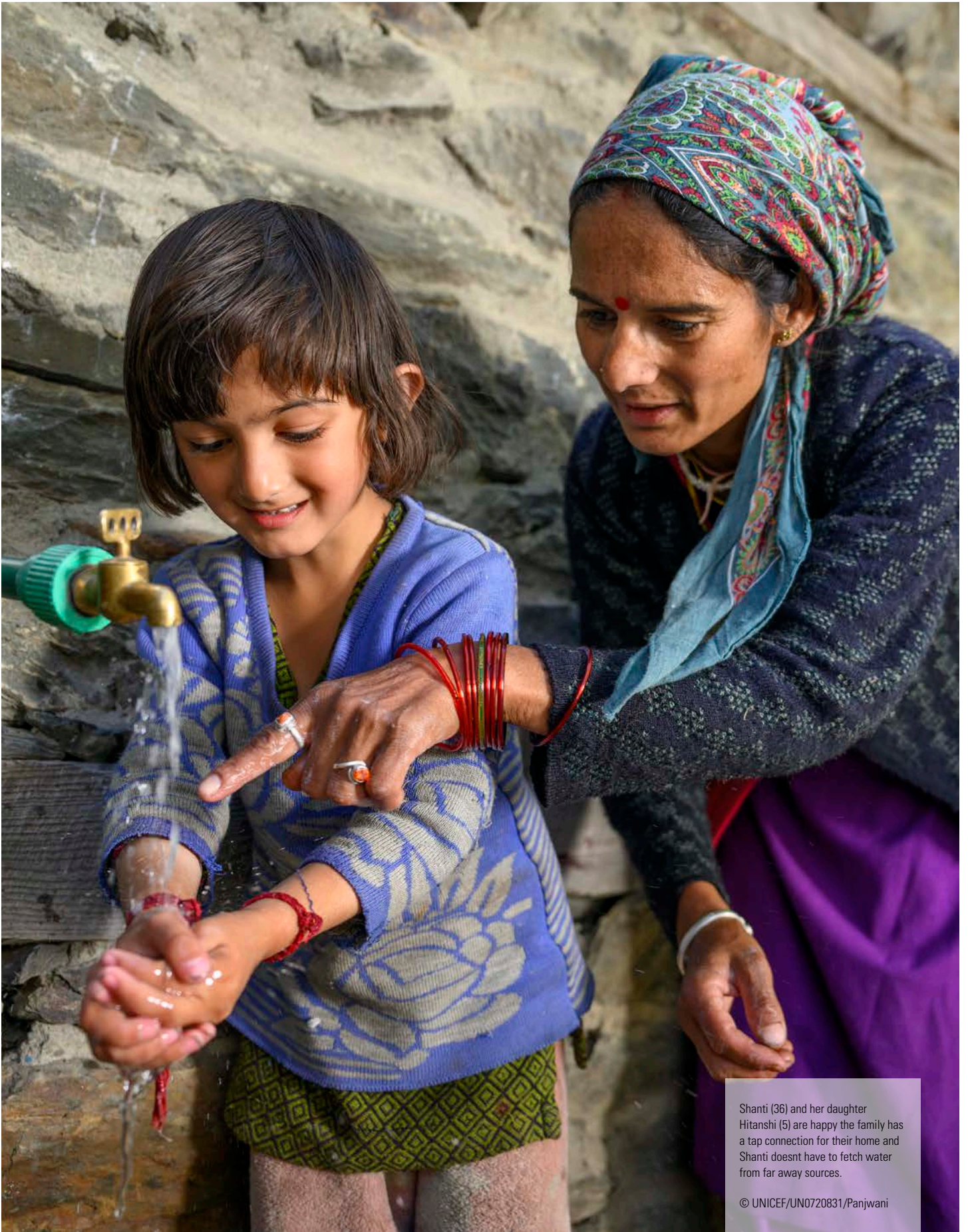
Figure 1	Status of the 48 child-related SDG targets by country income groupings based on latest available data	2
Figure 2a	Heat map displaying benchmarking results of the effort required to meet 2030 targets on child-related SDGs by country and indicator	6
Figure 2b	Heat map displaying benchmarking results of the historical rate of progress on child-related SDGs by country and indicator	6
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	9
Figure 4	Heat map on child-related SDG status by indicator and country	20
Figure 5	Number of countries classified by average recent performance of child-related SDGs organized by sectors	30
Figure 6	Share of countries classified by average recent performance of child-related SDGs organized by country income level	32
Figure 7	Development of monitoring tools across different child rights	34
Figure 8	Comparative benchmarking of current status and 2030 targets across outcome areas and income groups	40
Figure 9	Benchmarking the expected rate of progress to meet the 2030 targets against the recent distribution of performance by outcome area	42
Figure 10	Benchmarking the expected rate of progress to meet the 2030 targets against the recent distribution of performance by outcome area and income group	43
Figure 11	Selected indicators where the expected increase in the level of ambition of countries to reach the 2030 targets is above the average expected increase (20 percentiles) by income group	44
Figure 12	Selected top 20 countries with systematic strong performance across multiple outcome areas and child-related SDG indicators	45
Figure 13	Inequality of opportunities across multiple sectors and selected Latin American countries	47
Figure 14	Illustration of three hypothetical scenarios of surviving and thriving trajectories along a child's life-course	48
Figure 15	Distribution of number of children and countries by number of child-related SDGs met in the world today, what is expected by 2030 and by simulation scenario	49
Figure 16	Number of births over 30-year period by SDG region, 1991–2020 and 2021–2050	60
Figure 17	Child and adolescent population by life cycle age group and SDG region (1950–2050)	61
Figure 18	Distribution of public education spending across wealth quintiles	63
Figure 19	Debt status of low-income countries and LDCs	65
Figure 20	Evidence of debt overhang in HIPCs	66
Figure 21	Trends in the number of countries with national cash transfer programmes that are ready to respond to crises, 2018–2022	72
Figure 22	Benchmark of the rate of change using a single indicator: Neonatal mortality (SDG 3.2.2)	89
Figure 23	Benchmarking where countries are and where they aim to be by 2030	91
Figure 24	Benchmarking countries expected rate of progress to meet their 2030 targets against the recent distribution of performance	92

Boxes

Boxes 1	Benefits of using the distribution of standardized performance rather than performance across heterogeneous indicators	28
Boxes 2	Ambitious and realistic targets: Vital to results for children	38
Boxes 3	The value of global and country targets	41
Boxes 4	Financing and climate change	54
Boxes 5	Community health systems: Improvements to save lives	55
Boxes 6	Supporting data collection efforts: MICS innovations	58
Boxes 7	Multisectoral approach to ending child marriage in Ethiopia	70
Boxes 8	Protecting children's right to learn	71
Boxes 9	Putting children at the centre of the HDP nexus	74
Boxes 10	Sierra Leone: Strengthening partnerships at national level to scale up foundational learning	79
Boxes 11	Supporting nutrition across the life-course in Nepal	80
Boxes 12	Mozambique: Cash and Care – An integrated approach for expansion	81
Boxes 13	Average percentiles in practice: Monitoring health interventions	89
Boxes 14	Benchmarking levels: Comparing child poverty rates	90
Boxes 15	Benchmarking performance: A quick explainer	92

Highlights

Highlight 1	The 2030 Agenda: Galvanizing efforts to measure and monitor child well-being	34
Highlight 2	Benchmarking and the SDG indicator framework	39
Highlight 3	Tangible change in the life of every child: Using an equity lens	46
Highlight 4	Game-changing demographic shifts	60
Highlight 5	Spotlight on debt in developing countries	64
Highlight 6	Addressing inequities: Close-up on community health systems	76



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.

© UNICEF/UN0720831/Panjwani

Foreword



Catherine Russell
UNICEF Executive Director

A handwritten signature of Catherine Russell in blue ink, written in a cursive style.

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.

© UNICEF/UN0692726/Arcos

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).

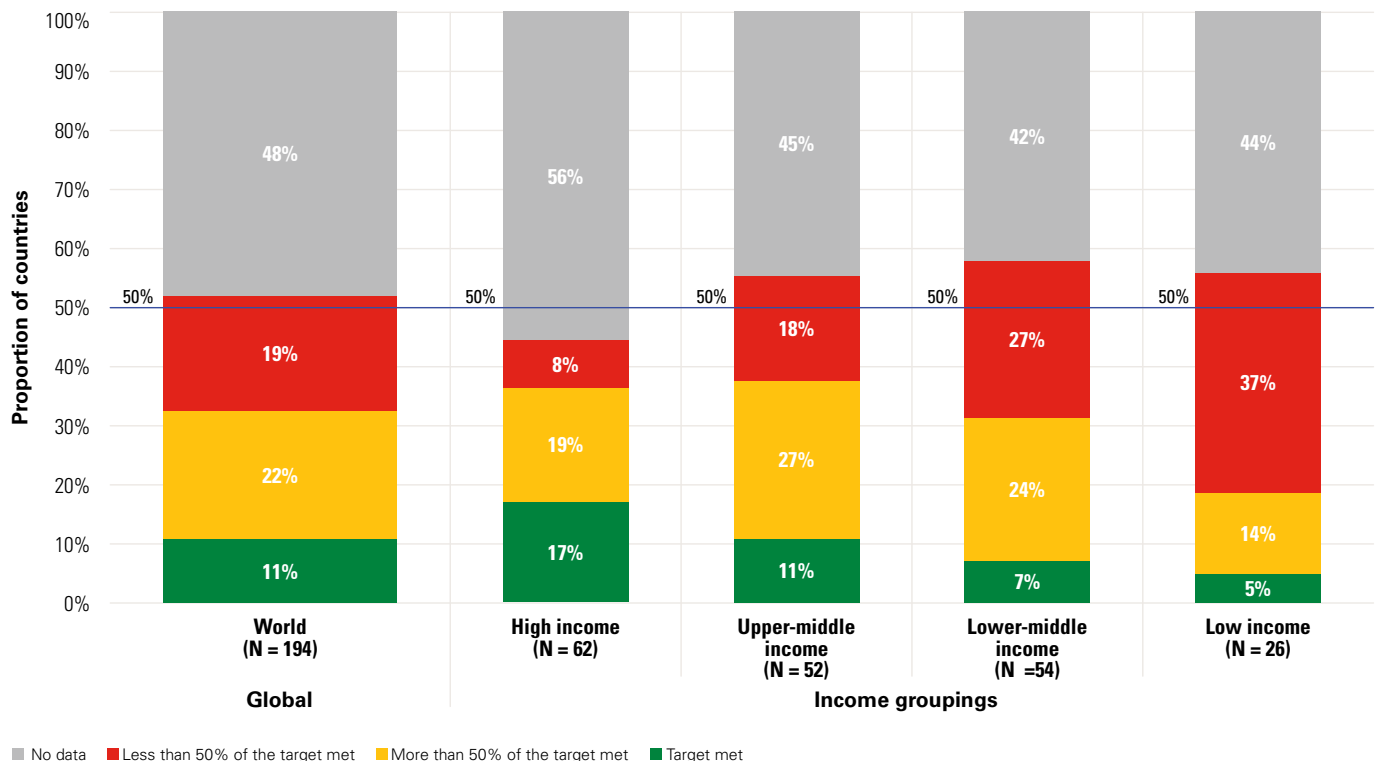
- **What this means for children:** By 2030, only **one in four children will live in countries where 70 per cent of the child-related SDG targets will have been met.**

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.

© UNICEF/UN0635776/Pouget

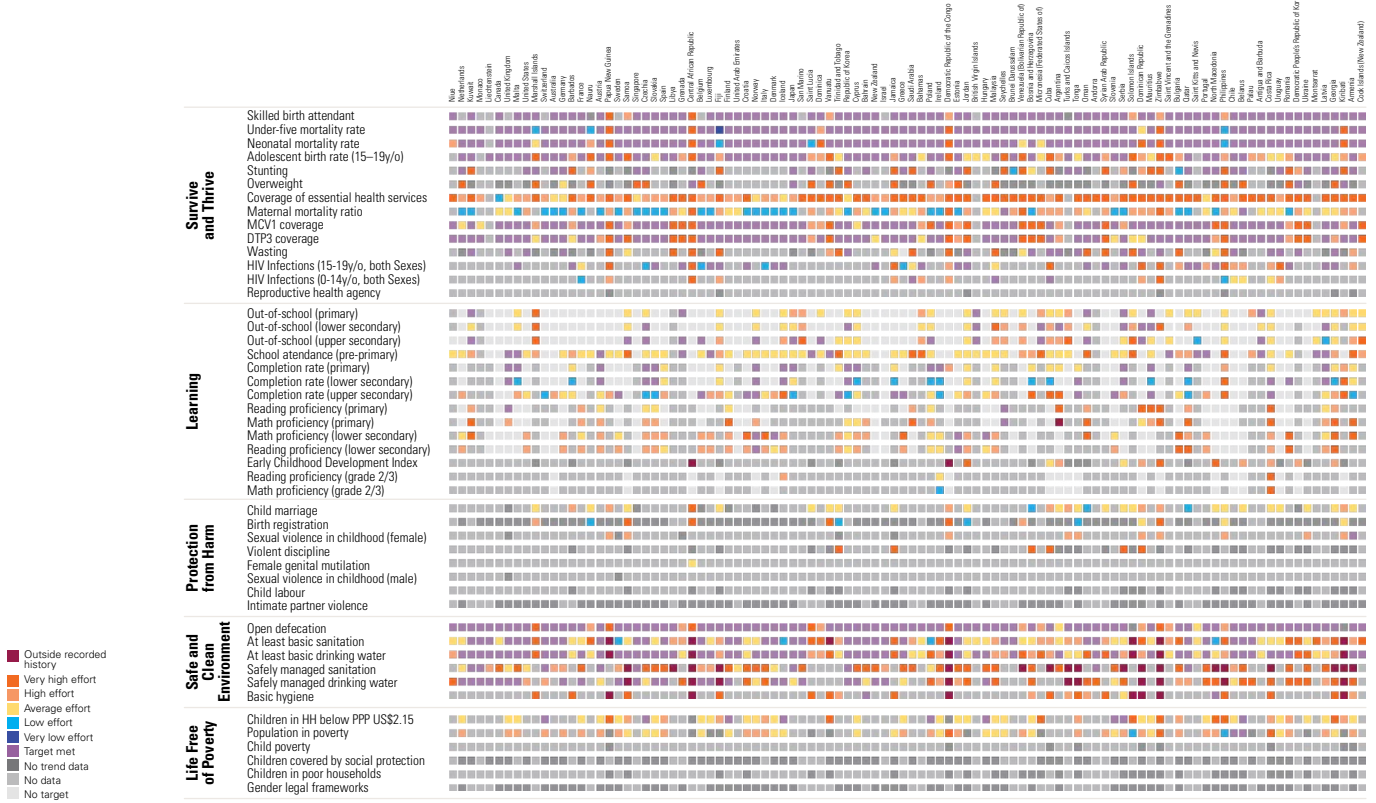


Muyila, 13, in his classroom at Ecole Primaire Luebo in Kamonia, Kasai Province, DR Congo, September 15, 2022.

© UNICEF/UN0703816/Mulala

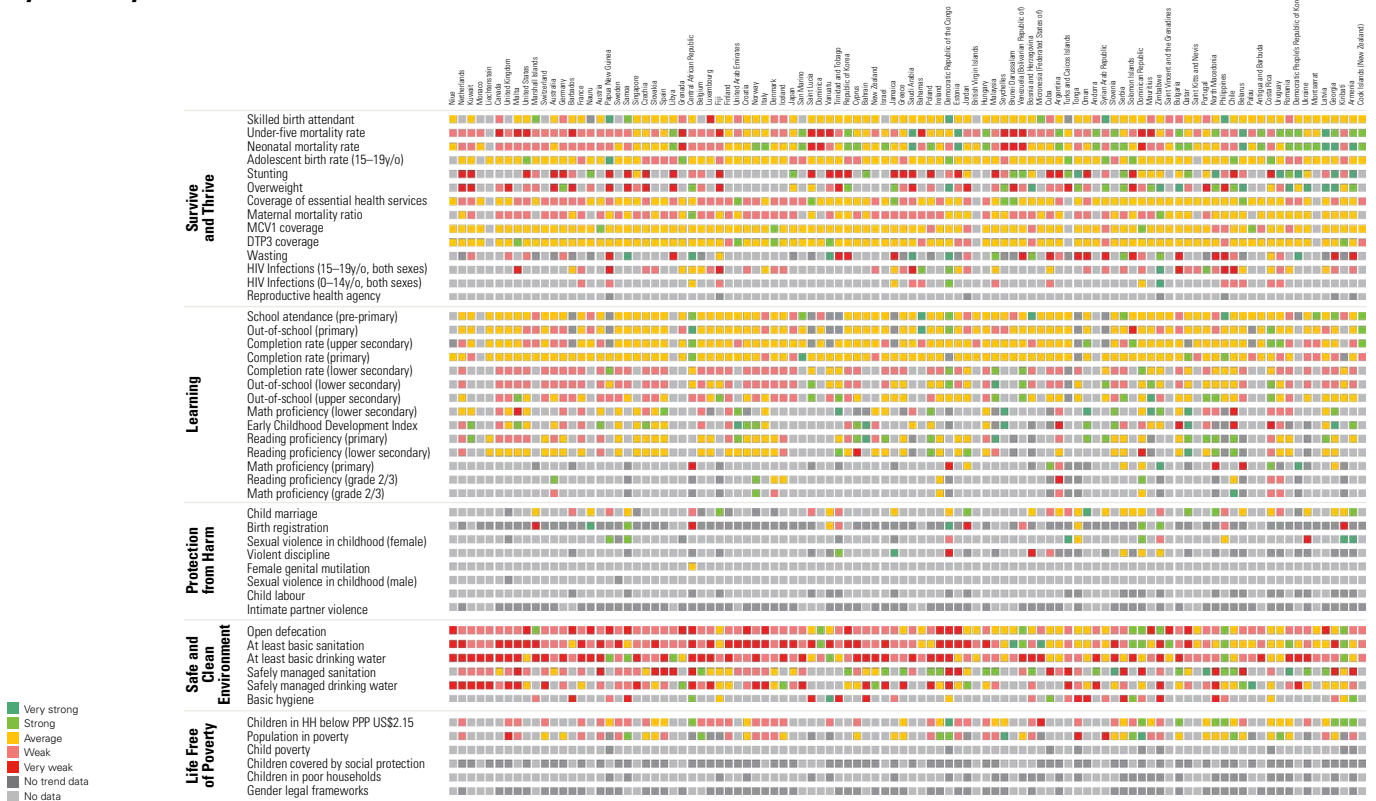
nic
our cha

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/>

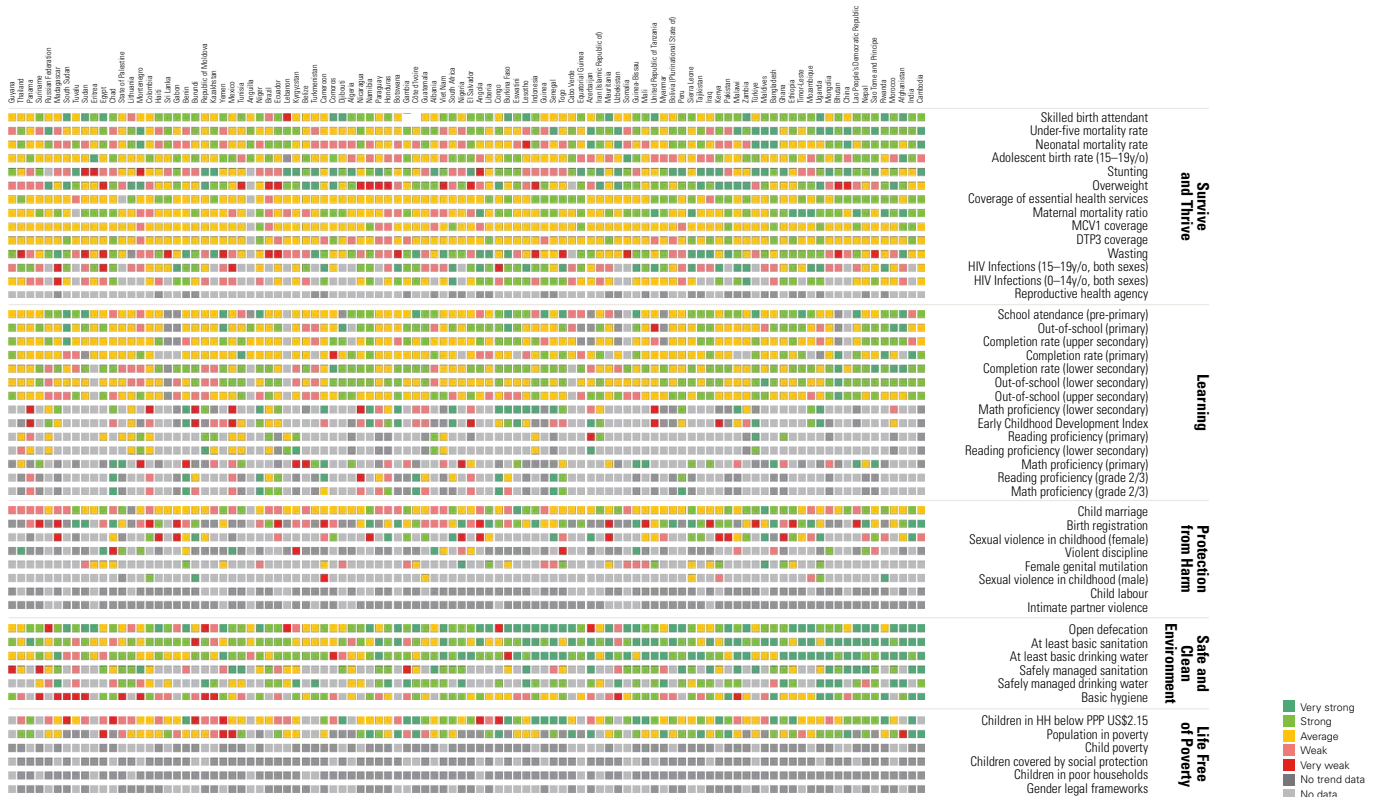
Figure 2b. Heat map displaying benchmarking results of the historical rate of progress on child-related SDGs by country and indicator



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/>



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

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).

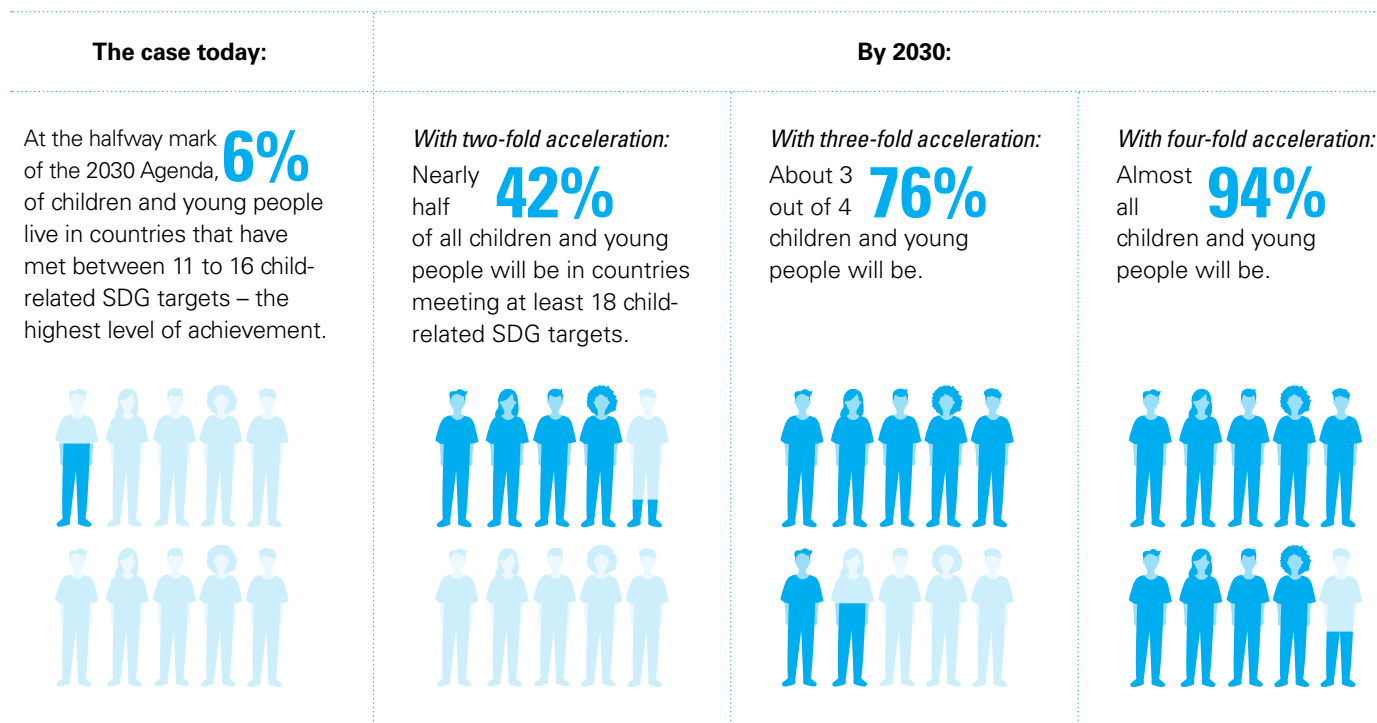
The UNICEF simulations presented in this report show that with focus and investments, accelerating progress towards realizing the vision of the 2030 Agenda is possible (see Figure 3). If countries double or triple their rate of improvement and match the strongest performance of their respective regions, 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.



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.

© UNICEF/UN0505807/UNICEF Sri Lanka

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.



Sima Gul pours a glass of water from her family's new water tap. For the first time, she has clean, drinkable water right near her home.

© UNICEF/UNI398362/Bidel

Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) lay out a comprehensive road map for global progress. At the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda, we are presented with a crucial moment to assess and reflect on standing global commitments, and countries and partners must view it as a turning point to calibrate and renew investments to accelerate results. In particular, we must spotlight the SDG targets that pertain to our collective future: our children.

In 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) established children as distinct rights holders in diverse areas. Emphasizing child-related SDGs is therefore not only relevant but paramount: As the well-being of children has implications for our world today and tomorrow, child rights must stand at the heart of country efforts to achieve sustainable development.

This report aims to provide an in-depth understanding of children's rights by examining progress and the path ahead. By assessing available data for 48 child-related SDG indicators, it provides a rich, multisectoral picture of where and to what extent children are surviving and thriving, and where they are being left behind. Based on an analysis of progress and what must be done to achieve targets, it highlights the need for countries to take urgent action to further the realization of child rights across all contexts, and to make the necessary investments throughout the child's life-course.

The report is organized into five chapters:

Chapter 1 performs a critical halfway assessment of our progress towards achieving the child-related SDG targets, highlighting current global trends affecting children's well-being.

Chapter 2 benchmarks both the effort required and countries' levels of ambition across all child-related SDG indicators; this analysis is then used to identify indicators that might need game changers.

Chapter 3 describes the main barriers to accelerating progress, including financial constraints, crises, inequality and data gaps.

Chapter 4 introduces strategies for overcoming these obstacles, emphasizing the importance of ambitious and realistic SDG targets, community systems and data-driven decision making to accelerate progress.

Chapter 5 serves as a rallying cry for immediate action, underlining the need for high-level political commitment, efficient financing, climate action, child participation and the use of behavioural insights.

Above all, this report aims to spark meaningful dialogue and forge deeper partnerships with policymakers at the country level and around the world in order to elicit action towards achieving our common goal of a safer and more equitable future for all children.



On 14 October 2021 in Kananga, Kasai-Central Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Clarisse Nalula (standing) teaches children in a classroom newly constructed with UNICEF support at Tshikungula Primary School.

Assessing the well-being of children

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 who are furthest behind first. This foundational tenet of the 2030 Agenda embodies a collective pledge by nations worldwide to ensure that all individuals flourish in a sustainable environment where their rights and welfare are ensured. 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 SDGs are interconnected and interdependent, achieving them creates the pathway to systemic, structural and long-term change for every child.

Today, at the halfway point of the deadline set for 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?

To answer these questions, UNICEF examined the available data on the 48 child-related SDG indicators, which the agency regularly monitors. Exploring the progress, specifically, of child-related SDGs helps policymakers spotlight the distinct challenges and opportunities associated with safeguarding children’s rights and ensure children are included in equitable, sustainable development.

This chapter centres on the lives of children today, as seen through these indicators. They are grouped into five broad domains related to children: 1) Survive and Thrive, 2) Learning, 3) Protection from Harm, 4) Safe and Clean Environment, and 5) Life Free of Poverty. The chapter also highlights national, regional and global progress, capturing how well we have delivered on improving children’s well-being and where more efforts are needed.

This section also illuminates how the 2030 Agenda has helped shape the ways in which we measure and monitor children’s rights. These innovations are not only critical to evidence-based policies and programming, but also mark important milestones to monitor dimensions of children’s well-being that have never been quantified before – which, in practice, means children can be better protected.

Overview of child well-being today

Understanding improvements needed for child-related SDG targets

In the early phases of the 2030 Agenda, SDG progress was assessed by looking at the level to which targets had been attained nationally, regionally or globally. More recently, progress has been assessed using the current rate of improvement to see whether a country is on track for (or has already reached at a certain point in time) the target, or whether acceleration is needed.

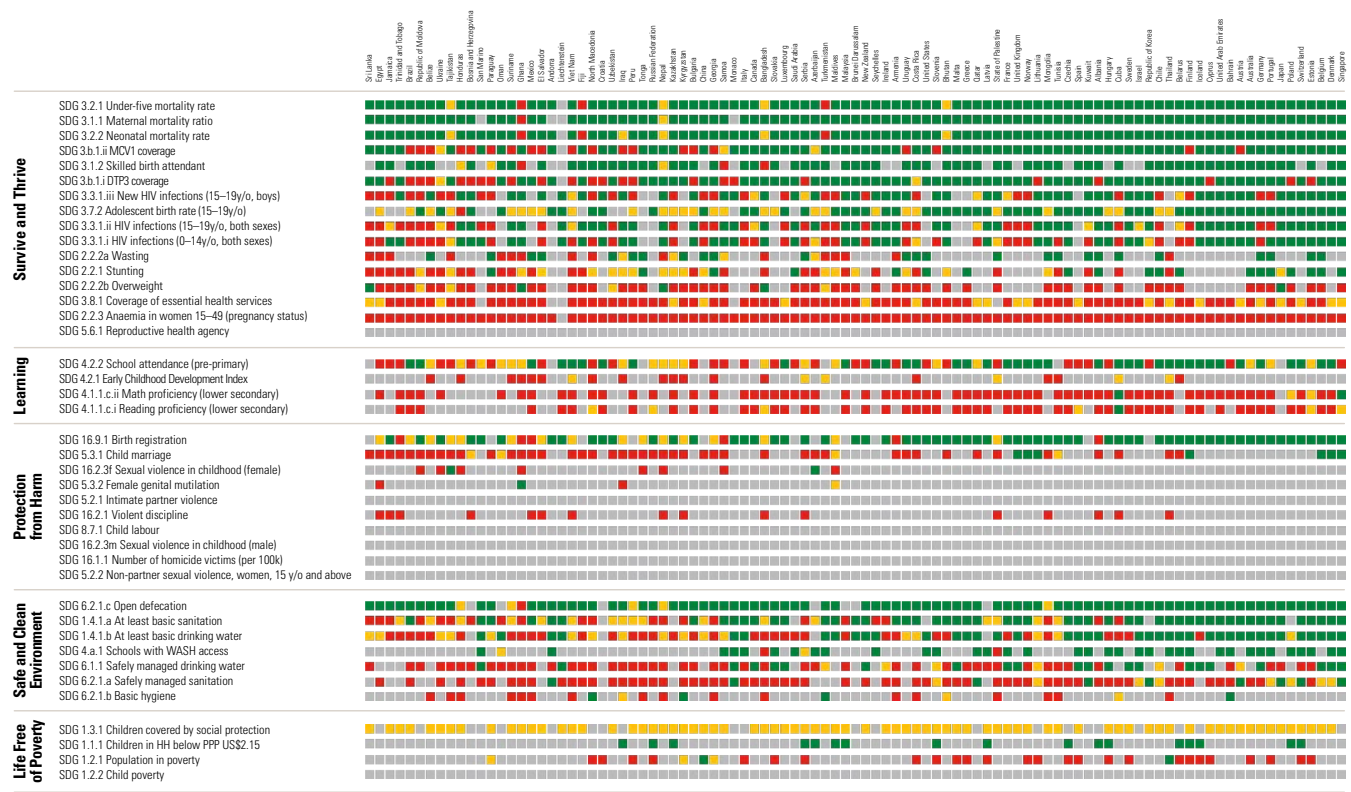
Using this approach, the heat map below summarizes the rate of improvement across multiple countries and indicators (see Figure 4). It makes it clear that the greatest obstacles – dots shown in red, where the largest number of indicators are off track – are faced in sub-Saharan Africa, depicted on the left-hand side of the graph. When we look at data availability by outcome area, data gaps – dots shown in grey – are most pronounced in two areas: Learning (quality education) and Protection from Harm.

The largest number of indicators are off track in sub-Saharan Africa; more data are needed to better monitor Learning and Protection from Harm.

Figure 4. Heat map on child-related SDG status by indicator and country



Source: UNICEF staff calculations based on values of UNICEF Global Database (as of June 2023) following TCG methodologies of respective indicators, <https://data.unicef.org/dv_index/>.



Source: UNICEF staff calculations based on values of UNICEF Global Database (as of June 2023) following TCG methodologies of respective indicators, <https://data.unicef.org/dv_index/>.

Progress varies significantly across the five outcome areas that pertain to children. A snapshot of select indicators for each area offers important insights into the current situation of children around the world.

Survive and Thrive⁷

Over the last 30 years, notable progress has been made in child survival, leading to millions more children having better chances at life than before. The global under-five mortality rate declined by 59 per cent, from 93 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 38 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2021. Challenges persist, however.

Nearly half of all deaths in children younger than 5 are attributed to undernutrition.

Routine immunization has declined, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic: For instance, coverage for the third dose of the diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis vaccine (DTP3), a widely used metric to gauge routine immunization, decreased from 86 per cent in 2019 to 81 per cent in 2021, dropping to the 2008 level.

Globally, in 2021, 5 million children died before turning 5 years old. The high risk of death among the youngest children also results in a disproportionate deaths burden among neonates (0–27 days). While the neonatal period is just 1 out of the 60 total months in the first five years of life, almost half of global deaths under age 5 (2.3 million) occurred among newborns. In addition, nearly 2 million babies were stillborn in 2021.

Thus, ensuring the survival of all children starts with the youngest ages, where mortality rates are typically highest (whereafter the rates decline with age into early adolescence). Globally, in 2021, the neonatal mortality rate was 18 deaths per 1,000 live births, but among children aged 1–4 years it was 10 deaths per 1,000 children aged 1 year. The mortality rate in early adolescence (ages 10–14) was 2.7 deaths per 1,000 adolescents aged 10 years.

In addition to the variation in risk of death by age, chances of survival



diverge considerably across countries and regions. Across countries, in 2021, neonatal mortality rates ranged from less than 1 death per 1,000 live births to almost 40 deaths per 1,000 live births. In middle childhood (ages 5–9), rates ranged from less than 1 death per 1,000 children aged 5 years to 21 deaths per 1,000 children aged 5 years.

Globally, the 1–4-years age group has seen the greatest percentage decline in mortality rate since 2000, dropping by 59 per cent. Across under-five age groups, reductions in mortality rates decline as age decreases: For instance, the neonatal mortality rate dropped by just 43 per cent since 2000, while 1–11-months mortality declined by 52 per cent since 2000.

Meanwhile, the adolescent age groups show the smallest declines among all ages – rates for both adolescent groups (ages 10–14 (early) and ages 15–19 (late)) declined by less than a third since 2000.

If current trends continue, about 40 million children younger than age 5 will die before 2030 – with nearly half of those deaths projected to occur in the first month of life. Another 4.5 million deaths will occur in middle childhood, 3.0 million in early adolescence and 4.9 million more in late adolescence.

The leading causes of death among children under 5 include premature birth and birth complications (such as birth asphyxia/trauma), acute respiratory infections, diarrhoea and malaria. As children age through middle childhood and into adolescence – especially late adolescence – causes such as violence, accidents and maternal causes for late adolescent girls become more prominent in the cause-of-death structure. Furthermore, children in rural settings often fare worse than their urban counterparts, and children from the relatively poorest households also tend to be worse off in their chances of survival compared to children from the wealthiest households.

While the direct impact of COVID-19 on the mortality of children and young people appears limited, the indirect effects of the pandemic are hampering efforts to combat childhood disease through vaccination and nutrition programmes. Meanwhile, children and adolescents face a host of other threats to their survival in the form of emergencies and crises. Conflict and climate disasters not only cause direct mortality of children and adolescents but also represent a serious impediment to the continuous provision of life-saving interventions.



A baby, who is an Ivorian refugee and has malaria, sits on a bed at the UNICEF-supported Martha Tubman Hospital in the town of Janzon in Grand Gedeh County.

© UNICEF/UNI118082/Pirozzi

SDG indicator 3.b.1 is used to monitor the progress of the vaccination of children, with a global vaccination coverage target of 90 per cent by 2030. Based on the latest WHO/UNICEF Estimates of National Immunization Coverage (WUENIC, 2022 revision), global immunization coverage has shown steady increases since 2000. In 2022, global coverage of DTP3 stood at 84 per cent, while the first dose of measles-containing-vaccine (MCV1) was 83 per cent; this is 6 and 7 percentage points short of the 90 per cent target, respectively.

There are large regional inequities in vaccination coverage, with DTP3 coverage in 2022 ranging from 72 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania to 93 per cent in Europe and Northern America. In 2022, just over half (53 per cent) of countries had reached the DTP3 target of 90 per cent or higher, accounting for 86 per cent

of countries in Central and Southern Asia and 80 per cent of countries in Europe and Northern America, compared to 27 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa and 36 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Despite general increasing trends in immunization coverage, global vaccination coverage levels backslid over the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic due to service and supply chain disruptions, resource diversion to response efforts, and containment measures that limited immunization service access and availability. Globally, the percentage of children who received DTP3 fell 5 percentage points between 2019 and 2021, from 86 per cent to 81 per cent. As a result, 24 million children were un- or under-vaccinated in 2021 – which is 6 million more than in 2019. Of these, 18 million were zero-dose, meaning they did not receive a single dose of DTP.

While progress has been made in reducing HIV incidence among children aged 0–14 years and adolescents aged 15–19 years, the world is not on path to reach the 2030 targets globally, especially in the least developed countries (LDCs). Between 2010 and 2022, globally, there was a decline in HIV incidence among children aged 0–14 years by 58 per cent and among adolescents aged 15–19 years by 49 per cent. COVID-19 did impact delivery of HIV services (e.g., viral load testing machines were used for COVID diagnostics). There was, however, a rebound in HIV service delivery back to pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels.

When disaggregating the data by gender among all adolescents, there are no key differences in which regions have met the SDG HIV incidence target and which regions are on track to meet it. For instance, Middle East and North Africa



and South Asia have already met the 2030 SDG target for adolescent girls and boys aged 15–19 years.

Stunting, wasting and overweight in children under 5 are the three SDG indicators on the nutritional status of children. Well-nourished children grow and develop to their full potential both physically and cognitively and are better equipped to lead healthy lives, to be free from poverty, to learn and participate, and to continue thriving across the life-course, with benefits that continue over generations.

Stunting has declined steadily over the past two decades. Today, there are 56 million fewer children suffering from stunting compared with 2000. Compared with 2012 (the SDG baseline year for nutrition), the number of countries with very high stunting prevalence i.e.,

(over 30 per cent) has also declined significantly, by 40 per cent. In the past decade, lower-middle-income and upper-middle-income countries have decreased the number of children affected by stunting by 20 per cent and 30 per cent, respectively (no decrease was observed in low-income countries). These important achievements demonstrate that large strides are possible, and progress needs to be maintained and extended to the 148 million children under 5 (representing 22.3 per cent) affected by stunting globally, the majority of whom reside in Asia and Africa. With no change in the current trajectory, the SDG target of reducing the number of children stunted by 50 per cent will be missed by a deficit of 40 million. At current rates of progress, in 2030, the stunting prevalence of children living in the poorest quintile will be more than double the stunting prevalence of the richest quintile. This pattern holds true in the Eastern and Southern Africa region (2.6 times), West and Central Africa region (3 times), and the South Asia region (2 times).

Wasting persists at an alarming rate in both emergency and non-humanitarian contexts. At least 45 million⁸ children under 5 (6.8 per cent) are suffering from wasting, and around one third of these children are suffering from severe wasting, the most lethal form of undernutrition, which also increases during crises. Most children with wasting – 70 per cent – live in Asia and more than one quarter live in Africa. The 2022 estimate is more than double the 2030 target of less than 3 per cent i.e., (considered no longer a public health problem). Recent developments in the scale-up of early detection, optimized treatments, targeted prioritization and support to the Global Action Plan on Wasting can serve as the catalyst for unprecedented acceleration towards eliminating wasting in many children.

There are 37 million children under 5 who are overweight. A reversal in trajectory is needed for the 2030 target of 3 per cent prevalence i.e., (considered

no longer a public health problem) to be achieved. Overweight and obesity pose health problems throughout the life-course. Children who are overweight are at a higher risk of type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, asthma and other respiratory problems, sleep disorders and liver disease.⁹ They may also suffer from the psychological effects of low self-esteem, depression and social isolation.¹⁰ Overweight and obesity during childhood often persist into adulthood, leading to lifelong health problems including higher rates of non-communicable diseases. There has been no change in the number of children affected by overweight – in any region – for the last decade. A serious concern is that the prevalence of overweight increases into adolescence and adulthood¹¹ – latest estimates indicate that overweight prevalence is 20.6 per cent in 5–9-year-olds, 17.3 per cent in 10–19-year-olds and 38.9 per cent in adults 18 and above. Even more worrisome is that about a third of adolescents and adults affected by overweight, and 44 per cent of children aged 5–9 years affected by overweight, were considered to have obesity; the prevalence of obesity more than doubled among children and adolescents between 2000 and 2016.

From 2000 to 2020, the global maternal mortality ratio¹² (MMR) declined by 34 per cent, from 342 deaths per 100,000 live births to 223 deaths per 100,000 live births. While the average annual rate of reduction was 2.7 per cent during the MDG period, for the period between 2016 and 2020 it was -0.03 per cent (which represents a slight increase in estimated global MMR). It is plausible that the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the stagnation seen during 2016–2020.

Apart from Latin America and the Caribbean, the MMR declined in all regions between 2000 and 2020. Central and Southern Asia achieved the greatest overall reduction of around 70 per cent. There are large inequalities in maternal survival between regions. Almost 95 per cent of all maternal deaths occurred in

low-income and lower-middle-income countries in 2020, and most could have been prevented. Sub-Saharan Africa alone accounted for around 70 per cent of maternal deaths.

Competent skilled attendance at birth (SAB) is key to reducing maternal and newborn morbidity and mortality. Globally, in 2022, skilled health professionals assisted 86 per cent of births, but coverage continues to be uneven around the world, with significant discrepancies between regions. Over the past two decades, SAB coverage has improved across almost all SDG regions. Coverage has approximately doubled in sub-Saharan Africa (from 38 per cent in 2000 to 70 per cent in 2022) and more than doubled in Central and Southern Asia (from 38 per cent in 2000 to 89 per cent in 2022).¹³

Despite progress made in the past decades, large equity gaps remain, with rural and poor populations often left behind. Globally, in 2022, approximately 77 per cent of births among rural mothers were attended by skilled health personnel, compared to 93 per cent of births among urban mothers. Women in the richest quintile were around 1.5 times more likely than women in the poorest quintile to have a skilled birth attendant at delivery (96 per cent versus 69 per cent).¹⁴

SDG target 5.6 aims to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights. While trend data are not available for SDG 5.6.1, among the 38 countries with available data wide variation is observed, ranging from 2 to 76 per cent of girls who make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use and reproductive health care.

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely disrupted health systems and essential health services. Interruptions in essential health services were reported in 92 per cent of 129 countries surveyed¹⁵ at the end of 2021. These disruptions were found across all major areas of health, including maternal and child health, affecting both MMR and SAB.

Learning¹⁶

With the unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 crisis, education systems cannot return to the 'business-as-usual' approaches of the pre-pandemic period. School closures have exacerbated the pre-existing learning crisis: Simulations suggest that the rate of learning poverty i.e., – the share of 10-year-old children who cannot read and understand a simple text – (an estimation is already implied by 'simulations suggest') increased from 57 per cent to 70 per cent in low- and middle-income countries between 2019 and 2022.¹⁷ The pandemic presented an opportunity to reset education systems, spurring innovations and interventions that help address widening disparities. With schools now reopened, education systems must continue to seek new approaches to achieve not only the full recovery of learning, but also the acceleration of learning needed to meet SDG 4 on universal quality education by 2030.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO),¹⁸ so far three in four countries have submitted national SDG targets, to be achieved by 2030, for at least one of seven key education indicators: early childhood education attendance; out-of-school rates; completion rates; gender gaps in completion rates; minimum proficiency rates in reading and mathematics; trained teachers; and public education expenditure. Benchmarks are the least forthcoming on gender gaps and learning outcomes.

The latest UNESCO SDG monitoring report highlights where countries' progress rates are regressing and support is required. Among countries with data and national targets, most are progressing well on primary completion rates, but out-of-school rates regressed in 1 in 10 countries between 2015 and 2020. At least one in three countries regressed in learning proficiency and in trained teachers at the pre-primary and primary levels.

Some countries' national benchmarks demonstrate very high ambition,

committing to improve faster than the historic rate of the top 25 per cent of countries. Ambitions are particularly high for improving learning outcomes at the primary level among poorer countries with low starting values, which may be because these countries lack data and are less familiar with its progress.

One in three countries – and two in three low-income countries – do not meet either of the two minimum national benchmarks on education finance. Among countries with data, 64 per cent of low income countries and 29 per cent of middle- and high-income countries fell below both benchmarks. Data availability is a more important issue in poorer countries: 24 per cent of low-income countries, 15 per cent of middle-income countries and 6 per cent of high-income countries report no data on public expenditure.

Protection from Harm¹⁹

For the first time, a universal call for action and targets to end violence against children is officially part of the global development agenda. The types of violence that children are exposed to, and the possible effects, tend to change as they get older and interact with a wider array of people outside the home, including peers, teachers, neighbors and romantic partners.

Thus, one of the indicators in this target reflects children's exposure to violent disciplinary practices. The proportion of children aged 1–14 years experiencing violent discipline is above 60 per cent in the vast majority of countries. Exposure to this form of violence at home is pervasive and widespread. It does not tend to show significant disparities by household or child characteristics. Currently, however, slightly more than half of countries worldwide (around 54 per cent) do not have internationally comparable data. Of the 93 countries with such data, the majority are low- and middle-income and lack sufficient trend data to assess progress.²⁰

A second indicator measures the issue of human trafficking and, while not child-specific, disaggregation by age is required. In 2020, around one in three detected victims of trafficking globally were minors (i.e., under age 18). Across regions, there are significant disparities. Slightly more than 70 per cent of victims detected in Latin America and the Caribbean and 60 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa were minors, compared to fewer than half in the other regions.

A third indicator captures experiences of sexual violence in childhood. Reported levels of sexual violence in childhood among young women is below 5 per cent in the majority of countries with available data. Measuring this issue, however, comes with a unique set of methodological, ethical and resource-capability challenges. Two thirds of countries lack internationally comparable data on sexual violence against girls and there are only 12 countries worldwide that have produced such data on boys.²¹

While early speculation about the impact of COVID-19 on violence against children, primarily in the media, was that service disruptions and confinement measures would lead to an increase in its levels, the available research and evidence has revealed a more mixed picture. A review of relevant articles and papers published from March to December 2020 found that there was a decrease in police reports and referrals to child protective services during periods of lockdown but an increase in child abuse-related injuries treated in hospitals.

Slightly more than half of countries (around 58 per cent) do not have comparable data for global monitoring and reporting on early childhood development and another one in five lack sufficient data to assess trends and progress. In most of the 85 primarily low- and middle-income countries with data, more than half of children aged 3 and 4 years are developmentally on track overall, with no significant differences by

sex. The proportion of children who are developmentally on track, however, varies widely across countries, from lows in the mid-30s to highs over 90 per cent.²²

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, access to early childhood care and education (ECCE) was severely disrupted or restricted, potentially

female genital mutilation has been nearly universal for generations and continues to affect at least 9 in 10 girls and women. In other countries, it is practised only among a subset of the national population but remains resistant to change in these communities. Still other countries have made progress, including some where



On 6 September 2022, Naseema Baloch (age 22) walks back to her home after receiving WASH kits distributed in the village of Achropat, which is located on the far edge of Bela Tehsil, Lasbela District, Balochistan province, Pakistan.

© UNICEF/UN0701798/Zaidi

compromising the healthy developmental trajectory of many children. The effect of COVID-19 related ECCE disruptions were estimated to result in nearly 11 million additional children falling 'off track' in their early development.

Another target seeks the elimination of harmful practices including female genital mutilation by 2030; among the countries where it is practised, progress towards that goal is mixed. In some countries

the practice was once nearly universal and is now on the decline.

Child marriage is addressed in the SDG framework with a target centred on child marriage among girls. Although the practice is more common and pernicious among girls than boys, it does occur among boys, too. Worldwide, one in five young women were married in childhood. The highest levels of the practice are seen in sub-Saharan Africa, followed by

South Asia. The practice has become somewhat less common over time, with progress driven by a great reduction in South Asia (the region that remains home to the largest absolute number of child brides). On the other hand, progress has been slow in many other parts of the world. West and Central Africa, home to the countries with the highest levels of child marriage in the world, has seen little progress. In Latin America and the Caribbean, levels have not changed for at least three decades. While child marriage rates have decreased since the 1990s, 12 million girls become child brides every year. If this trend does not change, an additional 100 million girls will be married by 2030. Moreover, in the poorest nations, over one in five children are engaged in child labour.

Child marriage is more common among those from the poorest households, living in rural areas, and with the least education. These disparities reflect drivers of the practice, which include financial pressure and a lack of alternate opportunities for girls. Notably, such drivers can be exacerbated in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, conflict situations and extreme events driven by climate change. In such instances, the income shocks, interruption to services including education, and volatility have driven families to choose child marriage as a 'safe haven' for girls.

Safe and Clean Environment²³

Every day, over 1,000 children die before reaching their fifth birthday due to diseases caused by lack of safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).²⁴ The WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme is responsible for global monitoring of SDG targets related to WASH. Since 2015, 687 million people have gained access to safely managed drinking water, 902 million have gained safely managed sanitation, and over 1 billion have gained basic hygiene services. But achieving the SDG target of universal

coverage by 2030 will require a dramatic acceleration in current rates of progress.

Since 2015, coverage of safely managed drinking water has increased from 69 per cent to 73 per cent. Rural coverage has risen from 56 per cent to 62 per cent but urban coverage only rose from 80 per cent to 81 per cent as services have struggled to keep up with rapid urban growth. No SDG region is on track to achieve universal safely managed drinking water services (i.e., over 99 per cent coverage) by 2030. Consequently, as of 2022, 2.2 billion (roughly 1 in 4 persons) still lacked safely managed drinking water. This includes 703 million who still lack even a basic drinking water service, of whom half live in sub-Saharan Africa and a fifth live in Central and Southern Asia.

Moreover, 1.8 billion people collect drinking water from supplies located off premises, and in seven out of ten of those households women and girls are primarily responsible for water collection. In almost all countries with comparable data, the burden of water carriage remains significantly heavier for women and girls than for men and boys.

In addition, 2 out of 5 people (3.5 billion) lacked safely managed sanitation, with regional coverage varying widely in 2022. Since 2015, coverage of safely managed sanitation has increased from 49 per cent to 57 per cent (rising from 36 per cent to 46 per cent in rural areas and from 60 per cent to 65 per cent in urban areas). No SDG region is on track to achieve universal safely managed sanitation services (i.e., over 99 per cent coverage) by 2030. In 2022, 1.5 billion people still lacked even a basic sanitation service, two of whom lived in rural areas. This included 419 million who still practised open defecation.

Since 2015, coverage of basic hygiene services has increased from 67 per cent to 75 per cent (rising from 53 per cent to 65 per cent in rural areas but remaining largely unchanged at 83 per cent in urban

areas). Thus in 2022, 1 in 4 people (2 billion) lacked basic hygiene services, including 1.3 billion with facilities that lacked water or soap and 653 million with no handwashing facility at all at home.

A total of 53 countries, had nationally representative data about menstrual health indicators in 2022. Adolescent girls and women living in rural areas were more likely to use reusable materials or no materials at all. Adolescent girls and women in the poorest wealth quintile, in rural areas, and those with functional difficulties were more likely to lack a private place to wash and change their menstrual materials at home. Many adolescent girls and women did not participate in school, work or social activities during menstruation, but there is significant variation between and within countries. Awareness of menstruation before menarche varies in the countries with data, and girls who are unaware are much more likely have negative experiences.

Children and climate

Recently the Committee on the Rights of the Child emphasized the urgent need to address the adverse effects of environmental degradation – with a special focus on climate change – on the enjoyment of children's rights, and clarified the obligations of states to address environmental harm and climate change.²⁵ The Committee also explained how children's rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child apply to environmental protection, and confirmed that children have a right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

Furthermore, every child on Earth is now facing a triple planetary crisis of climate change, environmental pollution and biodiversity loss.²⁶ This crisis has already exposed nearly every child on every continent to climate and environmental hazards. One billion children – nearly half of the world's 2.4 billion children – live in countries classed as extremely high risk



In 2023, Yemen's deteriorating economy and collapsing basic services continue to be the main drivers of people's needs in all sectors.

© UNICEF/UN0819035/Alsunaidar

by UNICEF's Children's Climate Risk Index (CCRI).²⁷ In these high-risk countries, children face a vicious cycle of increasing exposures and vulnerabilities that greatly compromise their ability to survive, grow and thrive. The CCRI shows that 2 billion children are already exposed to high levels of pollution, 820 million face high exposure to heatwaves, and 600 million are at high exposure to vector-borne diseases. At the same time, some 920 million already suffer from water scarcity, 400 million live in high-risk cyclone-prone areas and 240 million face a high risk of coastal flooding.

Children are not only uniquely vulnerable to these risks – at significantly greater risk of harm than adults – but deprivations due to environmental degradation and climate change during a child's formative years can result in irreparable harm that affects

their entire lives and future prospects. As such this global emergency threatens decades of development and humanitarian gains. Today, more than three quarters of United Nations humanitarian appeals involve an extreme weather event, up from just over one third in 2001. These mounting challenges – combined with existing economic crises, armed conflicts and the continued effects of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world – increase the imperative to act now.

A Life Free of Poverty²⁸

In terms of multidimensional child poverty, according to data from close to 80 developing countries, almost half of children face at least one severe material deprivation.²⁹ Moreover, globally, roughly

only one in four children are covered by social protection.

In addition, calls for the end of all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere are included in the SDGs. Globally, on average, countries have in place 80 per cent of legal frameworks that promote, enforce, and monitor gender equality in marriage and family; 79 per cent of frameworks on violence against women; and 76 per cent on employment and economic benefits.

Only 26.4 per cent of children globally are covered by some type of social protection floor or system (indicator 1.3.1) as of 2020. In addition, these coverage rates vary greatly across regions. Europe and Central Asia records the highest social protection coverage with 82.3 per cent of

children being covered, while Africa has the lowest effective coverage with only 12.6 per cent of children receiving some type of social protection. There are no sufficient data to assess trends.

Child poverty, i.e., poverty as experienced by children individually, based on material deprivations they suffer, affects almost half of the children in the close to 80 countries with comparable data. Few countries have trends on child poverty. Even for many of the countries where more than one estimate exists, they are not strictly comparable as often the dimensions and indicators change. For the few countries with trend data, child poverty is estimated to have declined. Using strictly comparable data for South Asian countries, a decline of 5 to 15 percentage points (depending on the country) has been calculated.

During COVID-19, it was nowcasted that an additional 100–150 million would fall into multidimensional child poverty. It was, however, also projected they would recover in a few years.³⁰

Although trend data are sparse, intra-country differences are available for internationally comparable estimates (i.e., carried out using exactly the same dimensions, indicators, and thresholds across more than 80 countries). Child poverty for girls in rural areas is almost two times higher than for boys in urban areas. The child poverty rate in the province/state with the highest level is 2.5 times higher than in the province with the lowest rate.

The percentage of children in monetary poor households (based on the PPP US\$2.15 threshold) seems to have declined by 24 per cent since 2013. For estimates based on national poverty lines there are many countries with several points in time since the 2000s, but without disaggregation by age. This indicates that although the data and the national consensus exist around a clear definition of monetary poverty, countries lack the interest or political commitment to report on poverty by age.

Measuring progress towards reaching the child-related SDG targets: Methodology and key findings

Methodology to understand progress on child-related SDGs

The above overview of child well-being makes clear that countries have made uneven strides towards realizing the child-related SDGs. Acceleration has been inconsistent: Although there have been significant leaps forward, stark disparities and significant challenges remain. To shed light on this, it is important to move beyond the description of values and instead consider these developments relative

to the values of the indicators in the recent past. This latter approach offers policymakers greater meaning, context and, ultimately, interpretability of what their countries have been able to achieve. Note that the objective of analyzing the data across countries in this way is to help policymakers better understand their countries' level of performance and how meaningful these results are when compared against recent recorded history.

Box 1.

Benefits of using the distribution of standardized performance rather than performance across heterogeneous indicators

The strategy used in this report – to analyse performance against recent recorded history – provides a more nuanced picture of achievement or growth over time, indicating whether things are progressing as desired. This strategy is also used in public policy.

For example, in the education sector, when an educational board introduces a new mathematics curriculum, it is crucial to gauge its effectiveness over time. One method is to compare results against the average student score from the previous year; as schools adopt this new curriculum, they will evaluate performance not just within the current year's context, but also against how well students performed in the past. This consistent reference point allows schools to measure progress annually, irrespective of changes in student groups or exam difficulty each year. School administrators can, however, choose to benchmark students not against a single point, but against the previous year's exam score distribution: 10 per cent below 50 points, 20 per cent scoring 50–60, and so on, up to 5 per cent above 90. After the method's introduction, the current year's scores reveal shifts across this distribution, such as only 5 per cent now scoring below 50 and a noticeable increase in students scoring above 70. By comparing against the entire distribution rather than just an average, the district gains a nuanced view of where performance improvements or declines are occurring, offering far richer insights into the new curriculum's effectiveness.

In this report's analysis, recent data (from 2000 to 2022) was used to assess how much progress countries have made on various indicators. A country's performance on an indicator is defined by annualized change in the indicator value – the speed of change of an indicator either towards or away from the target.

To strengthen the comparability and check the robustness of the results, country performance was assessed against three different standards: global, in which all countries are compared equally against one another; income level, in which countries are compared against peers within the same World Bank income-level classification; and regional (using the regional definitions approved by the United Nations Statistical Commission for use in SDG monitoring), in which countries are compared against peers within the same region. In this report, analysis focuses on the global comparison. The full set of results of this exercise is available on an interactive dashboard.³¹

To simplify the interpretability of the results, country performance on child-related SDGs was classified by five fixed cut-offs.³² Using this standardization, the

average positions of all countries per indicator were grouped as either 'very strong' (above 80th percentile), 'strong' (60th–80th percentile), 'moderate' (40th–60th percentile), 'weak' (20th–40th percentile) or 'very weak' (below 20th percentile). The cut-offs are illustrated by different colours in Figure 5 and Figure 6, with above 80th ('very strong') corresponding to dark green and below 20th ('very weak') corresponding to red. Grey bars indicate the number of countries with no data or no trend data on the respective indicators.

Key findings of the analysis

Since 2000, many countries have been able to deliver results across several SDGs. As Figure 5 shows, a substantial number of countries at or systematically above the 60th percentile of performance – classified as 'strong' or 'very strong' – is observed across all outcome areas and SDG indicators, in addition to the countries that have already met their targets.³³ This relatively high standardized performance suggests that many countries have been able to deliver results across several indicators since the 2000s.

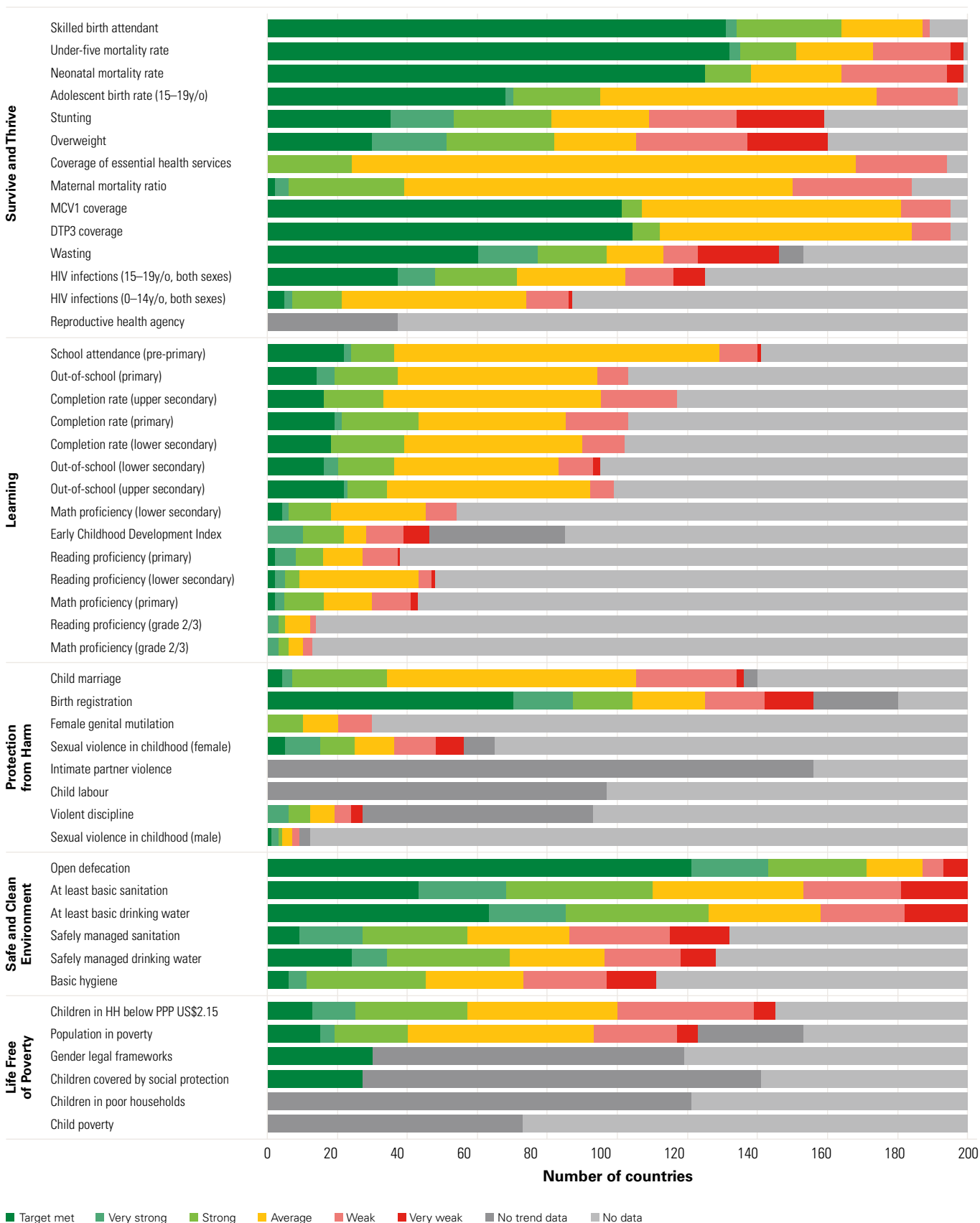
Progress remains uneven. As expected, there is wide variation across indicators

in countries' average percentiles of recent performance. For example, some indicators – such as under-five mortality, neonatal mortality or the proportion of the population practising open defecation – have countries falling in the bottom two categories – 'weak' or 'very weak'. Even for indicators with a large number of countries that have met their respective targets, there are still some countries with 'weak' or 'very weak' progress.³⁴ This illustrates that the reasons for low average recent performance are varied and a 'one-size-fits-all' approach would not result in acceleration, as what might have worked to deliver results for some countries might not be sufficient to those left behind.

Identifying outcome areas and indicators where countries are delivering results for children can inspire and inform the way forward in countries where acceleration is needed.



Figure 5. Number of countries classified by average recent performance of child-related SDGs organized by sectors



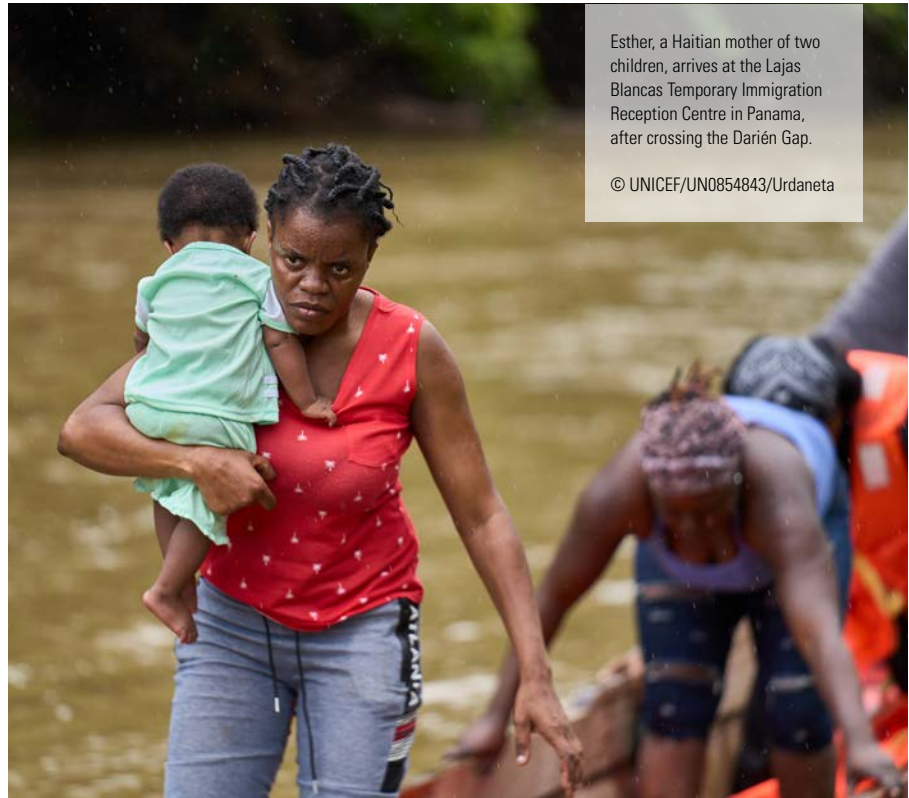
Source: Authors' calculation using UNICEF Global Database, accessed from Data Warehouse as of August 2023, <https://data.unicef.org/dv_index/>.

Note: For indicators under the Learning domain, the analysis includes only those countries that set national targets.

Data gaps persist. Lack of quality data is due in some cases to inadequate political commitment to solve the problem, and in others to the relative recency of the indicator and the global alignment around standards of measurement. The grey bars in Figure 5 also reveal the heterogeneity of the data gaps: Smaller data gaps are observed among indicators in the Survive and Thrive or Safe and Clean Environment outcome areas, while greater data gaps are observed in the Learning, Protection from Harm, and Life Free of Poverty outcome areas.

As discussed in Highlight 1 below, the indicators for which more data are available have been carried forward from previous international efforts, which may contribute to stronger data availability (either as empirical data or modelled estimates). Less data are available in several new areas introduced by the SDG agenda, such as learning, violence against children, early childhood development, and poverty measurement disaggregated by age. It is promising that in some of the indicators lacking trend data (dark grey), countries have at least one measure in place; however, this is not sufficient to indicate the direction of change and efforts must therefore continue in order to do so in the future.

This finding reflects that, in some cases, the global standard to measure these issues has just recently been achieved or, in other cases, there is a lack of political commitment to report on such issues. This is partly due to the time it has taken to establish international consensus on defining and measuring new aspects of child well-being. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the existence of top performers across all child-related SDGs, especially among low- and middle-income countries.

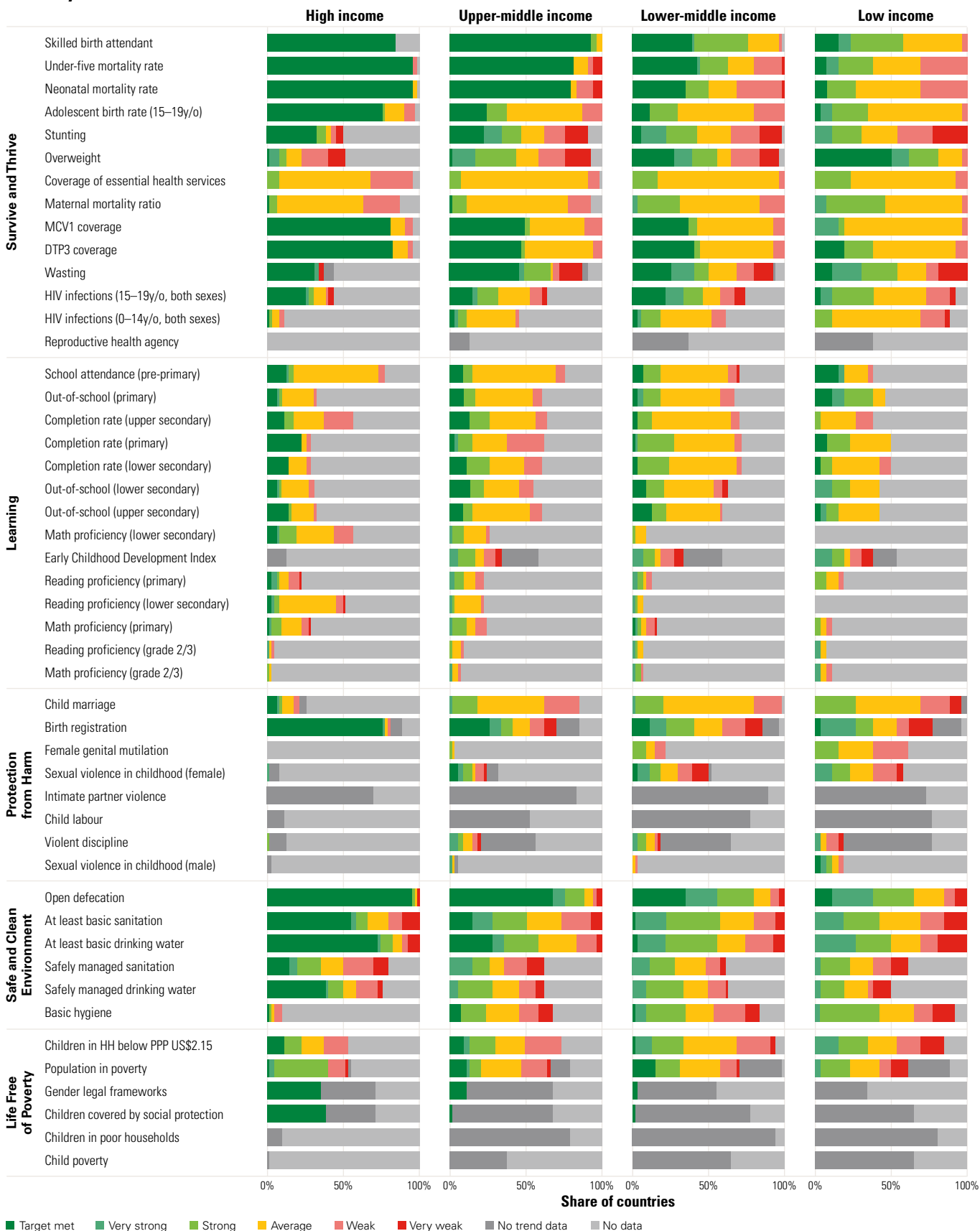


Diverse starting points between countries result in varying progress.

The results are further unpacked by outcome area and income group to identify where progress is being made and where it has stagnated. Figure 6 suggests that low-income countries have the strongest average percentile of recent performance while many high-income countries have already met targets across multiple indicators. In some outcome areas, high-income countries show stagnation or a modest performance. This could be either due to the fact that the absolute values of the indicators are already high in these countries and therefore only limited additional progress is realistically possible, or because the average recent performance in high-income countries may have plateaued and points to the challenges of going above and beyond to ensure that all goals are achieved for every child. To further understand this, country performance on indicators needs to be juxtaposed against the latest available values of indicators.

Context matters: Many high-income countries have met targets while low-income countries show the strongest recent performance but typically have much further to go in order to reach their SDG targets.

Figure 6. Share of countries classified by average recent performance of child-related SDGs organized by country income level



Source: Authors' calculation using UNICEF Global Database, accessed from Data Warehouse as of August 2023, https://data.unicef.org/dv_index/.
Note: For indicators under the Learning domain, the analysis includes only those countries that set national targets.

Analyzing these initial results does not provide insights into which countries have been systematically strong performers across indicators nor which actions and policies can be correlated with stronger results. This is simply because each SDG is being analysed independently from one another. The next chapter introduces a complementary analysis using heat maps to identify countries that have performed systematically well across multiple SDG indicators in different outcome areas.



On 5 March 2023, a girl is seen searching for her belongings amidst the ruins left by the fire that broke out in Balukhali refugee camp in Ukhia, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

© UNICEF/UN0798774/Sujan

HIGHLIGHT 1.

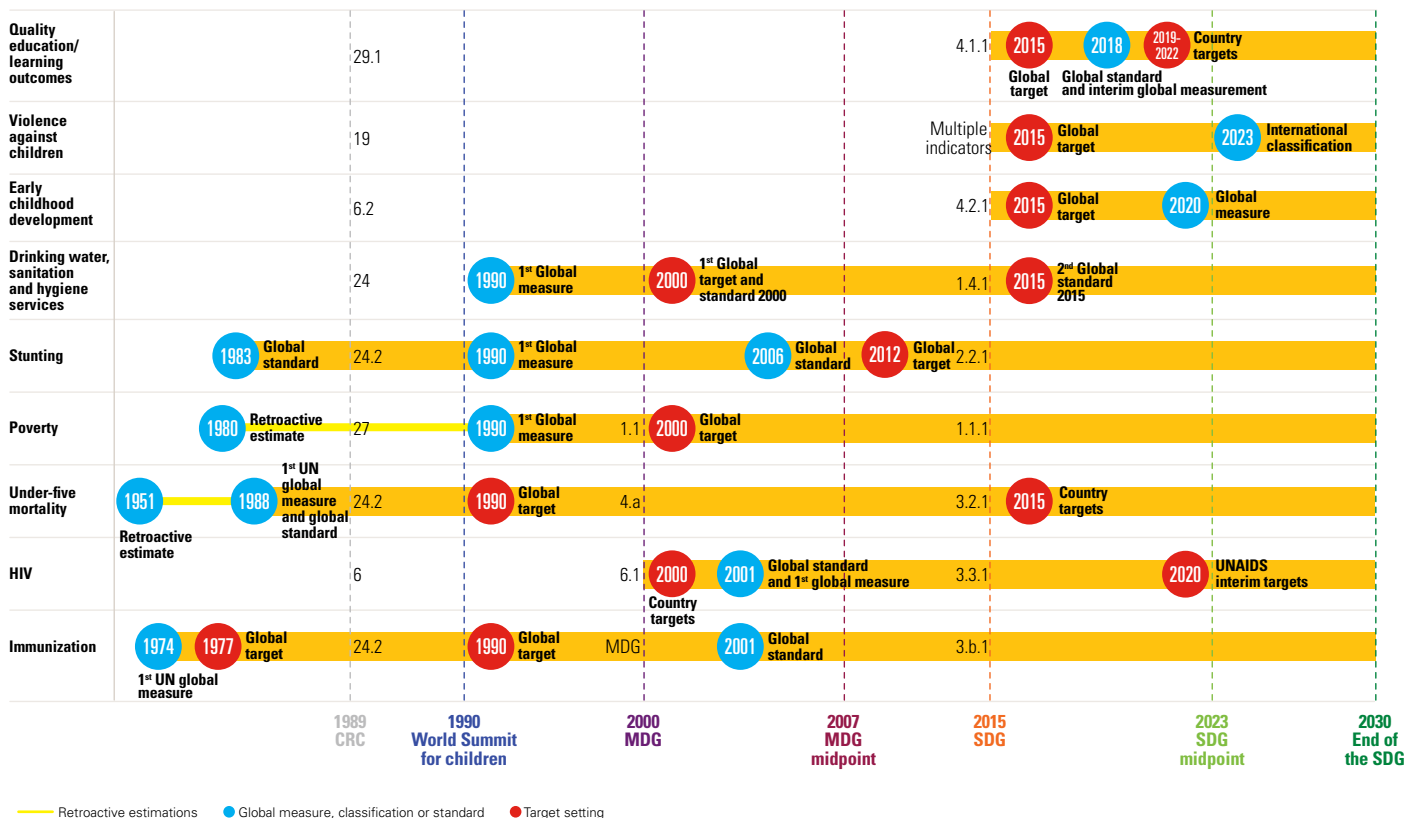
The 2030 Agenda: Galvanizing efforts to measure and monitor child well-being

The statistical framework has evolved to keep pace with an increasingly robust child rights agenda.

In 1989, the CRC articulated a wide range of areas in which children are rights holders, including health, nutrition, education, shelter, social security and protection against harm. Less than a year after the adoption of the CRC, the World Summit for Children was held, which adopted a World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children and a Plan of Action, which included 27 goals for enacting the declaration. Thus, the World Summit for Children highlighted the need to improve children’s lives via tangible and measurable goals.

The standardization of some measurement tools related to poverty (at the household level specifically) began around the same time as the CRC and World Summit for Children, with the launch of the World Development Report 1990³⁵ and the introduction of international poverty lines to compare extreme poverty globally (see Figure 7). In contrast, under-five mortality estimates have been available at the global level since the 1980s. Importantly, both these indicators could be estimated in some countries – depending on data availability – for some period preceding the CRC, allowing for a limited but better understanding of the historical global trends in child mortality and poverty.

Figure 7. Development of monitoring tools across different child rights



The era of global development goals

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were the international community's summary of the plans of action and goals agreed upon through the 1990s (including the World Summit for Children, the World Conference on Education for All, the International Conference on Population and Development, the Fourth World Conference on Women, and the World Summit for Social Development) to address poverty, promote social inclusion and gender equality, expand health care, enhance education, and many other aspects of child rights and well-being. Several of the MDGs consisted of indicators and targets related to rights enshrined in the CRC and echoed the sentiments and expanded upon the commitments of the World Summit for Children.³⁶

The MDG period saw the expansion of global standards that included improved global mechanisms and commitments for measuring progress on combatting HIV and improving immunization. The advent of the SDG period in 2015 further expanded the scope to include dimensions pertaining to child protection. For example, while access to education had been a global priority before 2015, the SDGs pivoted to focus on access to quality education. This shift towards tracking progress on quality education is unique to the SDG process, allowing us to understand whether children are acquiring the skills and knowledge to succeed and participate fully in society. Since this shift of focus in 2015, UNESCO – the SDG 4 custodian agency – has, in a relatively short span of time, established global measurement standards to help countries track progress and learn from each other.³⁷

The SDGs carry forward this mission, building on previous successes and efforts and expanding the scope from the MDGs' 8 goals to 17 goals. Collectively, these international instruments and processes draw upon each other to better monitor sustainable development (including some child rights and well-being indicators).

Sparking new ways to measure child well-being

It is hard to take action to tackle unknown problems. But the 2030 Agenda has spurred important progress in recent years to create, improve and strengthen the national, regional and global standards that help classify and measure critical domains of child well-being. Figure 7 illustrates this trajectory of measurement tools for selected dimensions: quality education, violence against children, early childhood development, access to water, sanitation, and hygiene, stunting, poverty, under-five mortality, HIV and immunization. The figure shows the critical role that international processes have played in monitoring different dimensions of child well-being, and how the expanded agenda of SDGs has galvanized efforts and enabled broader

monitoring of new critical domains for the first time, while fostering alignment at a significant speed.

Within four years of the establishment of the SDGs, UNICEF developed, validated and led the convening among countries, development partners and academics to create the Early Childhood Development Index 2030 (ECDI2030), a global standard for the measurement of early childhood development that monitors the achievement of key developmental milestones by children in early years.

The Sustainable Development Agenda also included indicators about violence against children, with the global community committing to end all forms of violence against children by 2030 and establishing four indicators to track progress on the goal. Despite the commitment, comparable data remains limited; to address this issue, UNICEF led the development of the International Classification of Violence against Children (ICVAC), which lays out internationally agreed concepts, definitions and principles on all forms of violence against children.³⁸ The operationalization of ICVAC is the next step in fostering the production of better data and enabling countries to produce comparable data on violence against children irrespective of differences in legislation across countries.

A clearer picture of children's lives

The breadth of the 2030 Agenda, its robust monitoring mechanism and the close association of child-related SDG targets with many articles of the CRC have significantly improved measurement of the situation of children. The well-being of children at an individual level can now be tracked and monitored across a wider array of dimensions than ever before, allowing policymakers to identify gaps in child rights and address them with conviction and nuance. These innovations in monitoring and measurement reinforce the immense value of these interconnected initiatives in UNICEF's pursuit of a better world for children.



A Rohingya refugee boy is happy to study at a UNICEF learning centre.

© UNICEF/UN0751759/Spiridonova

Using the SDGs to drive national-level conversations: The role of benchmarking

The SDG process has a strong indicator framework through which countries can report and monitor progress. Given the diverse starting points of countries, however, monitoring progress against targets can prove difficult. This makes it important to use a structured approach when evaluating progress and addressing challenges, keeping in mind that initial conditions will vary dramatically from country to country.

This chapter discusses countries' progress in achieving the child-

related SDG targets with the help of benchmarks, and also highlights the need for countries to set ambitious and realistic targets. Two benchmarking exercises provide concrete examples of how systematic investments in data, coupled with the availability, adoption and use of global standards that allow cross-country comparability of results over time, can be powerful resources to help countries understand and ultimately improve their performance in upholding their commitments to children. This section also emphasizes the importance

of taking action to address inequities and reiterates the need to invest in children throughout the life-course.

The benchmarking tools and methodologies described in this chapter, accompanied by an online dashboard, seek to provide policymakers with tangible insights into their stated efforts and level of ambition, allowing them to better understand if their actions are well aligned with their goals.

Moving beyond traditional assessments

Assessing progress to date and reaching targets

To chart and track how ambitious and how realistic country targets are (see Box 2), UNICEF created – for the first time – quantifiable country-level benchmarks for child-related indicators for which data are available to measure and monitor numerous child rights on a common scale. Benchmarking a country's target against a group of peer countries' recent performance on a specific indicator is a good starting point to assess what must be done to reach a goal and how feasible those expectations are.

Two benchmarking exercises were conducted that go beyond the broad classifications of 'on track', 'needing

acceleration' or 'no data to report on the SDG process'.³⁹ The resulting analysis and accompanying online dashboard provide valuable insights into how much additional effort might be required to achieve the child-related SDG targets while also, importantly, recognizing the results delivered by countries in the recent past. This approach provides a framework to assess ambition as well as the scale of action needed to realize it.

→ First, **2030 country targets** were benchmarked against where **countries are today** to show the effort required to meet the target.

→ Second, the **rate required to meet the target** was benchmarked

against a country's **recent rates of change** – or how quickly progress has been accelerating. This helps countries understand where the targets can be met by doing more of the same, where the scaling up of what exists might suffice (i.e., more financing might be enough), and last but not least, where – given the required acceleration – they must consider game changers.⁴⁰

The rank percentile anchored to the latest observed country values on each child-related SDG was used as a benchmark against where countries would like to be by 2030. For more details, see Annex 2.

Informing actions required to match target

When creating these benchmarks, it became clear that average required effort is not the same across different outcome areas. In fact, in the case of two outcome areas – Survive and Thrive and Learning – countries' required effort in the next seven years is significant, but much less than in the domains of Protection from

Harm, Safe and Clean Environment, and Life Free of Poverty, which – in some cases – reach a required average level of performance faster than has been recorded in recent history (i.e., progress at this speed has not been recorded since 2000).

This has broad implications, showing that the effort required is not uniform across outcome areas (nor respective

indicators). This indicates that certain outcome areas (and specific results) may require more attention, resources or effective strategies, and highlights the need for differentiated activities. The point of the benchmarking exercises is not to question or challenge the targets, but to offer a metric that can help inform actions required to match – or approach – these targets.

Box 2.

Ambitious and realistic targets: Vital to results for children

Setting ambitious and realistic country targets for 2030 and beyond is critical to achieving progress, maintaining focus and fostering accountability when it comes to delivering results for children.

Ambitious targets inspire motivation and innovation, encourage outside-of-the-box thinking and ask us to aim higher. But targets that are too far-fetched can become demotivating and lead to frustration and disappointment. Realistic targets ground aspirations in practicality, increasing the likelihood of effective planning and sustained commitment to reaching objectives or milestones.

Ambition, targets and action are interconnected when it comes to achieving results for children. Ambition represents the desire, belief and determination to achieve a specific outcome or target. Targets are the specific objectives or milestones set to measure progress and success. Action is the process of actively pursuing those targets through alignment, planning, financing and implementation. Without action, ambitions and targets remain mere aspirations.

Aligning ambition with lived experiences

Reality, however, is more complex. From a human rights perspective, the targets for child-related SDGs reflect the universality of the rights in question. For instance, when considering the right of every child to live free from violence, no level of violence against children is acceptable. Thus, the target is absolute: the complete eradication of violence against children. Recognizing this absolute target, the journey towards its realization is one of progressive realization.⁴¹ This means steadily working to ensure that these rights are fully realized, with the acknowledgment that the process may be gradual. This underscores the need to align ambitious objectives with the real-life experiences of the children UNICEF seeks to protect and serve, ensuring actions and targets are not only well intentioned but also grounded in justice and equity.

HIGHLIGHT 2.

Benchmarking and the SDG indicator framework

While the 2030 Agenda largely advocates for universal targets, the unique trajectory of each nation must be considered. The SDG process recognizes the divergence between nations, and from early on emphasized the importance of a shared responsibility for outcomes, a sentiment echoed by the United Nations Secretary-General's synthesis report *The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending poverty, transforming all lives and protecting the planet*. This shared responsibility can be enhanced when targets are country-owned and embedded in national development strategies.

The benchmarking of child-related SDG targets can help countries understand the effort and level of ambition required, which must then be met with concrete actions in order to be realized.

Benchmarking progress recognizes varied context and enhances accountability

Benchmarking is a systematic process of comparing an organization's performance, practices or processes against those of other entities (such as competitors, industry leaders, best-in-class companies or countries) or against historical data to identify areas for improvement, best practices and performance gaps. The goal of benchmarking is to learn from others' successes and failures, apply these insights to one's own organization, and drive continuous improvement and higher levels of performance.

Benchmarking the historical rate of progress and comparing it with the rates required to reach the target can be highly beneficial in goal setting and planning.

- 1. Informed goal setting:** Analyzing past progress provides valuable insights into the organization's or individual's capabilities and limitations. It helps set targets that are challenging yet feasible, based on the demonstrated pace of advancement.
- 2. Identifying gaps:** By comparing historical rates with the required rates to reach the target, one can identify any significant gaps. This process highlights potential obstacles and areas that need improvement to stay on track.

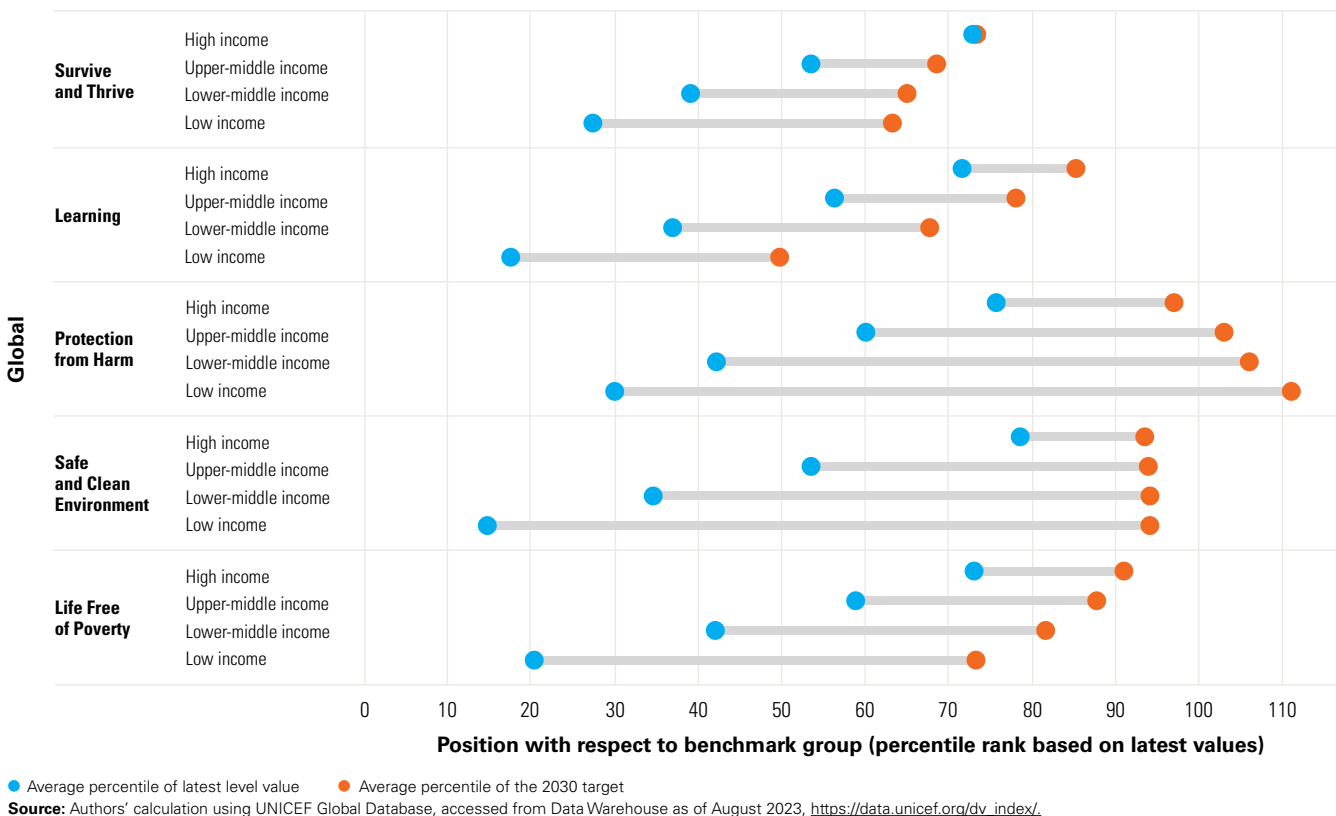
- 3. Realistic expectations:** Understanding the historical rate of progress allows for the establishment of realistic expectations for the future. It prevents setting overly ambitious targets that might not align with actual performance.
- 4. Course correction:** If the analysis reveals that past progress has been slower than expected, it signals the need for adjustments in strategies, resource allocation or timelines. It enables proactive course correction to avoid falling behind in reaching the target.
- 5. Motivation and accountability:** Benchmarking can serve as a motivator by showcasing achievements and milestones attained over time. Additionally, it holds individuals or organizations accountable for the progress they've made and the efforts required to meet future goals.
- 6. Resource allocation:** By understanding historical rates and required rates, resource allocation becomes more efficient. It helps in allocating resources where they are needed most and avoiding wasteful investments.

Benchmarking leverages the SDG indicator framework

Overall, benchmarking the historical rate of progress against the rates needed to reach a target facilitates a data-driven and pragmatic approach to goal setting. It empowers individual countries and organizations to set ambitious and realistic objectives while adapting their strategies to increase the likelihood of success.

The benchmarking of child-related indicators can help countries transform SDG indicators from metrics to powerful management tools. Countries can utilize benchmarks for strategizing, allocating resources effectively and closely monitoring their journey towards sustainable goals. Moreover, benchmarking enhances the value of the indicator framework by providing a comparative perspective. It allows countries to assess their progress not only in absolute terms, but also in relation to global and peer groups. Such a comparative analysis is vital for identifying best practices and areas of improvement, and for fostering a sense of national, regional and global accountability.

Figure 8. Comparative benchmarking of current status and 2030 targets across outcome areas and income groups



Key findings of benchmarking exercise #1: 2030 targets vs. where countries are today

The required effort needed to achieve 2030 targets varies within outcome areas by income group. The analysis described in Chapter 1 showed that the effort required to meet the targets differs by outcome area. By examining to what extent cross-country differences are observed – exploring these across income-level groups to simplify the analysis – this average can be further unpacked. As expected, the effort required by low-income countries is systematically higher than for any other country grouping (see Figure 8). But this expected finding is far from the full picture.

Distinctions by income group across indicators are not systematic. The distance to target varies by income group. Across different income groups, however, Protection from Harm stands out. In this domain, the 2030 targets – represented by orange dots – are significantly higher than others. This stark positioning reveals the disparate levels of effort required by countries based on their income: Low-income countries face a much steeper climb than their high-income counterparts. In other domains, such as Survive and Thrive, the dynamics are different. High-income countries on average have already met their 2030 targets, whereas other income groups lag behind. This discrepancy is influenced by the maturity of the indicators and the historical precedence of certain sectors.

As previously discussed, Survive and Thrive is a domain which has a long tradition of using targets to align policies and actors, and for which the availability of global standards and monitoring precedes the SDG process. In many areas, such as immunization, health, nutrition and HIV, country systems tend to be relatively better informed regarding scalable solutions.

In Learning – the outcome area that has most recently undergone a process of setting national benchmarks for SDG targets – the level of required effort is the most uniform across income groups. This is important as it clearly shows that, when asked, countries tend to set targets that are aligned with their existing conditions and specific country contexts.

Box 3.

The value of global and country targets

It is important to note that the process of setting country targets varied by indicators across outcome areas. In the case of extreme poverty, the SDG process did not establish country targets, as the only target agreed upon was decreasing extreme poverty to 3 per cent of the global population, while national monetary poverty and multidimensional poverty targets were to be nationally defined (with the general benchmark target of reducing by at least half by 2030); in other sectors, such as health and mortality, the SDG targets built on prior processes and benefited from the existence of longer time series to identify targets informed by past evidence.

More recently, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics engaged countries to define nationally determined expected contributions to the common education goal, using the concept of benchmarking embraced by the climate change sector and to some extent followed analytically in this report. Such a process has allowed for progress monitoring to be context specific, recognizing individual countries' starting points and education sector plans and helping link their national education agendas with regional and global agendas. In 2021, two in three countries committed to 2025 and 2030 target values for at least some of the benchmark indicators.⁴²



In October 2020, more than 1,600 UNICEF WASH and Dignity Kits and 36,000 single-use surgical face masks were distributed at the new Reception and Identification Centre at Kara Tepe refugee camp on Lesbos island in Greece, reaching the entire current population of the new facility, and supporting families and children address urgent hygiene and sanitation needs.

© UNICEF/UN0354305/Canaj/ Magnum Photos

Across children's well-being, expected performance required to meet targets varies.

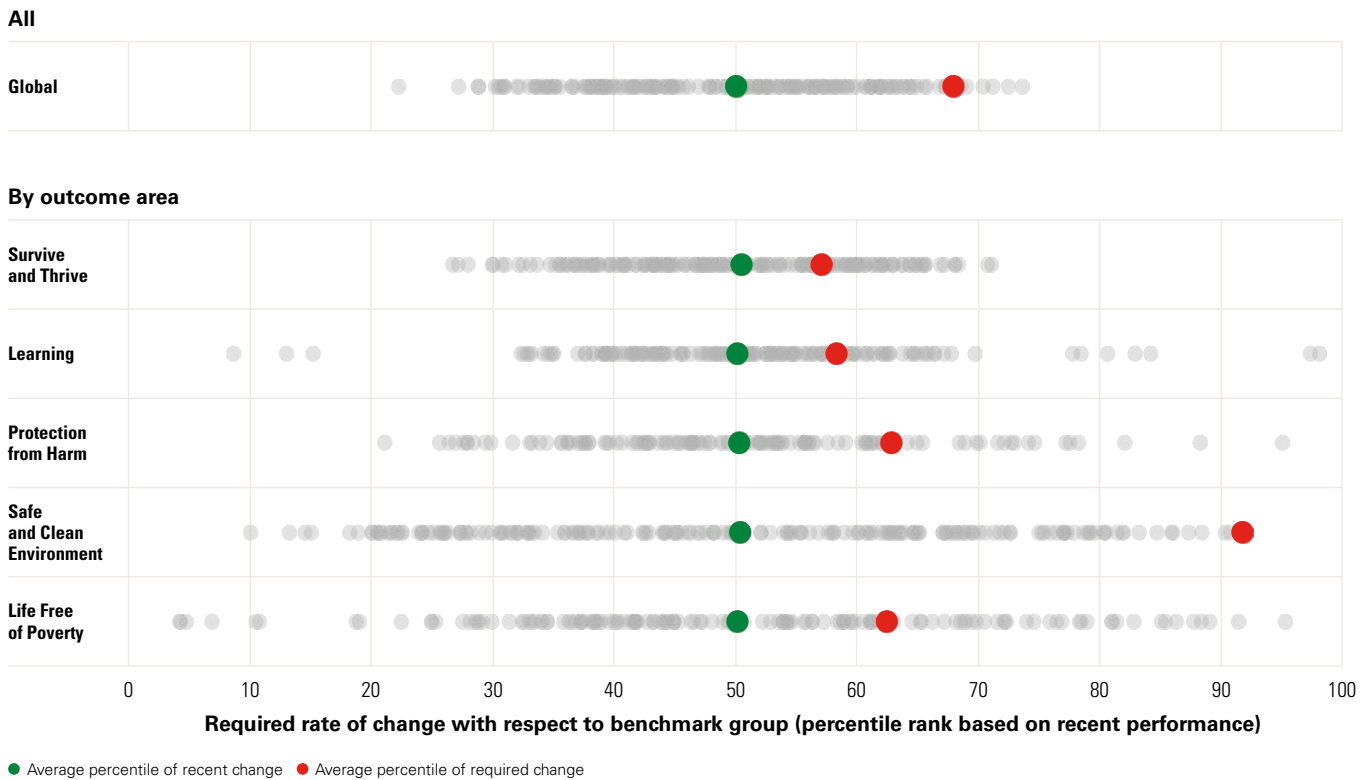
Key findings of benchmarking exercise #2: Comparing ambition and reality

Using the results of the first exercise, the recent rate of progress was used to benchmark a target's ambition level. In other words, country targets were compared against country performance over the recent past. Policymakers can use this information to guide and inform the most direct paths to achieving targets – and assess if these targets are realistic within the given timeframe.

For example, outcome areas and indicators in which historical and expected

performance are aligned indicate that more of the same will suffice for the country to reach the target. Countries would, however, need to evaluate their approaches to ensure progress does not plateau. Conversely, cases where the expected performance needs to accelerate by a modest amount indicate that solutions are likely available. Countries might still need to expand scale, however, for which financing is a crucial enabler. Last but not least, themes and/or groups of countries where the rate of change needs to accelerate substantially highlight areas where game changers are needed.

Figure 9. Benchmarking the expected rate of progress to meet the 2030 targets against the recent distribution of performance by outcome area



Source: Authors' calculation using UNICEF Global Database, accessed from Data Warehouse as of August 2023, https://data.unicef.org/dv_index/.
Note: Grey dots represent recorded episodes of change (i.e., year-on-year change) for a specific country and indicator.

The global average hides important differences across outcome areas.

For instance, in the education sector (Learning outcome area), the expected acceleration implies, on average, an increase from the 50th to the 58th percentile, while in the case of WASH (Safe and Clean Environment outcome area), countries are expected to increase from the 50th to 90th percentile (see Figure 9).

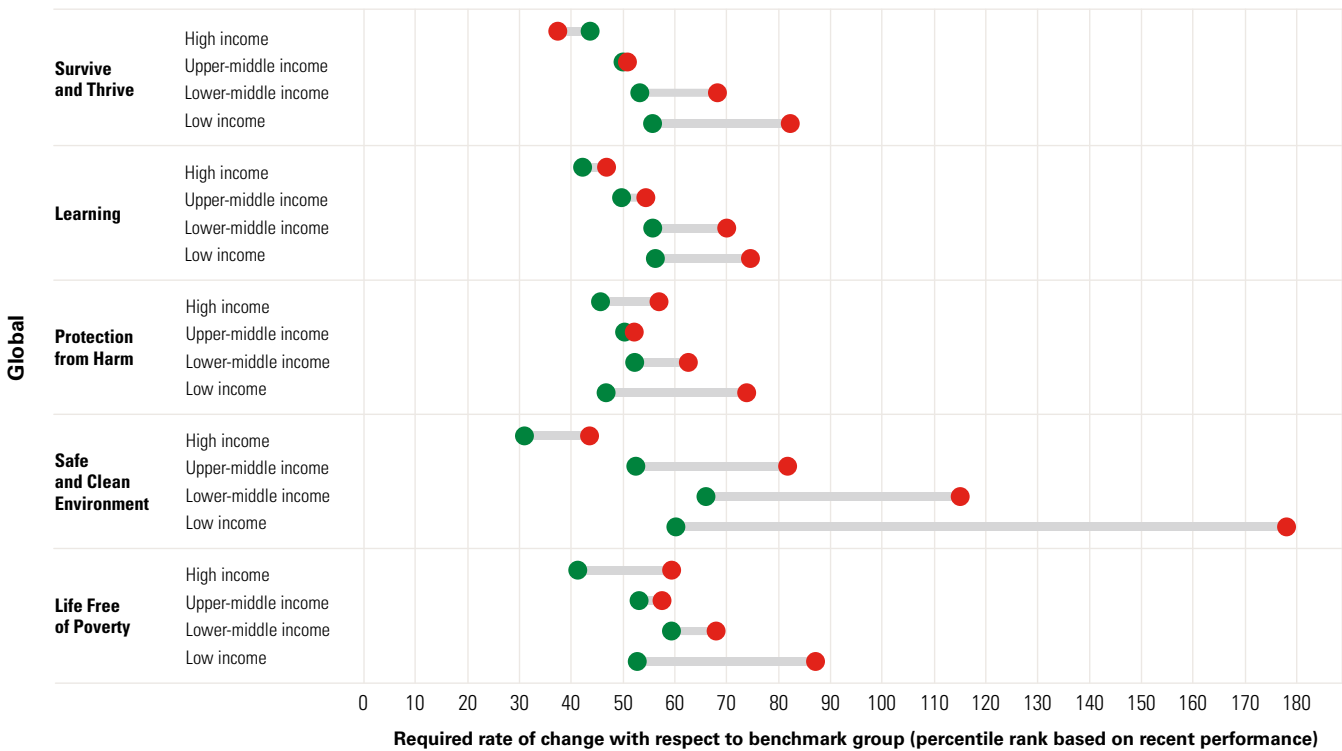
For most outcome areas, on average, the performance required to reach the target is within the realm of recent history – in other words, it has been done in the past 20 years, and can be done now. As the subsequent analysis shows, however, this is not homogenous across countries from different income groups.

Benchmarking by outcome area and income group highlights the need for transformation.

In two outcome areas – Safe and Clean Environment and Life Free of Poverty – the expected performance increase for low-income countries requires those countries to perform on average above the 85th per centile and up to the 180th percentile (i.e., the effort needed is almost double the effort recorded in recent history) (see Figure 10). This level of performance or acceleration has very few examples since the year 2000, indicating that the probability that countries might achieve this level of performance is quite unlikely and will only be possible through transformative measures, which will likely require a combination stronger leadership and partnerships at the country level, more funding, and in some cases better policies.

Without quick and transformative action, three outcome areas – Survive and Thrive, Safe and Clean Environment, and Life Free of Poverty – will fall far short of their targets.

Figure 10. Benchmarking the expected rate of progress to meet the 2030 targets against the recent distribution of performance by outcome area and income group



● Average percentile of recent change ● Average percentile of required change
 Source: Authors' calculation using UNICEF Global Database, accessed from Data Warehouse as of August 2023, https://data.unicef.org/dv_index/.

Game-changing strategies and investments are needed in many low- and lower-middle-income countries, as well as some high-income countries.

On average, these countries must boost their level of ambition by over 20 to 40 percentiles. Even with extensive coverage, high-income countries might need to increase their efforts by around 20 percentiles in certain areas to ensure every child gets a fair chance in life.

Transformative approaches vary by where countries stand today.

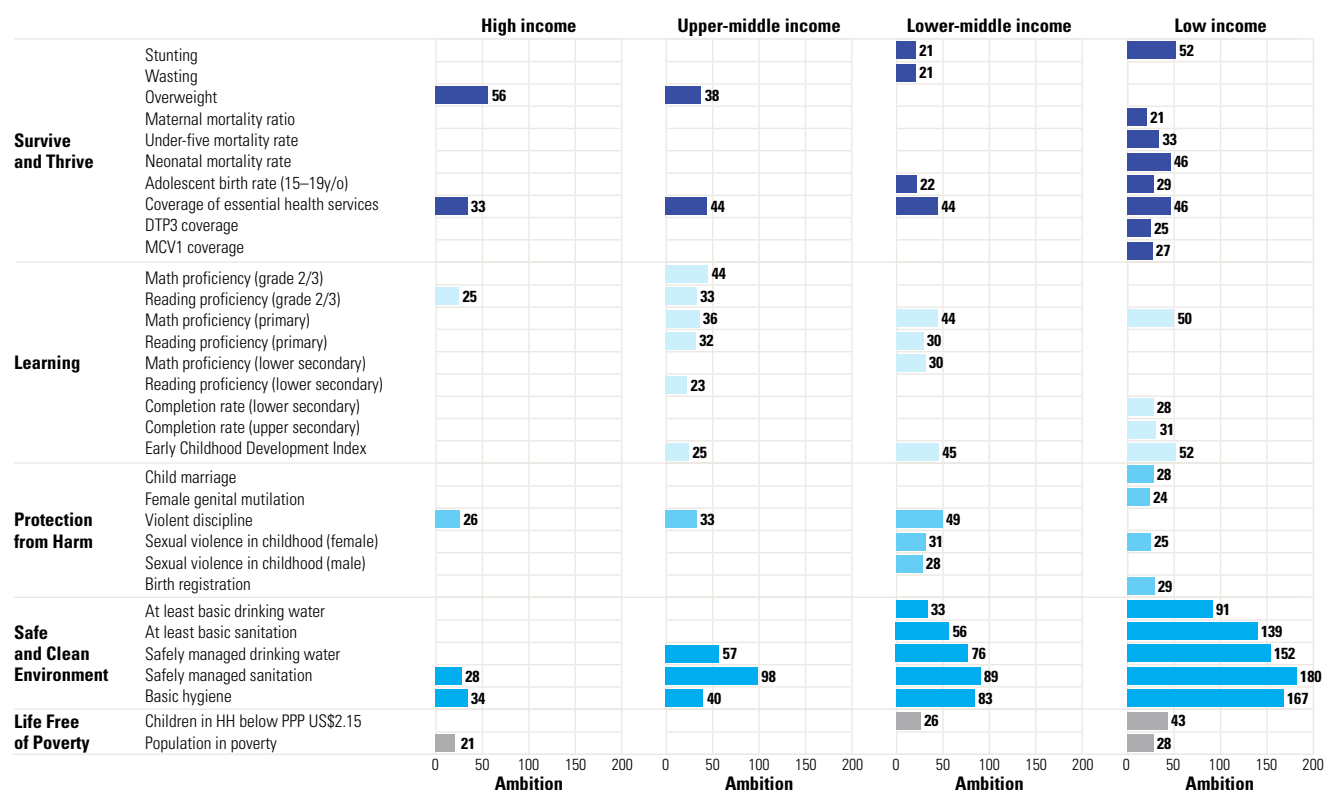
Figure 11 further unpacks the data to show indicators where game changers are needed to reach targets. These are indicators that require an above-average acceleration of approximately 20

percentiles to achieve the 2030 target. Game changers are needed in a total of 28 out of 48 child-related SDGs. Of these, high-income countries require game changers in six indicators. This number rises to 11 for upper-middle-income countries, 14 for lower-middle-income countries and 22 for low-income countries.

Each income group has distinct game-changer needs. High-income countries often struggle to reach the chronically excluded, whereas low- and middle-income nations face challenges in delivering large-scale, quality results. Transformative strategies should thus inherently prioritize equity.

Game changers are needed in 60 per cent of child-related SDG targets.

Figure 11. Selected indicators where the expected increase in the level of ambition of countries to reach the 2030 targets is above the average expected increase (20 percentiles) by income group



Note: This figure only includes those indicators where expected increase in the level of ambition to reach 2030 targets is above 20 percentiles.
Source: Authors' calculation using UNICEF Global Database, accessed from Data Warehouse as of August 2023, https://data.unicef.org/dv_index/.

Countries that show the strongest performance across indicators vary in how close they are to reaching targets. The benchmarking approach introduced in this report allows for the identification of countries that have been systematically strong performers across multiple child-related SDGs. The heat map in Figure 12 shows these countries and illustrates that, in a few cases, the performance achieved across SDG indicators came from a concerted effort that yielded widely distributed results. The quadrant analysis in the same figure, however, juxtaposes the overall rate of progress (x-axis) against the distance to the 2030 targets (y-axis). Notably, while these countries are the strongest performers in terms of progress rate, they differ significantly in how close they are

to their 2030 goals. Going forward, this analysis can be used to guide positive and negative deviant exercises to help us identify what conditions and interventions allowed these countries to stand out.

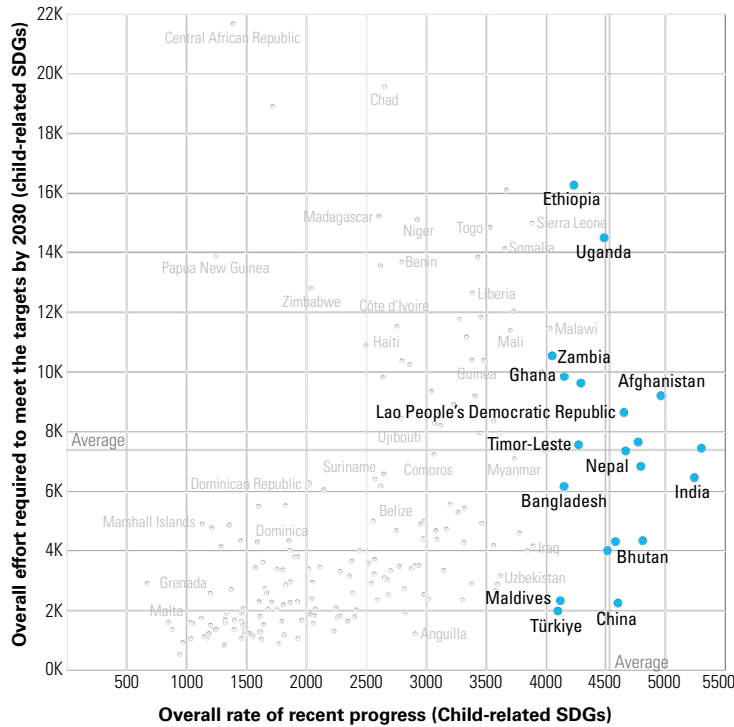
Many of these high-performing countries lie above the horizontal line, indicating they still have a greater-than-average distance to their targets compared to countries below the line. In essence, this suggests that even with notable progress, some countries have considerable ground to cover to meet their targets; the experiences of these countries offer insights that might be relevant to other national contexts. The online tools accompanying this report offer an opportunity for policymakers to more precisely understand country

performance against distance to 2030 targets. It is important to note that the average latest year of data used in this analysis for modeled indicators is 2021, but in cases of directly observed values, it might be 2016, as in the case of Afghanistan.

Strongest performers in terms of recent progress differ significantly in how close they are to their 2030 child-related targets.

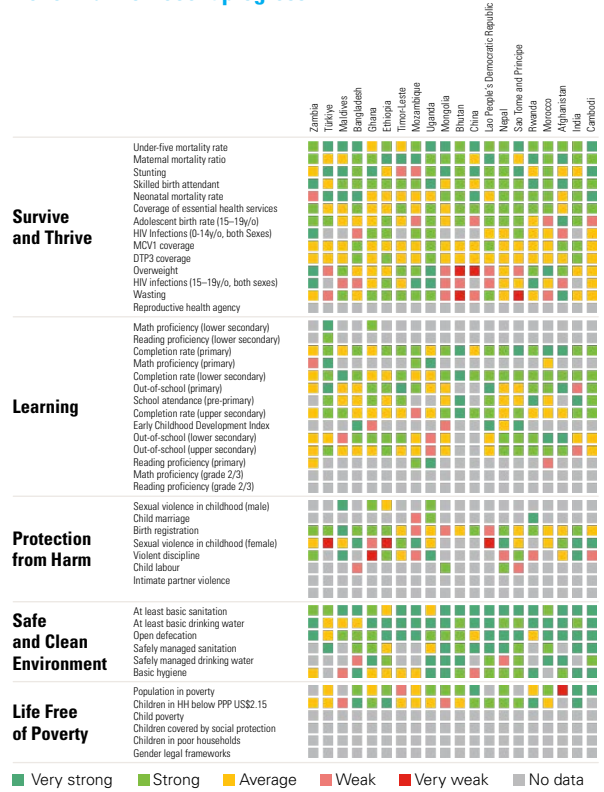
Figure 12. Selected top 20 countries with systematic strong performance across multiple outcome areas and child-related SDG indicators

Quadrant analysis



Source: Authors' calculation using UNICEF Global Database, accessed from Data Warehouse as of August 2022, https://data.unicef.org/dv_index/.

Benchmark of recent progress



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



Sala, who was arrested with a group of grown men and thrown in a truck on to broken glass, was so badly injured that his arm and several fingers had to be amputated..

HIGHLIGHT 3.

Tangible change in the life of every child: Using an equity lens

The SDGs emphasize the need for equitable progress and call for ‘no one left behind’ – reinforced by the notion of ‘no child left behind’. These principles recognize that marginalized children often face additional systemic barriers, necessitating extra efforts by countries and the international community.

Benchmarks that measure progress must therefore also unpack disparities between different communities that contribute to inequitable outcomes for children. This entails setting targets for subgroups and ensuring that when data are collected, they capture how achievements benefit everyone, especially the most marginalized.

Including the excluded

Setting targets is just the initial step on this journey. To truly make a difference at a national level, ambitious and realistic targets must be coupled with effective policies, sufficient allocation of resources and robust monitoring mechanisms that utilize an equity lens. This multifaceted approach ensures that targets are not mere aspirations but actionable goals that bring about tangible changes in the lives of children who have been excluded.

Consider, for example, efforts to end child marriage. While overall progress to eliminate this rights violation has been made, a deeper examination reveals that girls from the poorest families still face barriers and are not reaping this achievement’s benefits in equal measure.⁴³ Similarly, while the level of mortality has declined for all household income groups, relative disparities in the under-five mortality rate between the poorest and richest households have remained stable for decades, highlighting the difficulties in reaching the groups of children left furthest behind.^{44 45}

Unequal opportunities: Inequity and access to basic services

The expansion of services in the Latin America and Caribbean region illustrates the multifaceted nature of access to opportunities for children. Despite significant improvements over time, children’s access to basic services such as water, education, electricity and sanitation remains largely unequal⁴⁶ across and within countries and far from universal.⁴⁷

A key message from this analysis is that there are little to no disparities when access is universal and every child is covered. Similarly, when coverage is 0 and no child is covered, there is no scope for disparity. In between, there are different situations that vary from more equitable to less equitable. Thus, when countries assess inequalities in the context of benchmarking, they must recognize that policy interventions may be different when access is relatively low and disparities are wide, as opposed to a situation in which access is high, disparities are low but reaching the unreached may be most difficult.

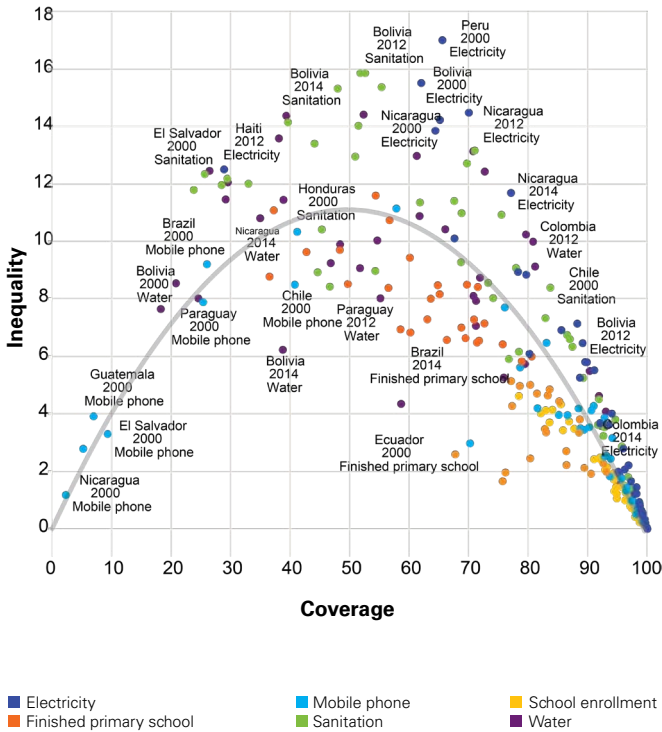
This exercise also allows us to compare the levels and unpack the sources of intranational inequalities. What is interesting is that the sources of inequities within countries vary by indicator – e.g., sources of inequities in learning are quite different from those in water and sanitation (see Figure 13). For each indicator, a combination of parental education, household per capita income and urban/rural gaps account for a large part of these inequalities. Such an exercise can help policymakers envision better strategies to identify and reach those systematically excluded, and should accompany any wider benchmarking exercise.

Sources of inequities vary; understanding these complexities are important to achieve child well-being for all.

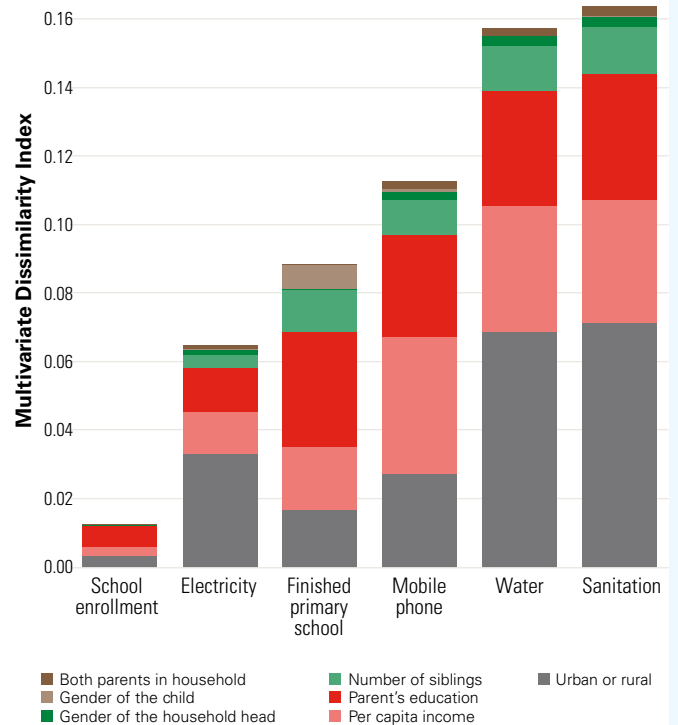


Figure 13. Inequality of opportunities across multiple sectors and selected Latin American countries

What is the relationship between access and equity?



What are the main sources of inequities?



Leaving no child behind

Remaining committed to equity and inclusion paves the way for realizing the rights of all children. In striving for universal access, it is important to establish measurable goals, targets and milestones along the road of progressive realization. By setting ambitious and realistic targets at the national level and for subgroups of children, the principle of progress comes alive. Moreover,

applied this way, it strengthens equality by ensuring that actions help the most marginalized children first – or at least that they progress at the same rate as the rest of the children. Acknowledging disparities, measuring progress for all groups and implementing targeted policies help us move closer to a future where every child enjoys equal opportunities, irrespective of their background or circumstances.

Investing in children today and in their future

The required acceleration of child well-being is possible. It requires, however, high-level political commitment, financing strategies and effective policies and practices that recognize the importance of supporting the child throughout the life-course. This long-term approach ensures that progress in specific life stages will be protected and sustained as children mature.

Figure 14 illustrates three potential scenarios depicting the progression of children’s well-being, using a baseline of 4 per cent annual improvement in said well-being.

- Scenario 1: Policies, practices, societal forces and other factors contribute to a 4 per cent annual improvement in children’s well-being. The trajectory of progress is not linear but rather dynamic, where success of interventions at each life stage (e.g., immunized and

well-fed babies, children attending school) establishes the groundwork for subsequent development cycles. This compounding effect leads to sustained growth, increasing overall well-being more than twofold.

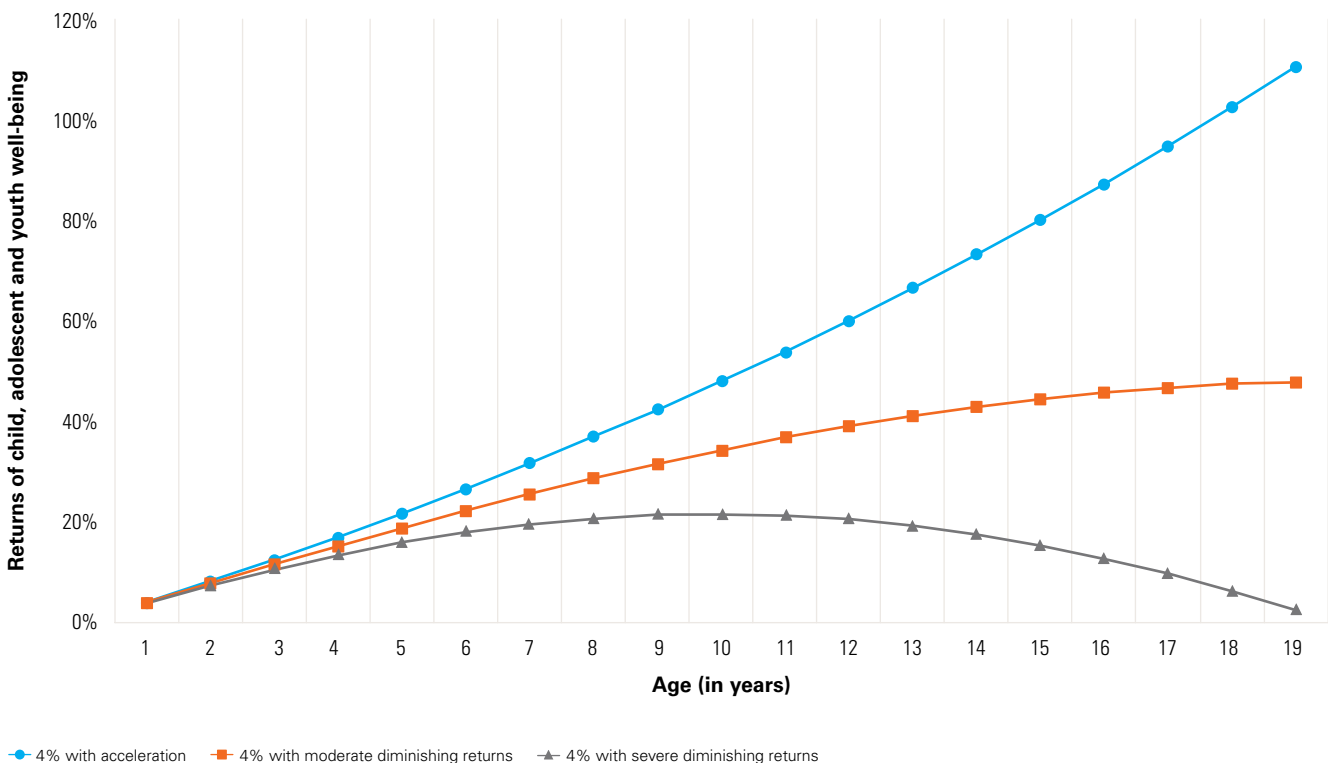
- Scenario 2: Gains are offset by deficient investments and interventions in ensuing age-periods, which could manifest in different ways. For example, factors such as poor-quality education after age 12, no access to social protection, poor nutrition, exposure to child labour or early marriage can plateau well-being gains. This leads to a levelling off or plateau in children’s well-being at a certain point in the life-course.
- Scenario 3: The system starts to fail earlier – for example, the child does not get access to adequate nutrition early

on, does not receive all immunizations, does not acquire foundational skills, is exposed to violence, engages in child labour or marries early – and returns severely diminish. In this situation, most initial enhancements in children’s well-being are lost by the time they transition to adulthood.

To truly accelerate children’s well-being, it is essential to account for and navigate the potential scenarios outlined above, underlining the need for sustained strategies and interventions along the life-course to prepare children for the future.

Investing in children throughout the life-course ensures early investments are maximized rather than lost.

Figure 14. Illustration of three hypothetical scenarios of surviving and thriving trajectories along a child’s life-course



Source: Authors’ illustration.

Bending the curve: What does recent progress tell us is possible?

With the bar set at 70 per cent, no child resides in a country that earns a passing grade on achieving the child-related SDG targets. What would it take for countries to bend this curve by 2030? Building on UNICEF’s analysis of where countries are and the rate of progress seen in similar countries, a simple simulation scenario was conducted that examined the rate of progress needed for every country to match the rates of their region’s or income group’s top performers. This exercise is not a projection; it simply captures how much acceleration is possible.

In many cases, matching the highest achievers – those within the 8th decile – implies doubling, quadrupling or even further accelerating the recent average rate of progress. In other words, this is

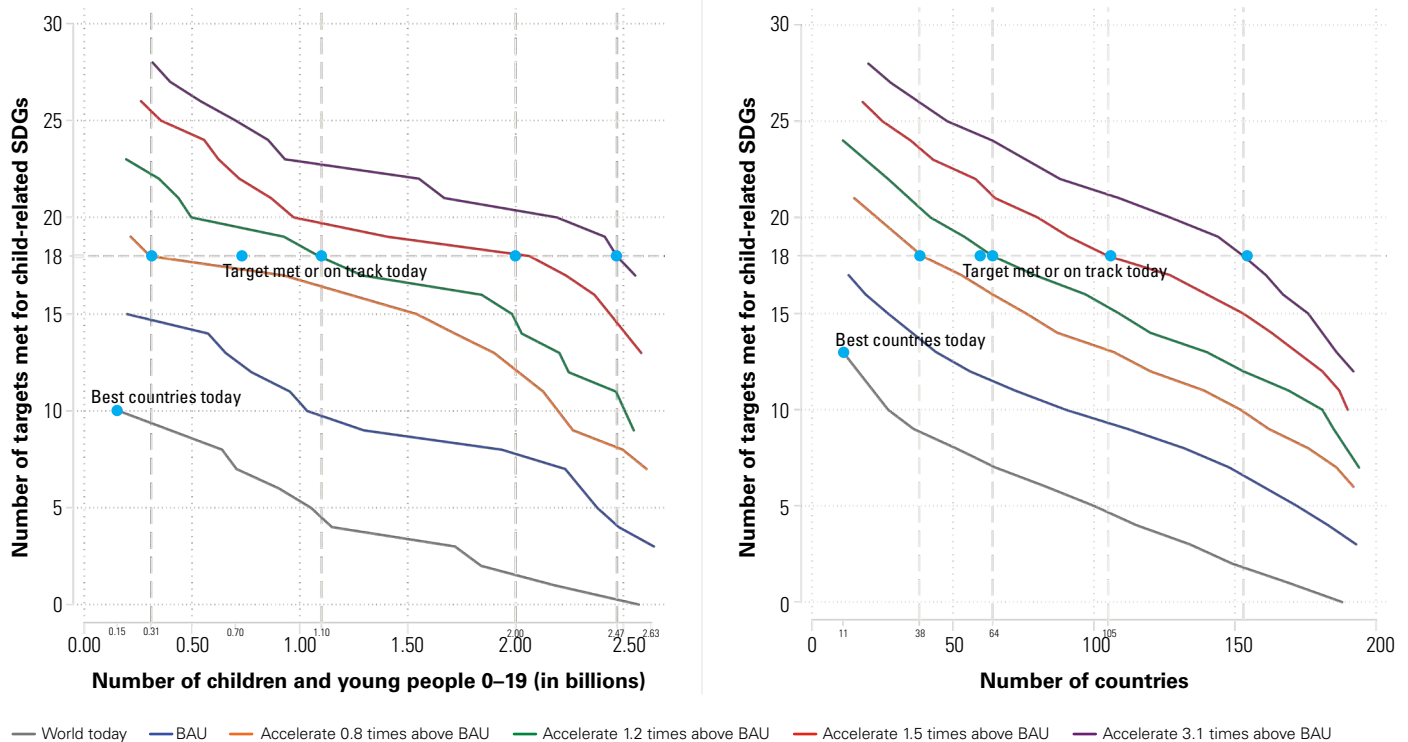
not an easy task. But data suggest it is possible, as other countries in the region or income group have done so in the recent past.⁴⁸

Only with high acceleration will about 0.7 billion children – a quarter of the global child population – live in countries that meet at least 70 per cent of their child well-being indicators by 2030. To achieve this, nations will need to outpace three fourths of their regional peers. For half of the world’s children – roughly 1.3 billion – to reside in countries with a passing grade, these countries must exceed the performance of 8 out of 10 nations based on recent historical data. To go a step further – for over 80 per cent of the world’s children, or an estimated 2.25 billion children, to live in countries meeting the standards – countries must

surpass 9 out of 10 of their regional counterparts. In short, countries will need to perform at a pace above recorded history (Figure 15).

The difference between taking informed action on behalf of every child and doing nothing is stark: The well-being of millions of children rests on this decision.

Figure 15. Distribution of number of children and countries by number of child-related SDGs met in the world today, what is expected by 2030 and by simulation scenario



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 simulation scenario assumes that countries will improve each child-related well-being indicator at the average observed performance of their regional peers ranging from average to top performers (7th to the 10th deciles of the empirical distribution of performance). World Today: corresponds to the distribution of targets already met; Expectation by 2030: corresponds to the distribution of countries that have met or are on track to meet their child-related SDGs by 2030; BAU: corresponds to a business-as-usual scenario in which countries would perform at the median of their respective regions.

It is crucial to note that these projections are based on available data. On average, countries monitor just over half – 24 – of the 48 child-related SDG indicators. This means many countries are operating without evidence on 50 per cent of internationally comparable measures concerning child well-being.

While the path ahead may not be easy, there is much to learn from what we have achieved and how we have done it. This midpoint of the 2030 Agenda offers the opportunity to leverage those insights and inspire acceleration strategies that are evidence based and optimally efficient. More than anything, the data underscore the importance for countries to reaffirm their commitment to the child-related SDG targets and take ambitious and realistic action.



On 23 October 2022, Abasse Dahani, age 8, and his sister Zawiratou, age 9, play a game outside of their home in Tanguiéta, northern Benin, as their parents look on. The family fled their village in south-eastern Burkina Faso when it was attacked.

© UNICEF/UN0794105/Hounkpatin





At a UNICEF child protection centre, located in the CAPMIR centre on the Guatemalan border, children have a place to play, have fun and forget for a while about the hard migration journey they are undertaking.

© UNICEF/UN0747612/

Obstacles that threaten the 2030 vision for children

The preceding two chapters illuminated not only whether countries are on track to meet targets related to the key outcome areas that impact child well-being, but also how well they are performing, independent of how likely they are to reach the SDG targets. Several countries are outliers – those that are

doing better or worse than their peers. As countries gear up for acceleration, four key challenges can be identified that may impede this acceleration. Their applicability varies by goal and context, weighing on some countries more than others. In addition, there are three important demographic shifts underway

– so-called megatrends – that must also inform the path ahead for better outcomes for every child.

Examining and addressing these obstacles and changing dynamics helps crystallize how we can get back on track and realize the SDGs related to child well-being.

Today, children are living in a time of polycrisis

These crises include climate change and environmental degradation, public health emergencies and heightened levels of conflict and humanitarian crises – which often exacerbate one another. The rights of **children living in crisis and fragile settings** are often seriously threatened.

Climate change and children

Environmental crises are affecting child rights across the globe. Among other negative impacts, health, nutrition, education and poverty reduction are hampered by climate-related shocks. Nearly half of all children worldwide, amounting to a staggering 1 billion, live in 33 countries extremely vulnerable to climate impacts.⁴⁹ These 33 vulnerable countries, however, are responsible for a meagre 9 per cent of the world's total carbon emissions. Meanwhile, the 10 highest-polluting countries churn out an overwhelming 70 per cent of global emissions while not experiencing the same degree of risk at all. This presents a glaring imbalance in the world's climate change equation. The burden of climate change falls heavily on the shoulders of those least responsible. The most susceptible populations – including

children – are paying a high price for a problem they contributed least to.

This crisis is altering disease patterns in disturbing ways, putting over 600 million children at a heightened risk of vector-borne diseases like malaria and dengue fever and halting more than a decade of consistent progress in reducing mortality rates due to disease. Climate change is already here, and the world urgently needs to adapt.

Simultaneously, lack of food and nutrition security poses a significant threat to millions of children. Approximately 45 million children under the age of 5 already suffer from wasting,⁵⁰ a life-threatening form of malnutrition worsened by food insecurity ensuing from climate shocks. The alarming fact remains that over 99 per cent of children are exposed to at least one climate shock, environmental stress or hazard.⁴⁹ The crisis, however, turns into an urgent daily reality for about 850 million children – roughly one in three worldwide – who grapple with four or more overlapping climate threats such as cyclones, heatwaves, disease, flooding and water scarcity.⁴⁹

UNICEF analysis has shown that 559 million children are already exposed to high heatwave frequency and all children are expected to be exposed to high heatwave frequency by 2050 even under the most optimistic global warming scenario.⁵¹

Droughts, floods and extreme weather events critically undermine agricultural productivity, driving families to migrate in search of fertile land and sustainable livelihoods. Over the past decade, the number of climate-related internal displacements has more than doubled. Over 10 million children were newly internally displaced in 2021 alone.⁵² The scale of migration and displacement among children today must be considered as policymakers work to meet their child-related SDG targets (see Highlight 4).

These climate hazards, shocks and stresses, and the consequent food insecurity, can trigger conflicts over scarce resources like food, water and land. This has been evidenced in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel region in recent years, where prolonged drought has led to violence, conflict and instability.⁹⁸

Box 4.

Financing and climate change

Forward-thinking action that is child-centred includes smart investments. To effectively protect children during environmental crisis, climate finance needs to be:

- **Large**, to facilitate the fastest possible green transition that can deliver a better world for children, to jump-start urgently needed adaptation to protect children who are most vulnerable to climate change's effects, and to prevent countries from being forced to choose between climate and non-climate investments that equally concern children.
- **Efficient**, so that investments deliver the largest possible impact for the dollars provided and minimize the opportunity cost of other potential investments in children.
- **Compatible** with other development goals, in so far as investments that undercut other child-related goals are prohibited.
- **Transparent**, to allow governments and private stakeholders to make more informed choices about the sources, terms and focus of investments that impact children – and to help citizens hold governments to account.
- **Accessible** to all countries, to avoid the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic where poor countries were unable to adequately invest in measures to protect children.
- **Sustainably provided**, to avoid drawing countries into cycles of debt whose effects are devastating for children.
- **Aligned** with ongoing SDG financing reforms, to ensure that climate finance puts children's rights at its centre and incorporates the social, environmental and economic dimensions of the SDGs.

Health emergencies and pandemic preparedness

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed severe deficiencies in health-care preparedness worldwide, generated critical socio-economic impacts, and undermined progress across SDGs. As the crisis unfolded, even robust health systems were stretched to their limits. Facilities were overwhelmed, essential supplies ran short and health-care workers faced burn-out. Accessing

routine and preventative care became difficult for many who also stayed away from childcare lest their child become infected. Ultimately, this lack of preparedness proved extremely costly in terms of lives lost.

Measures taken to constrain the spread of COVID-19 had global implications – particularly the closure of schools, which affected not only educational outcomes, but also nutritional and child protection

outcomes. The rapid and sudden rise in poverty – especially among those who live hand-to-mouth – shaped all aspects of children's lives.

Disrupted services also had spillover effects, slowing gains across child-related SDGs. For instance, limited access to sexual and reproductive health care led to rises in unintended pregnancies. Suspension of vaccination campaigns facilitated disease outbreaks. Mental health services for children were curtailed. Numerous countries experienced reversals in maternal mortality and some countries experienced stagnation in child mortality after years of steady declines. And, as illustrated below, the pandemic exacerbated the already-looming care crisis, posing additional challenges for women, adolescent girls and caregivers.

The pandemic underscored that building strong, resilient health and social systems must be central to the SDG agenda.



Christine Mocirufu (age 24) fetches water for home use at a community tap outside Unna Primary School in Adjumani District.

© UNICEF/UN0616894/Mugisha

Box 5.

Community health systems: Improvements to save lives

COVID-19 reiterated the vital need for robust, resilient and accessible health systems in every community. Local-level health care plays a vital role in protecting lives – but action is needed to ensure it is adequately resourced so that the most marginalized populations are not left behind, particularly during crisis. Unless the below roadblocks are addressed, at least 30 million more women and children will die by 2030, more than half of them in sub-Saharan Africa.

- First, health programmes are massively underfunded. Insufficient investments mean that these programmes have not realized their full potential. They are excessively reliant on external funding, with limited domestic resources allocated to essential recurrent expenditures such as salaries and skilling of community workers and critical commodities.
- Second, where funding does exist, it is often fragmented. This means that community health programmes remain siloed, with resources poorly co-ordinated and distributed or spent in ways that undermine the effectiveness and impact of evidence-based interventions for child health and nutrition outcomes.
- Third, donor priorities and funding are not aligned to national strategies and are often implemented in a vertical fashion, which risks fragmenting impact.
- Fourth, many community health initiatives, including those that are well intentioned and even well performing, are not properly integrated into the broader primary health care system, instead remaining small-scale initiatives.
- Fifth, many programmes fail to meaningfully involve communities in the design and implementation of community health care initiatives – missing the opportunity to take in feedback regarding each community's true challenges and needs and build ownership.

Care crisis

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, women and girls across the world were already largely responsible for most of the unpaid care and domestic work in their households and communities. In fact, women performed 76.2 per cent of total hours of unpaid care work globally, spending 3.2 times more of their time in this way than men.⁵⁴

As crises can heighten existing vulnerabilities and risk factors, the 18 months of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this “crisis of care,”⁵⁵ with care work being repeatedly taken for granted and receiving less public provision, support and investment in societies. This had consequences for gender inequalities, increasing the amount of unpaid care weighing on

women and girls and the vulnerabilities faced by paid care workers, many of whom are women working informally. This ultimately threatened the gains made across the SDGs towards improved gender equality.

Prior to the pandemic, women comprised 70 per cent of health workers globally and even higher shares of care-related occupations such as nursing, midwifery and community health work, all of which require close contact with patients. The risks these front-line workers took to save lives were compounded by poor working conditions, low pay and lack of voice in health systems.⁵⁶

Closures of school and childcare services due to COVID-19 further exacerbated gender inequality, as many households turned to their women and girls to look after and home-school younger children.⁵⁷ For women, this often meant job loss: The International Labour Organization found that 13 million fewer women were employed in 2021 than in 2019.⁵⁸ Data from 2022 showed that more than 606 million working-age women also considered themselves unavailable to work because of unpaid care work, compared to only 41 million men.⁵⁹

The gender divide in unpaid care reaches beyond the adult population. Young and adolescent girls around the world spend a collective 160 million more hours than boys every day on unpaid care and domestic work.⁶⁰ Girls in households with children with disabilities are more likely to be out of school than boys or other girls their age.⁶¹ Adolescent girls are often the first pulled from school to act as caregivers to younger siblings, or aging family members, or to support those living with disabilities. This derails their potential pathways to learn and increases their likelihood of dependence on men for their financial security, which can lead to exploitation.⁶² Moreover, the cooking, cleaning and caregiving work they perform confines them disproportionately to these same responsibilities as adult women.



On 13 April 2022, at the Nutrition and Rehabilitation Centre of Raparin Children's Hospital, in Erbil, Iraq, one-year-old Abdullah gets measured while his mother Hajja (left) holds him.

© UNICEF/UN0648782/Njioiktjen

During the highly visible crisis of care, social protection measures designed to provide childcare support to families during the COVID-19 pandemic fell short, accounting for only an estimated 2 per cent of high-income countries' expenditure.⁶³ Social protection programmes, such as cash transfers or educational stipends to incentivize school participation (especially among girls) and increase access to childcare services, can be particularly beneficial in reducing the unpaid care and domestic work burden on women and girls and ensuring they can participate in education and employment. But fewer than 20 per cent of social protection responses to the pandemic took gender into account, despite widespread detrimental effects on the well-being of women and girls who were inadvertently and, at times, deliberately omitted from the recovery response.

Conflict and humanitarian crises

Over the last 30 years, the number of countries engulfed by violent conflict has escalated drastically. Violent conflicts have increased to their highest levels in three decades, and more than 450 million children worldwide – or one in six children – are living in a conflict zone.⁶⁴ Current and ongoing conflicts have also

contributed to the world's largest refugee crisis, with 89.3 million people forcibly displaced at the end of 2021, 41 per cent of whom are children, many separated from their caregivers.⁶⁵ This grim reality violates international law and standards, leaving children 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.

The United Nations Security Council's identification and condemnation of six grave violations against children during war, specifically killing, maiming, recruitment into armed forces, attacks on schools or hospitals, rape or other sexual violence, abduction and denial of humanitarian access, further underlines the gravity of the situation.⁶⁶ A staggering 315,000 such grave violations were verified to have been committed across over 30 conflict situations from 2005 to 2022; this figure captures reported instances only, meaning that the actual number could be considerably higher.⁶⁷

Around the world, the protection of children is being blatantly disregarded. United Nations data paint a sombre picture of the toll on children:⁶⁸

- More than 120,000 children killed or maimed since 2005
- At least 105,000 children recruited by armed forces or groups
- More than 32,500 children abducted
- Over 16,000 children subjected to sexual violence
- 16,000+ attacks on schools and hospitals
- 22,000+ instances of denial of humanitarian access for children

These verified cases are likely just the tip of the iceberg. Many millions more are displaced, bereaved or separated from their families, enduring catastrophic, life-altering experiences likely to affect them for many years.

Attacks on education are affecting the futures of entire generations. Deprived of an education, children are growing up without essential skills in already dire situations. The endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration by 118 states offers a glimmer of hope, yet the situation requires continuous, concerted effort to ensure that education continues during conflict and is protected from military abuse.⁶⁹

Inequity

Continued inequities within countries mean that not all children enjoy the same opportunities and outcomes needed for a life free of poverty. Inequality within countries poses significant challenges to ensuring that all children have the same opportunities and outcomes.

Gender norms result in adolescent girls confronting greater barriers to completing secondary education and accessing sexual and reproductive health information and services (see also 'Care crisis' above). For example, globally, child marriage affects one in five girls⁷⁰ and is more common among those from the poorest households, living in rural areas and with the least education.

Geography and mobility

There are also complex differences between children living in different kinds of geography. Usually, rural children are at a disadvantage compared to urban children, and rural girls fare worse than rural boys. Children in rural areas often face limited access to health, education and social services compared to their urban counterparts. There are also, however, often stark inequalities among urban children – not just between urban girls and boys, 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 clean water in poor urban areas offset any potential increase in access to services.

Rapid urbanization in countries with low national income has led to more informal settlements, which typically lack adequate infrastructure and services, thus reinforcing inequities (see Highlight 4). In 2020, an estimated 1.1 billion urban residents lived in

slums or slum-like conditions. The growth of slum populations is not only due to internal economic migration, but also due to conflict, disaster and climate-related displacement. Most of the world's internally displaced persons already live outside camps, with many fleeing to urban areas. Some 60 per cent of refugees and 80 per cent of internally displaced persons settle in urban areas – outside the reach of traditional humanitarian operations – making their situation even more fragile. Many of these people end up in slums or informal settlements.

Excluded from society

Too many children around the world face discrimination and high barriers to participation in society. Stigma and discrimination may be tied to dimensions including a child's ethnicity, race, migratory status or disability status. Child refugees and asylum seekers, for instance – who numbered 17.5 million in 2022⁷¹ – can lack legal protections and struggle to access basic services. Children with disabilities experience attitudinal, physical and financial barriers to inclusion in all settings. Only 28 per cent of persons with disabilities have access to disability benefits globally, with that figure dropping to 1 in 100 persons in low-income countries.⁷²

Children in multidimensional poverty are deprived of basic needs in areas such as health, nutrition, education, WASH and shelter – deprivations which carry lifelong consequences. Furthermore, children living in relatively poorer households in terms of assets have a significantly higher chance of dying than children in richer households. In many countries, under-five mortality is two to three times higher for the poorest wealth quintile compared to the richest. They are less likely to access quality education

and drop out of school sooner⁷³ and are significantly more vulnerable to experiencing malnutrition.⁷⁴ Also, as described below, the share of public spending on social services accruing to the poorest children is a fraction of the share for children from the richest households.

These overlapping disadvantages accumulate over the life-course, limiting children's capabilities and potential. Tackling child poverty, inequality and exclusion requires addressing root causes, from gaps in social protection to discrimination. Progress requires prioritizing those furthest behind to ensure every child has the same chance to reach their full potential.

Reliable and actionable data are central to monitoring the upholding of children's rights – yet quality data remain scarce in countries around the world.

One of the complex challenges affecting the rights and well-being of children is a less visible but pivotal issue: data gaps. These gaps exist for a majority of the SDG indicators relating to child health, well-being and rights: Significant gaps exist in indicators related to Learning, Protection from Harm and Life Free of Poverty. Adolescent health data are also crucial but have limited availability.

As the primary source for many of these indicators is household surveys, innovations in this area are critical to the production of relevant and timely data.

Box 6.

Supporting data collection efforts: MICS innovations

Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) have been supported by UNICEF since 1995. In many countries, four, five or even six surveys have been carried out. The MICS programme is constantly innovating to better capture the situations of the communities it serves. For instance, the recently developed MICS Plus survey programme collects real-time data over an extended period, with direct phone calls to sampled households. During the COVID-19 pandemic, MICS Plus was vital to understanding how the situation of children and households was evolving. These data were used to formulate timely and relevant interventions and policy decisions.

In Mongolia, the Government – with the support of UNICEF – used MICS Plus to sample 2,200 households and generate data on COVID-19 self-protection practices, such as mask wearing and hand washing. The survey also collected data on how the pandemic was impacting household income and children's education to inform policies on government benefits and distance learning programmes. MICS Plus follows the same households in all data collection waves in order to measure how their situation changes over time. Seven waves of data collection have been completed so far and the programme is ongoing given the continued presence of COVID-19 in Mongolia and, above all, the continuing need for real-time, representative longitudinal data.

Another recent innovation is MICS GIS, which provides geo-referenced data. These data are important to provide links to other sources of information (e.g., environmental risks, which are also geo-referenced) and to carry out subnational analyses (which help to explore geographic inequities).

Different data sources can be combined to fill SDG gaps. Administrative data can be collected as a by-product of the delivery of public services if systems are digitized. Administrative data from digital health information systems or education management information systems, for example, can provide information on the well-being of a child, school attendance and achievement relevant to child-related SDG targets. To reap the full benefits, continued investment in digitization, country capacity and system strengthening, and standardization of data

collection through digitized public service delivery systems will be key. Machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI) can extract information from big data, a key opportunity in traditionally low-information countries where data gaps are most persistent. To incorporate such big data sources into SDG monitoring, however, challenges related to reliable and programmatic data access and sharing will need to be overcome, especially for data from private sector sources. To protect children from potential harm, parallel investments in data protection

and privacy will be necessary as the granularity and deep insight offered by administrative and big data sources comes with potential risks to individual privacy.

Administrative data and big data, however, should not be considered as a replacement for data from household surveys. Administrative data contain information from people who receive public services, whereas data from household surveys indicate gaps in service delivery and can thus guide further country capacity and system strengthening; meanwhile, machine learning and AI algorithms to derive information from big data require 'ground truthing' based on on-the-ground measurements (e.g., administrative data, censuses or household surveys). This is where data from household surveys continue to be critically important, as they provide the information to assess



the quality of algorithms during algorithm development. Thus, administrative data, big data, and household survey data work best together.

Underprioritized and inadequate monitoring

Due, in part, to the lack of interest by policymakers and society at large, national statistical offices mandated to carry out these surveys are largely underfunded, understaffed and underprepared to collect, measure and analyse relevant data for and about children.⁷⁵ This leads to large time gaps between surveys and to a lack of requisite sample sizes to enable disaggregation by factors such as gender, income, age and ethnicity. It is also important to note that household surveys are not designed to capture information on relatively small (and often marginalized) subgroups of the population such as refugees, migrants and children

in institutions, though surveys can be adapted to oversample such groups.

Strengthening data collection is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the scale, scope and distribution of the situation of children. Nevertheless, funding for data and statistics as reported by the PARIS21 Foundation shows a 16 per cent decrease since 2015.⁷⁶

Child rights hindered by poor data

As we strive to develop a rescue plan for children and the planet at the SDG Summit, the continued lag in data availability remains a challenge: Less than 22 per cent of the latest available data originate from 2022. Accelerating the rate at which data are collected, analysed and disseminated is a prerequisite to delivering impactful and timely solutions for every child.

Efforts to collect and use data for child-related SDGs, while vital, remain infrequent and fragmented, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, where the multifaceted effects of the crises described above are most severe. In these nations, a lack of data leaves policymakers without the information they need to strategically accelerate progress on child-related SDGs.

Measurement standards must be adopted in priority areas to boost cross-country and temporal comparability of essential indicators. Notably, i.e., Learning, Protection from Harm, and Life Free of Poverty are the areas for which data are least available – each of which require tailored solutions to close the data gaps.

The power to transform action

Even when data are collected, they are not always leveraged to inform policies on child well-being. 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. For example, in Nepal, new household survey data from MICS on water quality informed targeted interventions by local government to improve water quality, which helped reduce rates of under-five mortality.⁷⁷ This requires investment in local and national capacities to use data to inform planning, policymaking and budget processes. The know-how and resources to collect and use quality data must also be equally distributed within and across countries.

Combating the obstacles that stand in the way of children's well-being hinges on UNICEF's capacity to understand critical issues. This understanding starts with data. Therefore, addressing the twin challenges of data availability and use is a pivotal first step towards building a better world for children. Only then can UNICEF design effective strategies to fulfil the rights of all children and get progress back on track across child-related SDGs.



Bamogo Daouda, an eight-year-old boy, smiles at school in Kaya, in the north-central region of Burkina Faso.

© UNICEF/UN0640720/Dejongh

HIGHLIGHT 4.

Game-changing demographic shifts

Demographic trends provide vital information on the circumstances of children, and what is needed from a programmatic perspective. By capturing how the child population is changing nationally, regionally and globally – for instance, in terms of its size and age distribution, where children reside (rural vs. urban areas, if they leave their home countries) – these crucial data are vital to meeting the child-related SDG targets and ensuring child well-being in the decades to come.

Patterns in population growth, urbanization and international migration are likely to shift dramatically this century. Children are directly involved in these so-called megatrends.

Population growth

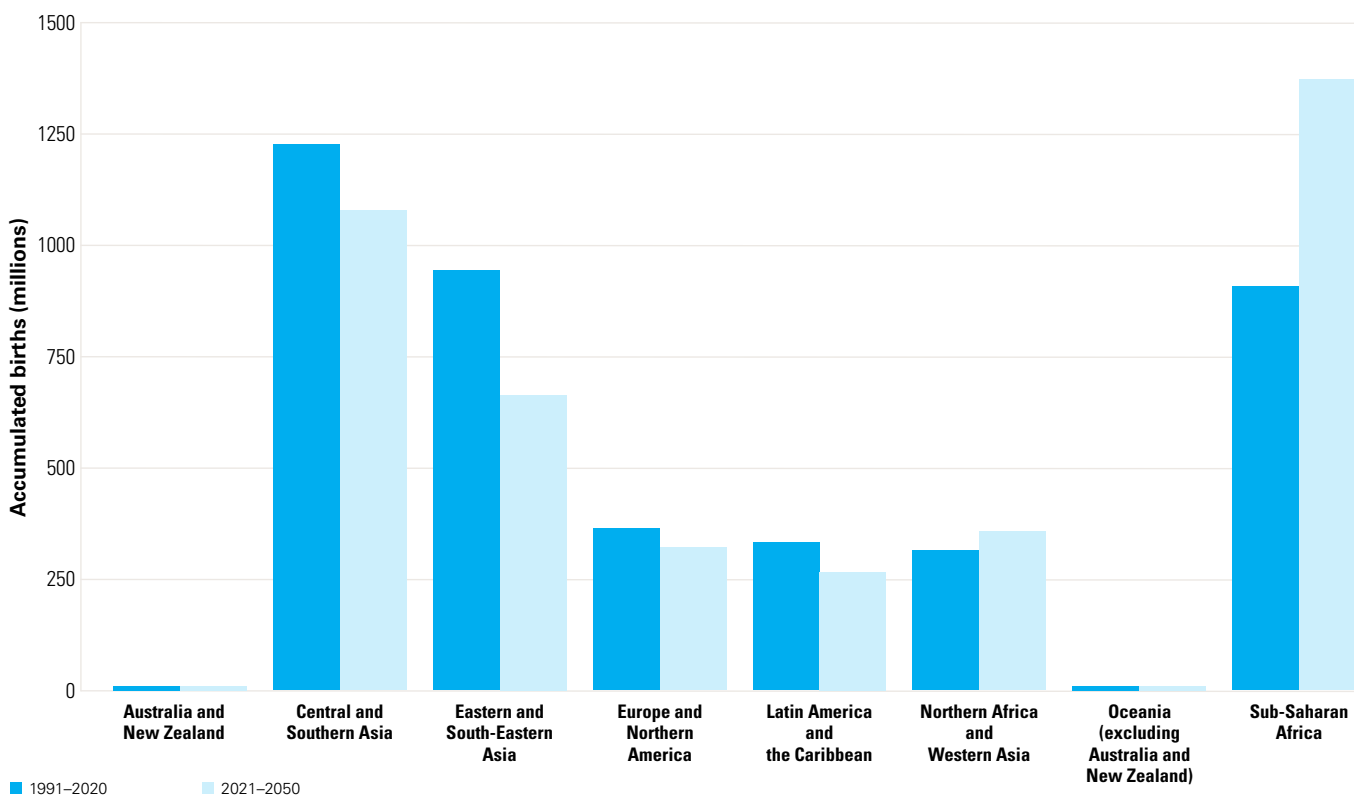
A massive increase in population is expected in many African countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, the number of births between 2021 and 2050 will increase by 51 per cent compared to the previous 30 years (see Figure 16). While between 1991 and 2020, the region accounted for 22 per cent of global births, its share will increase to 30 per cent over the next 30 years. Meanwhile, many of the world’s most populated regions will see a decrease in the number of babies born over the next 30 years – in some places, like Eastern and Southern Asia, by as much as 30 per cent.

By 2050, the largest population of 0–19-year-olds – 34 per cent – will live in sub-Saharan Africa, followed by 26 per

cent in Central and Southern Asia and 16 per cent in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, representing a percentage decline in both Asian regions (see Figure 17). All age groups in sub-Saharan Africa will grow by a significant degree, with the older targe groups seeing larger increases. For instance, the population of 15–19-year-olds will grow by 66 per cent.

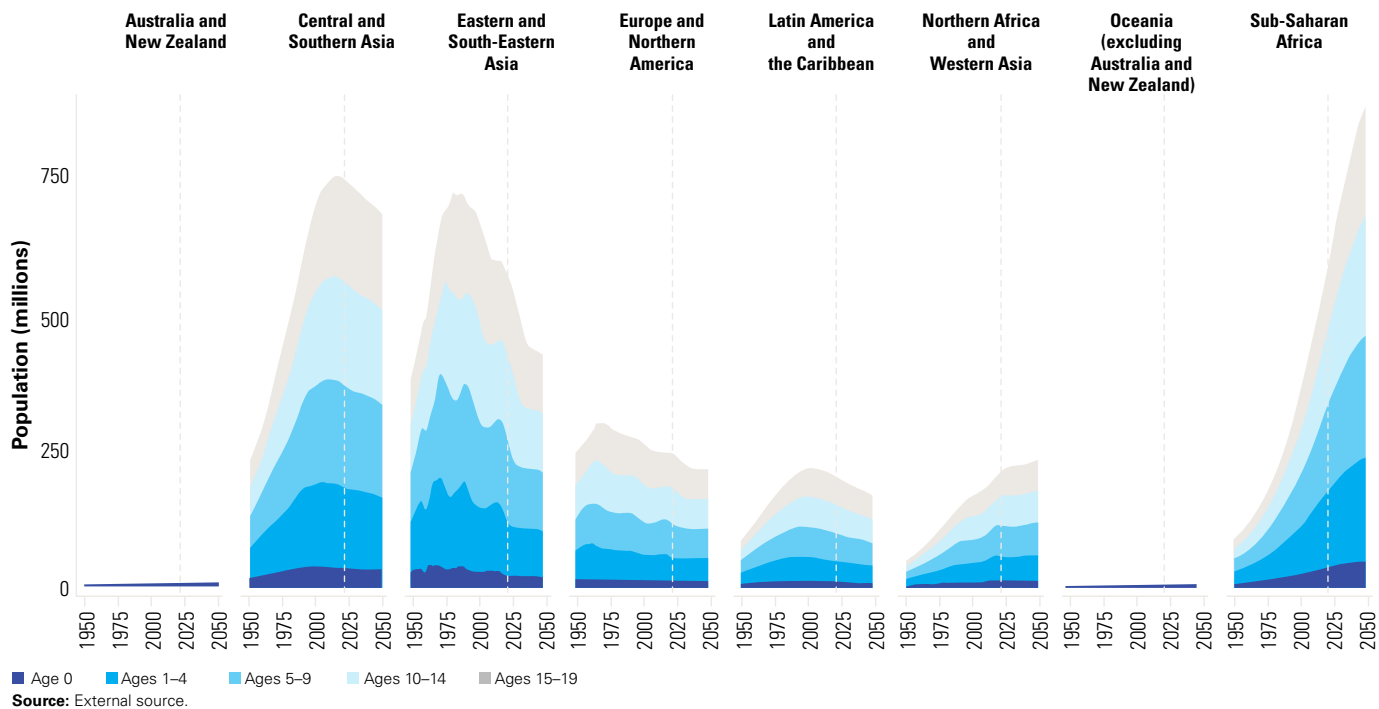
Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region expecting to see its number of births substantially increase by 2050.

Figure 16. Number of births over 30-year period by SDG region, 1991–2020 and 2021–2050



Source: External source.

Figure 17. Child and adolescent population by life cycle age group and SDG region (1950–2050)



This expected growth in sub-Saharan Africa will place additional burdens on the provision of essential services to children. Attention should also be paid to the increasingly large cohort of adolescents aged 15–19 years in the region, with a focus on upskilling this population as they enter the workforce.

In Asia and Latin America, an increasing number of countries are experiencing or projected to have a smaller population. Supportive policies and programmes need to be strengthened to maintain and improve essential services for all children, in the context of an aging population with competing priorities and resources.

Urbanization

The global urban population is expected to reach 6.6 billion by 2050, a 45 per cent increase from today's estimated 4.5 billion. Over a 100-year period, the percentage of urban dwellers is likely to more than double from 30 per cent of the global population in 1950 to 68 per cent in 2050. The rural population is predicted to decline from 3.4 billion to 3.1 billion over the next 30 years.

Africa has today's lowest urbanization level (44 per cent) – but one of the fastest

growing urban populations. Because this is happening at a significantly lower level of national income compared to other regions, many children are at risk of ending up as urban poor.

A quarter of the world's urban population lives in slums – around half of whom could be under the age of 18.⁷⁸ The urban poorest or slum child population often fares far worse than children living in wealthier urban households and, in some countries, face deeper deprivations than the poorest rural children.

Urbanization poses a challenge to development as services need to be delivered differently, and development agencies are much more accustomed to establishing services for rural poor than for urban poor. Urban programming needs to increase to service all children, particularly the urban poor.

International migration

There are an estimated 35.5 million international child migrants globally, an upward trajectory that shows no signs of slowing down. The share of refugees and asylum-seekers among this population has increased by more than 60 per cent since 2005.

Conflict and violence forced 43.3 million children from their homes by the end of 2022 – the highest recorded number since World War II. This figure does not include children displaced by climate and environmental shocks or disasters, nor those newly displaced by crisis in 2023, such as the almost 1 million children forced to leave home by the conflict in the Sudan.

The impacts of climate change threaten to displace 1.2 billion people internally and across borders by 2050 – many of whom will be children. To mitigate the circumstances and consequences of this movement and ensure children's well-being is protected, countries and communities must take action today to build resilience and guide preparedness.

Children on the move often face serious rights violations – yet data reflecting their situation remain limited and of poor quality. Countries must build statistical systems to improve data on migration and displacement, while also enacting policies and programmes that uphold the rights of this marginalized group – paying particular attention to the damaging role of conflict and climate change in children's lives.

Financial barriers to realizing the child-related SDGs: Four key challenges

Financing and children

Despite the SDGs' shared vision to 'leave no one behind', **the state of current financing, particularly in terms of social spending**, illustrates a stark reality of inequality, imbalance and inadequacy.

A UNICEF analysis examined public spending on children from 84 countries, covering more than 50 per cent of the child population, using data on cash benefits, preschool or childcare, in-kind and public works, and education.⁷⁹ The report, *Too Little, Too Late*, highlights three key findings on public spending on children. First, globally, public spending on children is inadequate and arrives too late in a child's life. This implies that despite the known value of investing in the early years in a child's development, countries are backloading expenditure when it comes to spending on children. Second, there is a spending imbalance with little committed funding to social protection and human services. Third, there are disparities in public spending on children within and across countries. These disparities contradict the SDGs' guiding principles and exacerbate social and economic inequalities.⁸⁰

Insufficient and unequal social protection and human services funding prevails in a child's early years

Child welfare funding at the country level is critically insufficient, especially in early childhood and across all income levels. The underinvestment is most apparent in low-income countries, with only US\$2,300 spent per child and just 6.7 per cent aimed at children under 6 years of age, if the child attends school. On the other hand, high-income countries allocate about 27 per cent of their US\$195,000 per-child expenditure to those under 6 if the child attends school and preschool.

Many services that underpin key initiatives to combat food insecurity, support parental

employment, enable youth activation and provide essential child protection services are markedly underfunded. This delayed and limited investment in children's early years – pivotal for future development – represents a global issue requiring urgent attention.

The scale of difference in public spending on children is large

Across all countries and between expenditure items analysed, education dominates when it comes to spending on children. For example, in low-income countries, education expenditures account for US\$9 in every US\$10 PPP (purchasing power parity) spent on children. While this is noteworthy, the disparity between countries shows the scale of differences in financing. In low-income countries, for every US\$1 PPP spent on education for children who remain in school, an estimated US\$20 PPP is spent on the average child in an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development country.⁸¹

This wide difference gets compounded by the lack of spending in the preschool period, resulting in pressure on the education system to ensure child well-being for all. The prevailing underinvestment across countries has the potential to result in substantial costs impacting both social and economic development and infringing on children's rights.

Unmasking systemic hurdles

Almost half of children in low- and middle-income countries are deprived in at least one dimension of health, nutrition, education, WASH or housing.⁸² A major reason for this situation is insufficient financing prioritization of social sectors. This underinvestment stems from various factors, including low public spending on quality services, inadequate financial support for families and a lack of resources to effectively reach marginalized children.

This problem is a part of the global structural context posing additional challenges – particularly among low-income

countries – that includes a looming debt crisis which curtails the ability of countries to effectively allocate resources to social sectors. As per a UNICEF review,⁸³ even before the COVID-19 crisis one fifth of low- and middle-income countries spent more on debt service than on education, health and social protection combined.

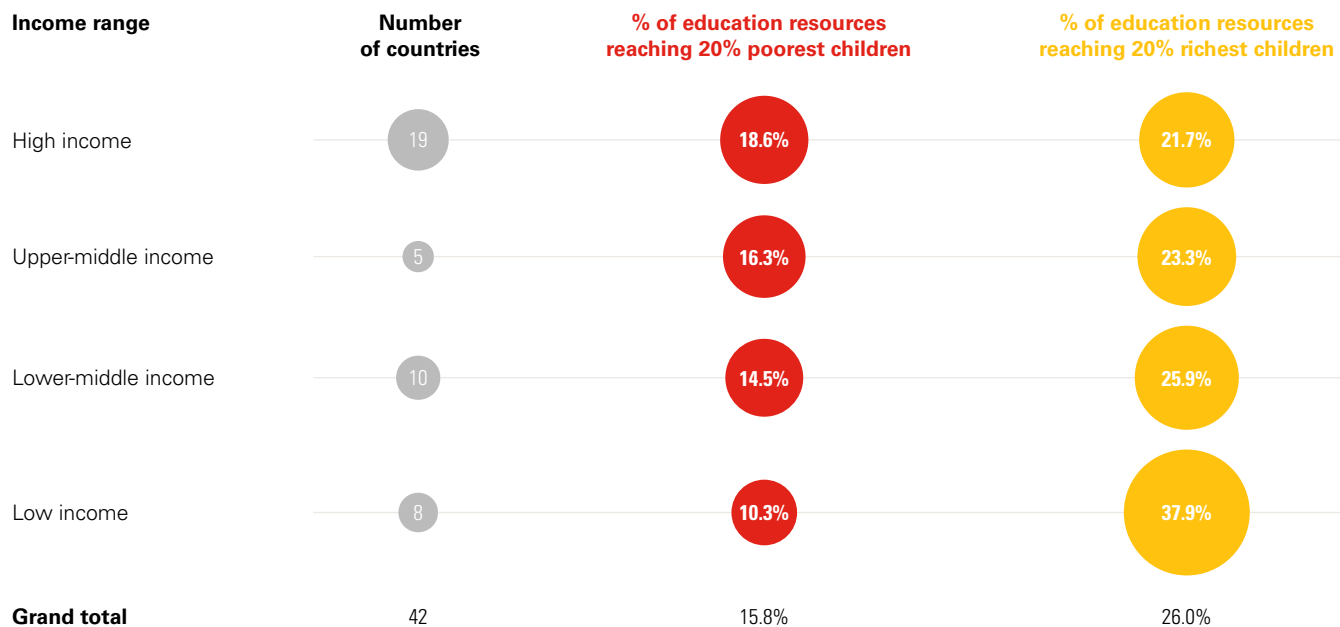
The problem is equally challenging when we look within countries themselves. The combination of declining or stalled government revenues, rising debt stress, health emergencies, disasters and, eventually, civil unrest will continue to exert pressure on the fiscal priorities of developing countries around the world. At the same time the global economic repercussions of ongoing conflicts force countries to face difficult trade-offs between containing inflation or safeguarding recovery, protecting the poor or building financial buffers. In addition, insufficiency creates inefficiencies, threatening to further limit public financing of social services that benefit the poorest families.

The example in Figure 18 shows that among low-income countries, the share of public spending on education accruing to the bottom 20 per cent of the wealth distribution is only 10 per cent: The resources to support those children are less than half what would be expected if resources followed size of population. For the richest children, however, the share is almost four times higher.

Across countries, public spending often neglects children from the poorest households but the difference is particularly large for low-income countries.

Figure 18. Distribution of public education spending across wealth quintiles

Average share of public education resources for children from the poorest and richest quintiles



Source: External source.

It is therefore crucial to support governments in enhancing the quality of spending, particularly in terms of equity, transparency, credibility, efficiency and effectiveness to deliver results and achieve impact. Enhancing efficiencies in public procurement is also critical, as in many developing countries it represents approximately 15 to 22 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). Sustainable procurement is not limited to what products are purchased, but also relates to how they are purchased and from whom.

This work on public finance needs to look at both the expenditure and the revenue

side, building the capacities of national revenue authorities to not only collect and administer taxes but also to expand the tax base and align tax policies with children’s rights. Identifying new sources of financing is key to scale up innovation and address critical gaps: This includes increasing official development assistance (ODA), promoting a debt architecture that is inclusive and works for all, and identifying investment opportunities and their appropriate modalities for private and blended financing.

Finally, with a social contract lens in mind, and the promotion of transparency and accountability principles, there is a need

to reinforce effective participation of civil society organizations and communities, including children, women, girls and adolescents, in setting priorities and making decisions about the financing – allocation and expenditure – of children’s needs and priorities. The international community and the private sector can support these efforts by partnering with governments to address the root causes of inequality and promote sustainable economic growth through an inclusive green transformation and human capital development.

HIGHLIGHT 5.

Spotlight on debt in developing countries

Underinvestment today results in part from the reinforcing constraints on government expenditure resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, climate crisis and emerging debt. Many governments borrowed money in the pandemic to support their populations. International financial institutions even assisted highly indebted countries to avoid imposing a choice between a debt crisis and a public health crisis. Such borrowing and reliance on concessional financing carries risks. Even pre-pandemic, one in eight countries – particularly lower-income countries – were spending more on debt servicing than on education, health and social protection combined. Sadly, debt service is the only area of government spending that has risen as a proportion of overall spending in the last five years. These fiscal pressures are occurring just as the climate crisis is becoming a planetary emergency that requires investment: The annual climate adaptation gap may climb to US\$140 billion–US\$300 billion by 2030.

More specifically, public debts (whether internal or external) impose constraints on the ability of governments to invest in the social sectors needed by children and their families.⁸⁴ For instance, between 2015 and 2022, interest payments (as

a proportion of government revenue) increased 50 per cent, and by 2027, they are expected to be (80 per cent higher), or almost double those in 2015. Currently, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and (this abbreviation was introduced on p. 20) LDCs are already respectively spending 12 per cent and 16 per cent of their revenues to pay interest on their debts. According to UNICEF figures, low-income countries are currently disproportionately affected, with severe impacts on social services, where one in eight countries spends more on debt than on education, health and social protection combined, further exacerbating child poverty.

It is therefore critical that greater transparency is promoted in relation to debt restructuring mechanisms, but also linked to national budget processes. Furthermore, it is also important to promote co-ordinated action on the part of creditors to convert debt into investments for children. Key ingredients at global level are the design of a new international debt restructuring architecture, which encompasses the heterogenous needs of low- and middle-income countries, and greater concessional support for heavily indebted poor countries, so that children's

rights are promoted in this ongoing polycrisis. The ongoing debate on the Reform of the Financial Architecture and the United Nations Secretary-General's SDG Stimulus initiative are key ongoing processes that are shedding light on this direction.

Current ODA: A small fraction of social spending

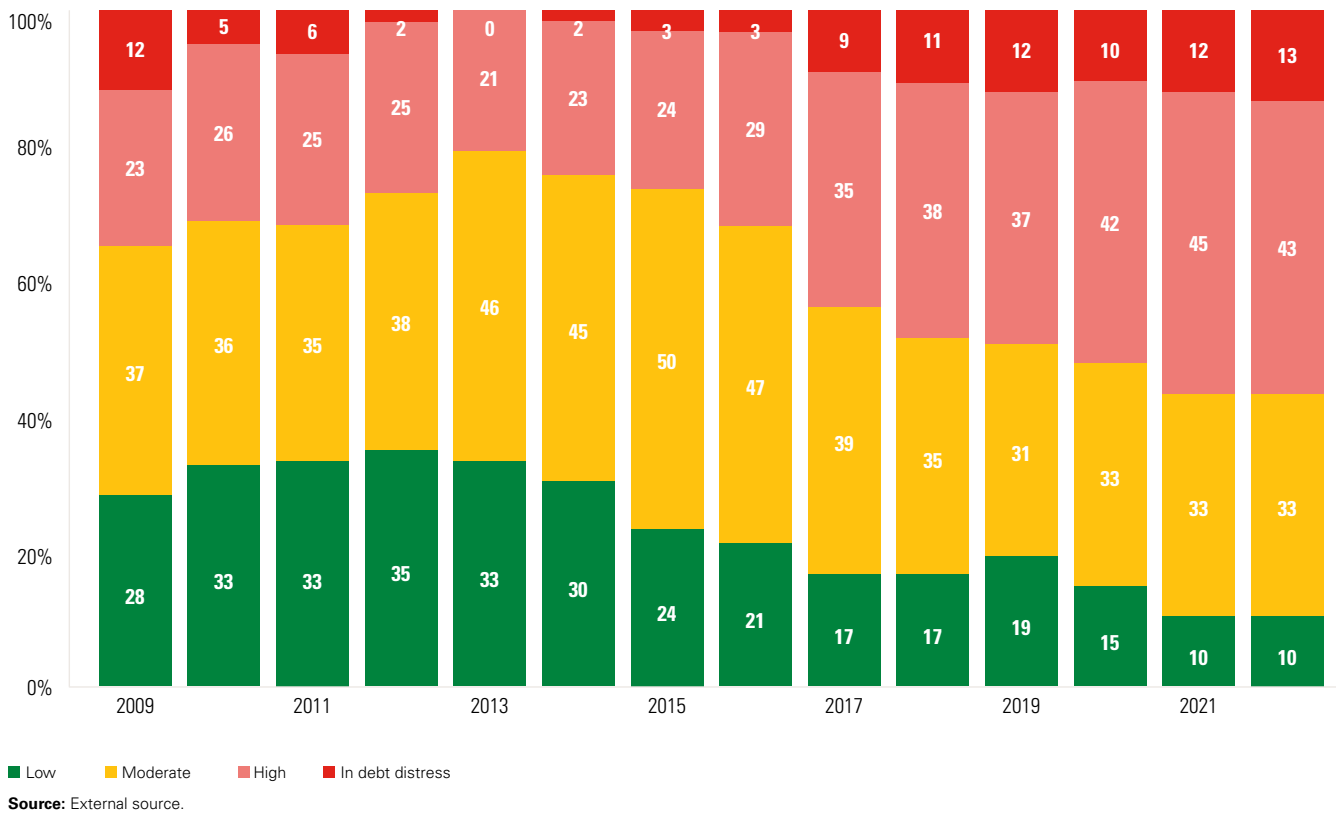
Although ODA could ease some of these constraints and help provide fiscal space, few donor countries have reached the 0.7 per cent ODA target. Furthermore, ODA remains a fraction of total social spending: sector-specific ODA in low- and middle-income countries amounts to approximately 1.8 per cent of government expenditure on health, 0.9 per cent of government expenditure on education and 0.3 per cent of government expenditure on social protection.

In line with SDG 17 and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, a renewed focus on international cooperation to bolster finance for the SDGs and address widening inequalities – including through the funding gaps – is needed. Particular attention must be paid to the unfinished commitment among donor nations to raise ODA levels to 0.7 per cent of GDP.



Debt distress – which undermines the child rights agenda – disproportionately affects low- and middle-income countries.

Figure 19. Debt status of Lower-income countries and LDCs



It is imperative that a definitive resolution to debt distress be found. Efforts to find such a resolution have been underway since early in the pandemic and are intensifying as the problem has become more urgent, with more countries confronting the prospect of default on debt repayments. So far, these efforts have failed to deliver. The existing framework for resolving debt crises is out of date, and it is proving extremely difficult to co-ordinate actors to agree on a new approach.

Consequences for children

This failure has severe repercussions for children depending on the extent to which child-related services can be protected from budget cuts. Health and education budgets are very large parts of government spending, so are unlikely to be protected from cuts. But analysis

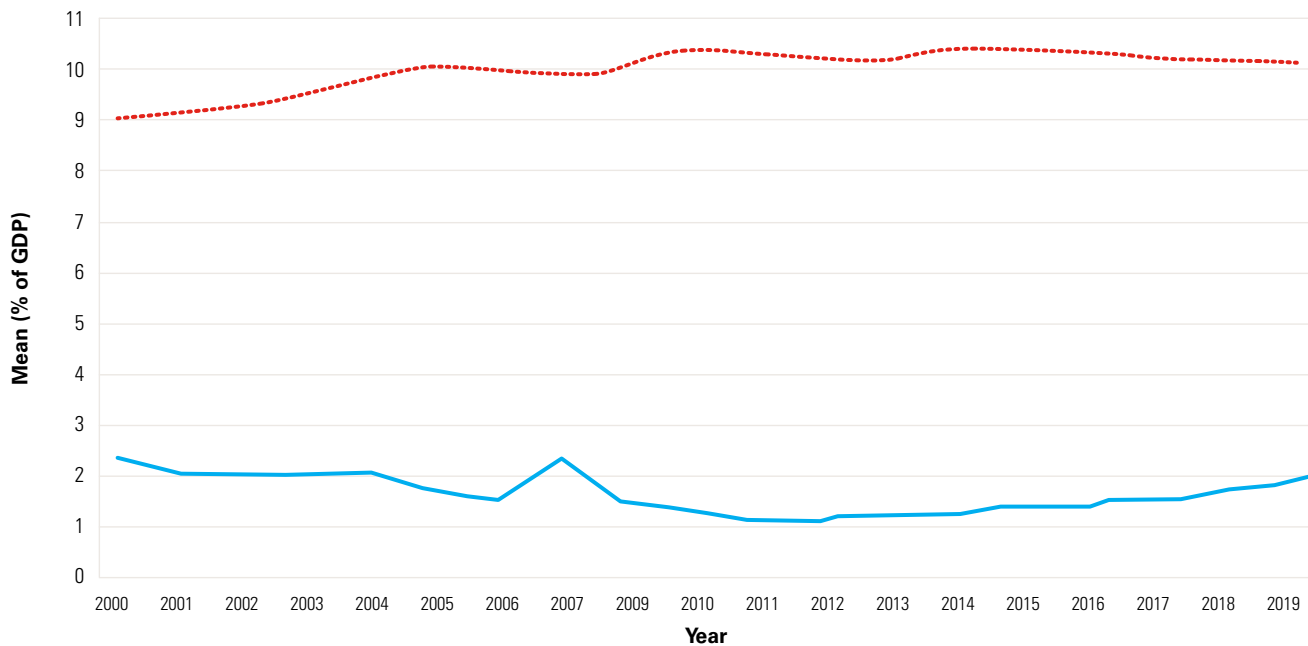
of previous debt default episodes⁸⁵ showed that children's well-being came under threat: Immediately after a default, monetary poverty of the households in which children live is on average 70 per cent higher and remains high seven years later, while infant mortality rises and remains 13 per cent higher 10 years after default. For those countries that have so far managed to stave off default, the consequences remain serious as increased debt servicing costs crowd out essential social spending – a phenomenon known as debt overhang. There is evidence⁸⁶ of precisely this effect playing out today among countries that previously participated in the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative (see Figure 20). Social spending will remain depressed until debt burdens are relieved, with long-term implications for today's children.

Persistent debt burdens often limit social spending – which takes a heavy toll on children's well-being.

Figure 20. Evidence of debt overhang in HIPCs

A. Low-income countries

(mean, in percent of GDP)

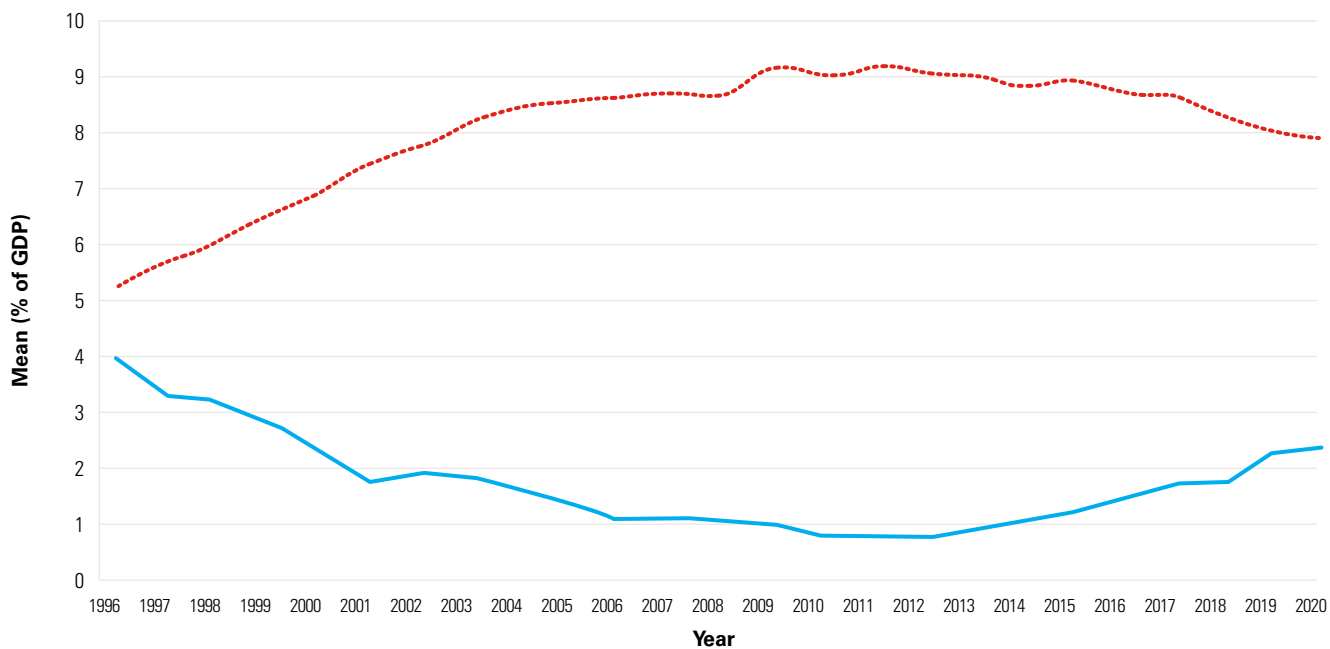


— Debt service - - - Social spending

Source: External source

B. HIPCs

(mean, in percent of GDP)



— Debt service - - - Social spending

Source: External source

On 15 March 2017, children bring food to firefighters trying to extinguish oil wells set alight by ISIS members as they retreated, Qayyarah, Iraq.

© UNICEF/UN057851/Romenzi





Over the past year, the security has been deteriorating in the northern and Sahel region of Burkina Faso. Schools became a target of invasion.

© UNICEF/UN0237266/Figula

Solutions: What needs to be done?

Supporting the full spectrum of child rights across contexts is a legal obligation of all State parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a nethical imperative, and of critical importance to building the human capability needed for sustained growth and progress towards equitable, efficient and just societies. Member States have made progress in many areas that effect the well-being of children – but at the halfway mark of the 2030 Agenda, the rights of too many children are still being

neglected. Too many children are still being left behind.

This report's assessment of the current status of child-related SDGs provides the insights to make this moment a turning point. UNICEF's analysis underscores that acceleration is urgently needed, sounding the alarm for all countries and the international community. This chapter turns to the how – what must be done to achieve more for children. First, it outlines

several components critical to driving improvements across sectors. These are followed by recommendations framed around four areas, which together will fortify the overall policy and institutional building blocks to support progress. Many countries have already developed solutions that are actively contributing to the realization of child rights, as seen in the case studies and examples in this chapter; they demonstrate that we know what needs to be done and that it can be scaled up.

A common path towards upholding every child's rights: Critical considerations

Governments are duty bearers and accountable to ensure that children's issues are a top priority. Accountability is essential to ensure that investments for children – particularly across social sectors – are prioritized, effectively included in national policies and, importantly, supported by adequate financial commitments. This commitment will directly affect children's lives by not only ensuring that these programmes are initiated, but that they also have the longevity and resources to make a lasting difference.

Political will translates to the creation, strengthening and enforcement of robust policies designed to promote and protect children's rights and to give effective and adequate prioritization in financing decisions and

budget allocations. This encompasses everything from drafting new regulations to bolstering existing ones, all while setting up mechanisms that ensure accountability for those who might violate these rules. By doing so, children are assured environments that foster their physical, mental and social development, safeguarding their futures and the future of the nation. As this report has shown, a number of countries have been able to make progress on the child-related SDG targets; but in some areas, significant political and financial commitment is needed if countries are to match their ambitions.

The multifaceted nature of the challenges affecting children's well-being necessitates an integrated, multi-sector approach. Whole-of-government

and whole-of-society commitments are needed to ensure that governments can realize their duty bearer role, and to rally the ownership, commitment and contribution of wider members of society. No single entity can address these concerns in isolation. Simply put, broad coalitions and partnerships are invaluable. Diverse stakeholders, including NGOs, civil society, the private sector, international bodies and children themselves, can foster the necessary collaborative spirit, defining and driving this agenda as key agents of change and transformation. Common ownership and commitment, built on shared goals and diverse expertise, can contribute to a comprehensive and multipronged strategy that maximizes the chances of creating a world where every child has the opportunity to flourish (see Box 7).

Box 7.

Multisectoral approach to ending child marriage in Ethiopia⁸⁷

In recent years, Ethiopia has made significant progress in reducing child marriage rates. According to the 2016 Demographic and Health Survey, the percentage of women aged 20–24 years who were first married or in union before the age of 18 decreased from 59 per cent in 2005 to 40 per cent in 2016. These national figures mask significant variability across the country – according to the most recent data, less than 10 per cent of young women were married in childhood in Addis Ababa compared to 50 per cent or more in Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz and Somali regions. Age of marriage increases with improved levels of education and wealth. The drivers of child marriage in Ethiopia include poverty as well as social, religious, cultural and gender norms.

The Government of Ethiopia, with assistance from donors, began supporting a large-scale social protection programme in 2005. The Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) was originally designed to address the needs of chronically food-insecure households in famine-prone rural areas of the country. As the programme expanded and unfolded, research and analysis in 2017 showed that although ending child marriage was not part of its rationale, the practice did decline in households that participated in the PSNP. Over the past four years, UNICEF and others have advocated for and influenced the design of the PSNP to optimize its ability to reduce child marriage. Four main approaches have been used iteratively: 1) building evidence of what works to end child marriage and elaborating a conceptual framework of the pathways through which the PSNP can effect change; 2) setting up pilot projects to show how cash-plus components, such as case management, can be added to the large-scale social protection programme; 3) building political will and working with national partners to harmonize policies related to child marriage and campaigning to end the practice; and 4) advocating to influence the design of the next iteration of the PSNP (PSNP 5).

One important lesson of the experience in Ethiopia is that economic development and poverty reduction strategies are not enough. By themselves, they are unlikely to affect long-term changes in deep-rooted gender norms, attitudes and behaviours related to child marriage. UNICEF developed a conceptual framework that identifies three pathways for reducing child marriage in Ethiopia: improved economic security; increased investment in girls' education; and improved knowledge of and attitudes towards child marriage.

In line with this framework, complementary cash-plus components, have been identified and piloted for the PSNP to have an increased positive impact on child marriage. These include: improving girls' retention in school by providing additional economic incentives such as cash top-ups to PSNP households to increase their demand for education for girls; expanding social worker case management support to PSNP households and providing information on the importance of girls' education, and risks of child marriage and early childbearing; facilitating referrals to child protection case management for girls and corresponding legal, health and counselling services; and integrating modules on child marriage prevention and gender equality into existing behaviour change communication curricula at the community level.

It is important to focus on children along the life-course. Policies and programmes must be synergized across the life stages from birth to adolescence so that positive actions in one sector are amplified by positive actions in other sectors, cumulating gains as the child grows up. Success in one sector or system is often dependent on the actions of other sectors or systems. For example, early learning and responsive caregiving in early childhood are more likely to improve learning outcomes in later life if children are well nourished and have access to quality education.

Life-course actions require intersectoral partnerships and support across government and society.⁸⁸ Sectors working with particular age groups must cooperate and build on areas of common influence to create the conditions for children and adolescents to flourish across the life-course and to ensure these gains are maintained and reinforced through interventions in later life. Whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches can enable these processes.⁸⁹

Life-course actions must be equity focused and gender responsive.^{90 91} This means taking action to identify children who have been excluded or marginalized, are at greater risk of deprivation and likely to experience discrimination, tailoring the design of policies and programmes to meet the specific needs of these children and monitoring and evaluating the impact of these initiatives.

Data and evidence that help translate life-course approaches into practice must be expanded.⁹² While there is a strong body of evidence to argue for a life-course approach, the evidence on how it can be operationalized in various contexts needs strengthening. Government, academia and partners must invest in studies, research and evaluations to identify the factors, processes and innovations that enable life-course approaches to secure positive outcomes for children in various contexts.

Fortifying policies and institutional frameworks: Key recommendations for increasing attention to crisis and fragile settings

Preparedness and resilience of communities, systems and services

Investing in resilience helps prevent and curtail economic, environmental and human losses in the event of a crisis, thereby reducing human suffering and protecting development gains. A resilience lens helps those who are most marginalized, ensuring that no one is left behind on the path towards sustainable development.

Lessons learned from past disasters and recovery processes underline the continued need to enhance the preparedness and resilience of communities, systems and services. The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the need for a whole-of-society approach, such as the one developed through the Comprehensive School Safety Framework⁹³, to ensure the response for children is robust and multifaceted.

It is paramount to invest in resilient and shock-responsive systems and services. Schools, health centres and WASH services must withstand natural and human-made hazards and always remain functional. Furthermore, to build lasting resilience, recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction must include all members of the affected community and deliberately engage those most vulnerable to shocks and disasters, such as children (especially the youngest), the elderly, women, people with disabilities, and marginalized communities. The needs and perspectives of these groups must also be included throughout planning and decision-making processes.

The integration of a risk-informed approach into routine programming strengthens national systems and builds resilience to shocks and stresses by identifying and addressing root causes and drivers of risk.

Education: A lifeline for children and communities

There is growing recognition, including in UNICEF's Core Commitments for Children, that uninterrupted, continuous education is critical for children and their families. Education enables people – especially, for instance, those displaced by conflict and violence – to live with dignity and agency and provides them with knowledge and skills to make important decisions about their life, livelihoods and well-being, addressing both psychosocial and learning needs.

Investing in preparedness and shock-resilient systems is crucial to mitigate the impact of future pandemics, conflicts and climate crises. With the rise of digital education, there is a unique opportunity to integrate technology into these efforts, ensuring that societies are equipped to handle challenges while maintaining continuity in education.

To establish shock-resilient education systems capable of withstanding future pandemics and crises, national education systems must be reimagined with solutions for blended and distance learning in mind. This must be underpinned by the principles of equitable access and complemented with high-quality free educational resources. This approach ensures the continuity of learning for those beyond formal schooling, especially during instability and crisis, when millions of children have limited or no face-to-face educational opportunities.

Research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that diverse approaches are needed to reach children during an emergency, with mobile access to learning being especially important as the most ubiquitous technology in homes. Other important factors include access to quality digital learning platforms, apps and content, and guidance and support for teachers, parents and children in the use of mobile, TV and radio.

Box 8.

Protecting children's right to learn

UNICEF and UNESCO launched Gateways to Public Digital Learning, a flagship initiative from the 2022 Transforming Education Summit to support governments in building accessible and high-quality national digital learning platforms and content and ensure education continuity by making digital learning available to all children.

In 2021, UNESCO, the International Institute for Educational Planning, UNICEF, the Global Partnership for Education and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office jointly published a risk analysis for resilient education systems, which was detailed in the third volume of *Education Sector Analysis: Methodological guidelines*.⁹⁴ The guidelines capitalize on the lessons learned from countries where risk analysis was included in their sector analysis and planning. This report provides guidance to conduct a hazard and conflict analysis of the education sector, covering the identification of prevalent risks, constraints they pose on ongoing delivery and development of education, bidirectional relationship between risks and education, and political, institutional and governance mechanisms that contribute to education system vulnerability or resilience.

Social protection: Critical during shocks

Social protection has been recognized as key to addressing child poverty and exclusion, and is a specific target of SDG 1 and SDG 10. The evidence is clear on the essential role of social protection in addressing the socio-economic barriers to accessing critical services, enhancing child outcomes across sectors, and contributing to productive capacity, even in households in which there are relatively few adults able to work (as a proportion of all household members). At the same time, social protection is a critical pillar of effective humanitarian action, as confirmed by the World Humanitarian Forum, the Sendai Framework and multiple commitments to scale up social protection and cash transfer programmes.

Social protection was a core pillar of the emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and has also been critical in helping families cope with intensified climate crises and cost-of-living increases. The response to COVID showed that investing in risk-informed, shock-

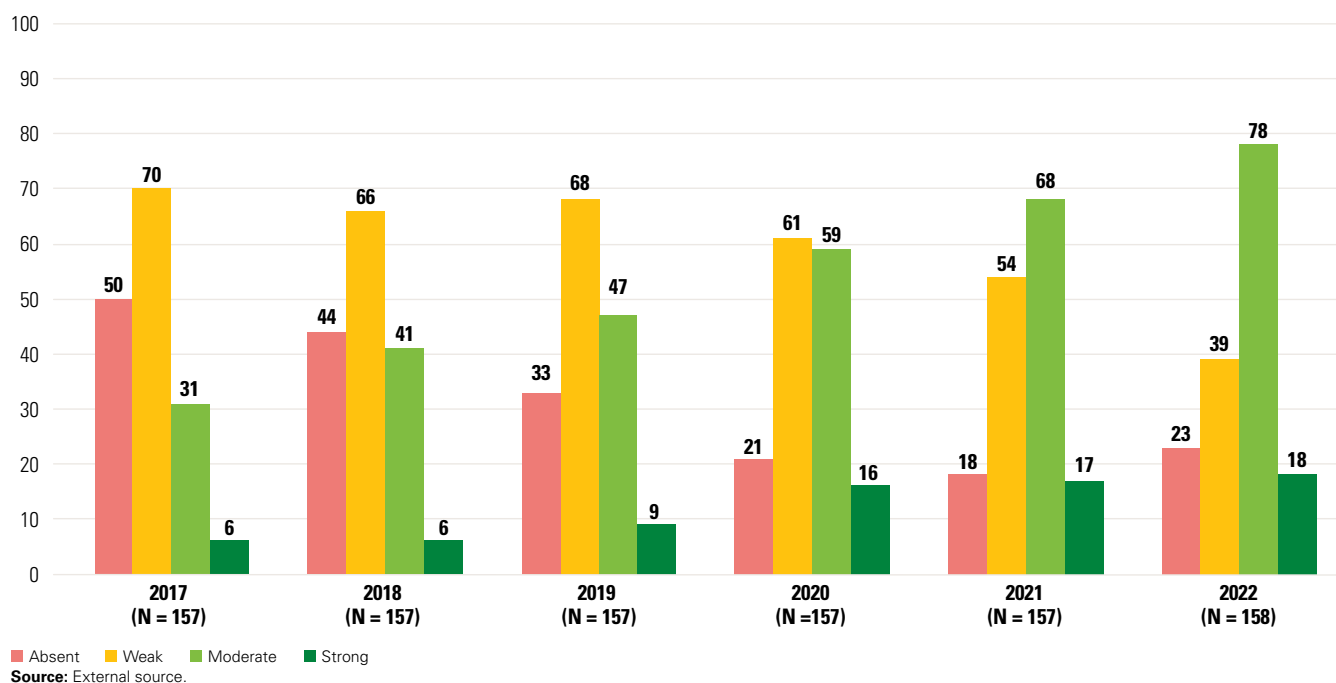
responsive social protection systems ensured an effective and timely response. At the same time, it also exposed the gaps in terms of coverage, scale and commitments, particularly for children, women and excluded families.⁹⁵

As of January 2022, a total of 3,856 social protection interventions, measures and programmes by governments were planned or implemented in 223 economies across the world. This significant scale-up of social protection in response to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 highlights the criticality of investing in shock-responsive social protection systems. Investment in building such systems at the country level is recommended by UNICEF’s Evaluation of Approaches to Social Protection Programming in Humanitarian Situations initiative. This evaluation found that, irrespective of the nature of the shock, strong shock-responsive social protection systems have proven to be key to the effective and efficient distribution of funds. They do this by reducing duplication while simultaneously enhancing national capacity

and the adequacy, comprehensiveness and timeliness of the coverage of needs.

The sector-level commitments for social protection in the Core Commitments for Children underpin many of UNICEF’s efforts to build shock responsiveness into social protection systems in countries. Since 2017, UNICEF has helped multiple governments strengthen and prepare their social protection systems to support the needs of crisis-affected children, with encouraging results. The positive trend in social protection systems that are ready and able to respond in times of crisis continued in 2022: In that year, the number of countries with nascent or low readiness to respond to crises fell to 39, down from 54 in 2021, whereas the number of countries with moderate readiness grew from 68 to 78 over the same period (see Figure 21). Despite a steady increase in the number of countries with strong readiness, progress was slower in 2022. This reflects the challenges in strengthening the shock responsiveness of social protection systems – and the critical need to continue working in this area.

Figure 21. Trends in the number of countries with national cash transfer programmes that are ready to respond to crises, 2018-2022



Mainstreaming sustainability and climate

Sustainability and climate action must be aligned and prioritized across all national policies and programmes to address the challenges of climate change, environmental degradation, unsustainable energy use and disaster risks. This is essential because children and young people are disproportionately impacted, which can jeopardize their well-being.

Targeted investments in adapting essential social services to make them climate resilient could significantly reduce risks for the children most vulnerable to the climate emergency. Enhancing access to resilient water and sanitation services could diminish climate risk for 415 million children.⁹⁶ Similarly, improving educational outcomes and expanding availability of health services and social protection could potentially benefit 275 million, 460 million and 310 million children, respectively. The call for global climate action to protect children and deliver climate justice has never been more urgent.

Increased attention to fragile settings where public institutions are not going to deliver

The frequency and duration of humanitarian crises has multiplied in recent years, driven by the effects of climate change and conflict. Children in humanitarian and fragile contexts face unique risks and challenges that impede the fulfilment of their rights.

Persistent poverty and inequality, armed conflicts, gender-based violence, the climate emergency, rising inflation and debt distress are pushing more countries into fragility and conflict. In an era of polycrisis, the global community must recognize that today's crises are increasingly long lasting, recurring and complex, requiring multi-year integrated development and financing solutions. It is also important to ensure that financing solutions address the rights of the poorest and most marginalized women and children – particularly their rights to

health – including sexual and reproductive health – nutrition, education, social protection and other services. Ensuring the full, equal and meaningful participation of women in decision making and political processes is also essential to building and sustaining peace over the long term.

In this context, countries can adopt approaches that strengthen the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus, including financing across the three dimensions of the nexus. The United Nations system plays a critical role in convening actors across those dimensions to ensure co-ordinated and coherent country-level support during and beyond crisis. This support builds on the United Nations' engagement in relevant global processes, including the Inter-Agency Standing Committee for humanitarian co-ordination and the Development Assistance Committee – United Nations Dialogue. Furthermore, the United Nations can strengthen and implement crisis-sensitive sustainable financing efforts. The United Nations system can continue customizing existing sustainable financial service offers,

ensuring that they are adaptable, sensitive to and deployable in fragile and crisis contexts, and that they respond to cross-cutting challenges like climate change, gender inequality and displacement. This includes exploring financing solutions beyond ODA (including leveraging public finance, private/public mechanisms and innovative financing), improving inclusive co-ordination mechanisms and generating evidence on investment impacts. It also includes strengthening partnerships with civil society at the national and grassroots levels to foster more inclusive processes and institutions. The United Nations can also strengthen the capacities of governments to build inclusive and resilient national systems and processes. It can continue to build national institutional capacity to access and effectively manage increasingly diverse sources of financing and build new partnerships. This is imperative to ensure inclusive and sustainable national institutions that do not require ongoing United Nations support, particularly considering declining resources and rising needs.



In February 2023, Maife (age 5) gets access to safe water at the Lajas Blancas migrant reception centre, Darién, Panama.

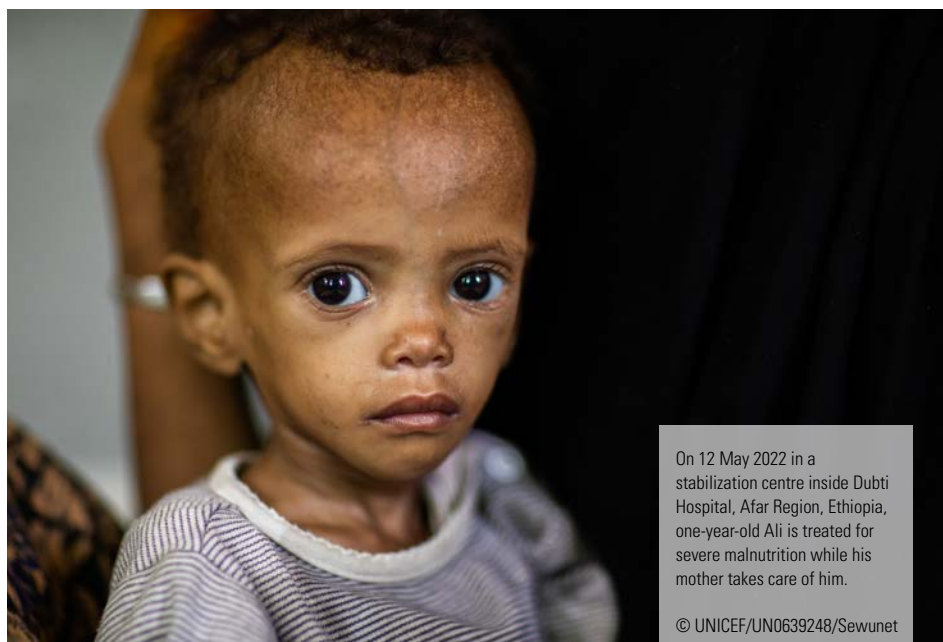
© UNICEF/UN0793542/urdaneta

Box 9.

Putting children at the centre of the HDP nexus

A risk-informed HDP nexus national approach enables a comprehensive response that includes a focus on conflict and crisis prevention while building the resilience of children, communities, livelihoods and ecosystems to shocks and stresses, thereby contributing to improving children's lives and achieving the SDGs.

UNICEF commits to conducting joint multi-hazard risk and/or conflict analyses sensitive to age, gender and conflict to inform its humanitarian, development and peace programmes. Analyses should ideally be conducted with governments and partners as appropriate and feasible. Findings can also inform the United Nations Common Country Analysis, the Humanitarian Needs Overview and other relevant United Nations or interagency processes.



Several activities can foster more sustainable solutions to financing social spending in humanitarian emergencies:

- Increase the volume of financing available to low- and middle-income countries – including ODA, climate finance and development lending, as well as establishing more equitable and affordable access to financial markets
- Scale up climate adaptation and mitigation efforts through humanitarian response, in line with the 2016 recommendations of the United Nations High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing
- Harmonize donor support by integrating humanitarian, development and climate finance at the institutional level
- Enhance support to governments in low- and middle-income countries to strengthen their public finance systems, improve their capacity to absorb shocks and provide a rapid response to humanitarian needs
- Foster greater knowledge-building on pre-arranged financing for humanitarian emergencies, focusing on risk transfer mechanisms to establish early response and preparedness
- Speed up the development of, and financing for, shock-responsive social protection systems to enhance resilience of populations in low- and middle-income countries

Addressing critical pockets of exclusion: Equity and leaving no child behind

Criteria to ensure equity

Inequalities and persistent forms of discrimination leave millions of children marginalized and excluded, undermining their full potential and putting entire communities at risk. The international community must renew its commitment to the Principle of Leaving No One Behind, a fundamental element of the 2030 Agenda which offers a new paradigm for more inclusive and sustainable development.

In the planning and design of policies and interventions, once an ambitious and realistic target lower than 100 per cent is set, it is vital to assess the various ways to achieve that target through an equity lens. As described in Chapter 2, it might be ambitious and realistic, for example, to make a policy to increase access by 10 percentage points from 70 to 80 per cent; however, aiming to reach 80 per cent accepts the exclusion of 20 per cent. Criteria must be established in order to know which groups will be expected to wait to achieve coverage.

There are at least two ways to solve this issue. One is setting targets for the most disadvantaged group and not for the child population as a whole. In this case, if the objective is to address gender disparities, the target should be set to increase access by the most disadvantaged girls as much as is necessary to achieve the national objective of 80 per cent for the country as a whole. An alternative is specifying targets that measure equity as well as overall target level. For instance, the target could be to increase access from 70 to 80 per cent without increasing disparities – or even better, while reducing them.

These approaches could be combined. The exact specification would depend on the criteria used to select disadvantaged groups (e.g., girls, rural, poor, children with disabilities). A benchmarking exercise could be used to set national targets for the whole population as well as separate targets for some subgroups and for different measures of inequity (e.g., gender parity index, wealth quintiles absolute and relative gaps, geographic disparities).

Roots of inequality

Leaving no one behind is not only about reaching the most disadvantaged children and families but also about combating all forms of discrimination and the root causes of inequalities within countries. Persistent forms of discrimination (see Chapter 3), including gender discrimination, are significant forms of marginalization and exclusion. Operationalizing this commitment at the country level is central to guiding action that can make a difference and bending the curve towards accelerated results. Thus, to accelerate progress towards the SDGs, special attention must be given to the most marginalized groups. The SDGs will not be achieved without an explicit focus on the most relegated children.

The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) estimates that currently 1.1 billion people live in slums and informal settlements, of whom 350 million–500 million are children.⁹⁷ The vulnerabilities of slum-dwelling populations are further exacerbated by poverty, pollution, climate change-induced weather extremes and natural disasters (see Chapter 3). Among the solutions available for children and their families

living in slums, three stand out: securing land tenure, addressing the lack of access to basic infrastructure and services, and eliminating overcrowding. Improving the living conditions of the poor in informal settlements and slums and realizing the child right to housing are key milestones for reducing poverty and inequality and meeting the SDGs.

For instance, the zero-dose agenda seeks to reduce the number of children that miss out on the first dose of DTP-containing vaccines. Zero-dose children usually suffer from a lack of nutrition, education or access to other public services as they are often invisible to systems and face unique structural barriers to inclusion. Given that the majority of zero-dose children in low- and middle-income countries live in urban and peri-urban areas – and that nearly half of children in slum households are estimated to be zero-dose children – pursuing the zero-dose agenda will go a long way in reducing child mortality and inequities faced by the urban poor.

Nearly 240 million children with disabilities are being left behind. Children with disabilities face multiple and often compounding barriers to accessing their right to well-being. Addressing their exclusion will involve enablers such as social and behavioural change (i.e., changing social norms), governance and fighting the underlying determinants of discrimination.

HIGHLIGHT 6.

Addressing inequities: Close-up on community health systems

Strengthening community health systems can help address disparities by providing health care and related services to the most marginalized children. Several key measures – guided by the One Plan, One Budget principle – can help fortify these important community mechanisms:

- ➔ **Establish a transparent and agreed-upon country engagement process to streamline the support of regional- and global-level partners for priority countries.**
This includes efforts by the expanded coalition of partnerships to strengthen co-ordination across global initiatives to collectively and more effectively contribute to supporting One Plan. This will avoid countries needing to produce different plans for different donors and partners, thus avoiding fragmentation and duplication of efforts by countries.
- ➔ **Align partner and domestic resources for community health systems around One Budget.**
Through technical assistance, countries will develop One Budget to support longer-term sustainable financing to strengthen community health systems. The principle of One Budget will enable countries to provide visibility for funding gaps and support the mobilization and co-ordination of resources across different funding modalities from external and domestic sources.
- ➔ **Integrate community health systems into primary health care.** Development partners can advocate for and support policy and programmatic actions in the One Plan, which integrates community health systems into primary health care. Community health platforms are most effective when they are integrated into a primary health care system, thereby creating strong referral links between communities and primary health care.
- ➔ **Support for a multisectoral integrated community health platform.** The One Plan focuses on delivering an evidence-based package of essential services for health, nutrition, WASH and other context-specific services. This entails support for both preventative and curative services and applying universal and targeted approaches as needed.
- ➔ **Involve and strengthen community-level leadership.** Experience highlights the critical importance of community leadership and accountability in the effective and sustained delivery of essential services at the community level. For instance, community health workers – who are often members of or selected by the communities they serve – are trusted sources of knowledge in their communities as well as advocates for local priorities and needs. The One Plan prioritizes investing in processes to involve community leaders and community health workers in the design of revitalized community systems and establish feedback loops.
- ➔ **Professionalize the role of community health workers.** Community health workers play a critical role in enhancing the equity arm of primary health care, bringing essential services to the most marginalized children in a locally and culturally appropriate manner. The One Plan requires that these essential workers are sufficiently trained, paid, protected, supervised, equipped and supported, recognizing the significant gender-related barriers community health workers confront.
- ➔ **Increase availability of essential commodities.** Ensuring qualified community health workers have life-saving commodities on hand is a necessary component of the One Plan and One Budget. As part of this process, partners will work with priority countries to secure the supply of high-quality life-saving commodities, develop training materials and quality assurance programmes, and encourage the development of innovative products more suited for storage, distribution and administration in developing countries.
- ➔ **Strengthen accountability (i.e., data and monitoring) for community health systems.** The Community Health Development Programme will operate a data-and-monitoring function, leveraging data from countries and partners to monitor and measure progress and provide regular updates. To this end, a community health dashboard will be implemented, starting with mapping community health workers and identifying key metrics for their services. This dashboard will be continuously updated and additional health system metrics, starting with community health investment, will be added over time.
- ➔ **Establish communities of practice for South-to-South learning.** Expanded partnerships and knowledge exchange mechanisms will facilitate the South-to-South sharing of insights, best practices and lessons learned from implementation across the priority countries.

Improving data production and use: Better knowledge and evidence

Improved data production is vital to building the ability to generate the timely and actionable plans needed to achieve the SDGs. The commitment to leave no one behind also calls for high-quality disaggregated data as well as quantitative and qualitative analysis to design evidence-based solutions that identify, empower and support the most marginalized and address the multiple determinants and root causes of issues affecting children.

Focus on quality data within countries

Data play a critical role in shaping policies and driving action. For a long time, national household surveys have produced aggregates as well as subnational estimates addressing gender, geographic, socio-economic and other disparities – and increasingly include data about children with disabilities.

Policymakers, planners and implementing agencies need to have a clear picture of who the excluded children are and which barriers prevent these children from accessing services. As averages mask inequities, household surveys can be used to disaggregate data critical to policy, programme planning and service delivery to ensure that no child is left behind. For example, household surveys have been used to illuminate vast disparities between the rich and the poor, especially within cities.

Partnerships to fortify data

Countries and the international community must continue to collaborate to fill the data gaps that currently cloud the picture of children's well-being and to build capacity to monitor progress effectively. Armed with comprehensive and up-to-date data, countries will

be better equipped to adjust national strategies as needed, scale up successful interventions and redirect resources to where they are most impactful.

As highlighted in Chapter 3, data collection and use tend to be fragmented and infrequent, especially in low- and middle-income countries. In particular, there are major gaps in indicators related to Protection from Harm, Learning and Life Free of Poverty. The SDG process allowed countries to adopt measurement standards that enhance cross-country and over-time comparability of vital indicators. Under the 2030 Agenda and the global call for a data revolution, commendable progress has been made in filling data gaps, making more recent, comparable and high-quality data available. For example, the number of indicators included in the global SDG database has increased from 115 in 2016 to 225 in 2023.⁹⁸

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 water quality. Commendable advances have been made in the monitoring and reporting of 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.

Investing in national statistical systems

It is critical that countries continue to invest in strengthening systems, building

capacity, and technology to improve data collection, monitoring and analysis across the life stages of children. Accurate and timely data are crucial to identifying necessary interventions and setting attainable national targets.

Going beyond data collection

This must, however, go beyond having data; countries must prioritize efforts to use the data. Without the capacity to access and use relevant and context-specific data among local and national decision makers, it will not be possible to harness data's transformative potential for delivering results for children. There is a need to expand the scope of investments to strengthen the use of data in child-responsive planning, financing and policy decisions across sectors, as well as for social accountability.

Including children

Inclusive participation is also an essential dimension of improving the quality of data. Countries should develop participatory community data systems and monitoring mechanisms that allow children and youth to participate meaningfully to drive targeted and effective service delivery to ensure no one is left behind.

Protecting children's data

Risk is inherent in data collection, analysis and use. Data protection practices must therefore be strengthened nationally, regionally and globally to ensure that the opportunities of data and data technologies are harnessed to narrow the digital divide while also minimizing risks and potential harms to children.

Increasing investments: Public finance, resilient systems, and child rights across the life-course

Social spending and investing in what works

Achieving the ambition of the SDGs requires a concerted response from governments, society and the international community to scale up social spending across social sectors. These include health, nutrition, education, child protection, social protection and family-friendly policies. Such a response should also directly address growing challenges such as child poverty and rising inequality. In many cases, those involved already know what works – the investments and policies that give the most ‘bang for the buck’.

Though we are off course, SDG acceleration is possible. This will require a paradigm shift towards investing in children and supporting them across their life-course, rather than merely financing projects. This involves transitioning from project-based grants to large-scale, predictable financing that strengthens child-centred institutions, policies and programmes, and infrastructure. Key to this process is the strengthening of domestic resource mobilization through progressive taxation and the curbing of illicit financial flows.

In addition, as the benchmarking exercise in this report makes clear, there is a need to improve key sectoral policies; to encourage coherence between the efforts and expenditures of governments, civil society and development partners; and to develop new financial architectures at the national and international levels to support the required expenditure. Structuring budgets to integrate child rights across funding flows and increasing children’s participation in budget processes are essential steps.

National budgets and financing frameworks should prioritize and protect critical investments in children.

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. Yet low- and middle-income countries currently invest an average of just one third of their total government expenditure in social spending (defined here as education, health and social protection). National planning in key social sectors must be supported by integrated, strategic national financing plans. Renewed focus on the efficiency, efficacy, equity, transparency and accountability of public development spending is needed. Enhancing the efficiency of domestic financing can unlock critical resources for national development priorities: For instance, 2 per cent of GDP spent on education in low- and middle-income countries is lost due to inefficient spending and management.⁹⁹

Coherent approaches from governments, society and the international community are vital.

Governments should take a rights-based, whole-of-society approach to

financing centred on the principles of leaving no child behind, gender equality and the right to equitable social services. Public expenditures and government financing strategies should draw on and be complemented by the resources of international development partners, diaspora communities and the private sector. Such collaborative and coherent efforts through strengthened partnerships will increase the effectiveness of sectoral and cross-sectoral programmes (see Box 10). The importance of this integrated approach can also be observed, for example, in the 86 countries using the Integrated National Financing Framework approach to address gaps between planning and financing systems and strengthen the sustainable finance architecture at the national level. In 2023, 40 countries are expected to develop financing strategies – the conceptual centrepiece of integrated national financing frameworks – to advance their progress towards reaching their SDG targets.



Asma, age 17 (centre), surrounded by her peers on the Girls’ Basketball Team in Herat, Afghanistan. Asma has six siblings (three sisters and three brothers).

© UNICEF/UN0425237/Awad

Box 10.

Sierra Leone: Strengthening partnerships at the national level to scale up foundational learning

As part of the commitment towards the country priority reform Delivering Foundations of Learning for All, UNICEF engaged with the Government of Sierra Leone and key partners on sector-wide alignment for children's school readiness and foundational learning. The thrust of the partnership is to strengthen basic literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional skills, including closing learning disparities for girls and boys and for other groups, as aligned with the Education Sector Plan (2022–2026) and with major national policies (Free Quality School Education, Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools, National Integrated Early Childhood Education Policy, Comprehensive Safe Schools Policy). To achieve this, UNICEF collaborated with the World Bank to support the Foundational Learning Exchange in Sierra Leone that convened seven countries as well as 80 partners and donors to commit to action, fostering a supportive community, encouraging investment, and creating improved awareness and accountability for foundational learning in Africa. Subsequently, UNICEF advocated to jointly support access to quality primary education through investing in sufficient financing, well-trained teachers, and engaged families and communities.

Furthermore, the country embedded this focus in the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) compact and the new GPE programme design, to be achieved through transforming the country's education system. UNICEF facilitated and provided technical support to develop the GPE proposal worth US\$55 million for the three grants that the country has received, with UNICEF as the grant agent. Efforts to achieve this transformation focus on pedagogical solutions and innovations in pre-primary and the first four years of primary school, supported by transversal data and governance reforms. As the country aims towards 100 per cent learning outcomes for grade 4 children by 2030, the grants will support national scale-up of the foundational learning programme covering all 16 districts in the country.

A unique aspect of this was UNICEF's co-ordination with all partners in Sierra Leone (the World Bank, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the European Union, Irish Aid, and other United Nations bodies) to develop an aligned GPE application to accelerate progress towards all children gaining foundational learning skills. The programme, which is now approved, builds on 'one model, several partners, aligned resources' and taps into the technical and financial resources and strategies of each partner to avoid duplication and foster synergy. Sierra Leone is one of the 30 countries using partnership alignment to build foundational skills.

Early investments in children's well-being matter. Achieving the vision of the 2030 Agenda means realizing, among other goals, that no one should live in poverty. There is overwhelming evidence that early investments in children's well-being meaningfully contribute to achieving the SDGs. Nevertheless, funding for social sectors – i.e., health, nutrition, early childhood development and social protection – continues to be insufficient and, when faced with fiscal crises, is at high risk of further cuts. These critical investments should be prioritized and protected in national budgets and financing frameworks. They should also factor into the ambition of international financial institutions' and systems' response to issues such as the global debt crisis, particularly given the demands on budgets from emerging debt and climate crises. Governments must safeguard social spending and minimize the negative impacts of the economic, environmental and public health crises on people; children must be last in line for cuts to critical investments.

The United Nations system and international financial institutions and systems also play a role in strengthening these investments, particularly around emerging situations like the global debt crisis. All Member States must ensure that the financial systems in which they operate – both public and private – are sustainable, fair and equitable, and meet the needs of the twenty-first-century world. This can be achieved by:

- **Expanding the resource pool.** A domestic resource mobilization agenda (i.e., a tax discussion) is one way of increasing resources. Another involves securing, identifying and/or accessing additional international and domestic financing options as necessary to direct adequate finances towards children (especially the poorest and most marginalized).
- **'How' is as important as 'how much.'** Governments and their development partners must also ensure the effective, efficient and equitable use

of financial resources across social sectors for human capital development. Governments must look to maximize the impact of every expenditure within and across human capital development sectors. For example, this can be done by enhancing efficiencies in public procurement, which can represent up to 22 per cent of GDP; increasing alignment between development financing, climate financing and humanitarian financing to increase effective fiscal space; and supporting monitoring and evaluation to establish the impact of implemented solutions. The effective participation of civil society organizations and communities must also be reinforced – including children, women, girls and adolescents – in setting development priorities and making decisions about financing national development goals.

Children across the life-course

A good start to life for every child is increasingly urgent in a world where many millions of infants and young children are exposed to multiple, overlapping and interacting deprivations.^{100 101} Investments in early childhood are one of the most cost-effective ways to protect child rights and achieve more sustainable growth. As children transition to the school-age years, early gains must be maintained and reinforced while their evolving needs and vulnerabilities are addressed. Adolescence provides a second chance to tackle inequalities and shape the future, particularly among children who faced severe deprivations and poverty, or rights violations during their early years (see Box 11).

Box 11.

Supporting nutrition across the life-course in Nepal

The nutrition and development of children from preconception to adulthood is shaped by a complex and changing combination of factors. The timing and accumulation of exposure to risk factors determine the extent to which children grow well, enjoy good health, meet their potential at school, earn a productive living in adulthood and are able to pass these benefits to future generations. For these reasons, UNICEF supports national governments to develop and implement life-course and multi-sector nutrition plans to achieve the SDG 2 targets on child nutrition.

In Nepal, the Multi-Sector Nutrition Plans I (2013–2017) and II (2018–2022) were designed with a life-course premise. The plans prioritize the first, 1000 days from – conception to a child’s second birthday – which is the most sensitive period for a child’s growth and development; and adolescence, which provides a chance to recover from nutrition deprivations in earlier childhood and shape the future. In addition, the plans include programming to improve physical and financial access to nutritious foods for all children; enhance the nutrition literacy of school-age children and the quality of school meals; improve access to safe water and safe and sustainable sanitation in communities and at school; and address harmful social and cultural norms and practices, such as child marriage.

Contrary to previous nutrition programming, which was primarily driven by the health system, these plans involved all sectors with the potential to deliver nutrition results for children, adolescents and women: health, agriculture and livestock, education, water supply and sanitation, women and children, home affairs, federal affairs and local development. This multi-sector approach increases the opportunities to ensure all conditions for good nutrition and development are met, including immediate (nutritious diets and care), underlying (food, services and practices) and enabling (resources, norms and governance) determinants.

Over the course of the last decade, Nepal has achieved rapid and sustained progress on improving child nutrition through implementation of the Multi-Sector Nutrition Plans. For example, the percentage of women consuming iron supplements for at least 90 days during pregnancy increased from 56 per cent to 87 per cent; the percentage of children aged 6–23 months consuming a minimally diverse diet increased from 27 per cent to 48 per cent; and child stunting fell from 41 per cent to 25 per cent.

The Multi-Sector Nutrition Plan III (2023–2030) will seek to sustain and build on these successes and address gaps in the design of prior plans, including the need to give greater attention to addressing harmful gender norms and to prioritize the nutritional needs of disadvantaged groups, including children living with disabilities.

Investment in care and family-friendly policies

It is critical that governments and the private sector enhance their investments in family-friendly policies that address the care crisis to enable parents to give their children the best trajectory in life, boost productivity and women’s empowerment, and shape

a more just and equitable future. UNICEF supports a package of family-friendly policies encompassing: 1) sufficient paid leave to all parents and guardians, in both the formal and informal economies, to meet the needs of their young children; 2) the ability of mothers to breastfeed exclusively for six months, as recommended by

globally endorsed standards, and to continue breastfeeding for as long as they choose; 3) affordable, quality childcare and early education for all children; and 4) child benefits and adequate wages to help families provide for young children (see Box 12). Greater investment in family-friendly policies is urgently needed. This is good for children, good for women, good for business and good for the economy.

The needs and vulnerabilities of children vary across the different stages of life, from infancy and early childhood through the school-age years and adolescence. All stages of a child's life are intricately intertwined, and deprivation or advantage at one stage can shape outcomes in later stages and in adulthood.

The different stages of life also interact with household, institutional, community, societal, macroeconomic and environmental conditions. For example, younger and less established households are often those with younger children, fewer resources and lower capacity to absorb shocks without detriment to children's well-being.¹⁰²

These interactions and interconnections demand a life-stages approach, which ensures the evolving needs and vulnerabilities that impact a child's life are considered and addressed from birth to adolescence. By removing barriers and bottlenecks to good nutrition, development, physical and mental health, education, protection, and safety and security, cycles of disadvantage can be prevented or broken. This approach is crucial to achieving the full set of child-related SDGs and is grounded in the same principles of equity and sustainability that guide the 2030 Agenda.

Box 12.

Mozambique: Cash and Care – An integrated approach for expansion¹⁰³

Since 2017, UNICEF has supported the Government of Mozambique in the design, implementation and evaluation of components of the cash-plus programme *Subsidio para a Criança de 0–2 anos* (subsidy for infants 0–2 years). The start-up phase of the programme was implemented in Nampula, one of Mozambique's poorest provinces with a large child population. In 2021, an impact and process evaluation of the child grant programme was completed to inform the government's decision on its scale-up. The programme is part of the Basic Social Subsidy Programme, overseen by the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Action, implemented at national, provincial and district levels.

The Cash and Care programme has three components: 1) a cash transfer of MZN 540 (US\$9) per month paid to primary caregivers of children aged 0–2 years in targeted districts; 2) social and behaviour change communication on nutrition, WASH and childcare practices, implemented by community social protection volunteers at cash distribution sites; and 3) a case management component that is offered to recipient families considered the poorest and most marginalized.

A comprehensive evaluation of the programme for the period 2019–2021 was conducted to assess the impact on recipients and their families. The findings were striking: There were reductions in poverty, increases in household savings and expenditures, increases in the frequency and diversity of meals provided to children, reductions in gender-based violence and stress, and, surprisingly, reductions in pregnancies. UNICEF and its partners, including key donors, translated these results into strategic evidence-based advocacy efforts to convince the Government of Mozambique to expand the cash-plus programme into more areas.

With the results of the impact evaluation, through the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Action and the National Institute for Social Action, the government committed to progressively expand the programme to more provinces – focusing on areas with high rates of poverty and malnutrition – with support from UNICEF and finance from the United Kingdom, Sweden, Finland, Canada, the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau and the World Bank.

Shock-resilient systems

The SDGs provide a solid foundation for supporting resilient societies and a prosperous future for children. Efforts to achieve this promise, however, will require collective and co-ordinated work across systems, including at the community level, ensuring they are able to function and deliver services even in the face of shocks and recurrent crises.

The current polycrisis has increased the urgency to ensure investments lead to systems that are robust, comprehensive, prepared and risk informed. The United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework emphasizes that an integrated and

multidimensional programming approach is crucial to maximize synergies and positive impacts and to manage potential trade-offs. Therefore, the framework likewise calls for a systems approach to development.¹⁰⁴

Systems of co-ordination must be able to develop policies, raise awareness and build institutional capacity in order to assess, prepare and effectively respond to shocks. The COVID-19 pandemic clearly demonstrated the need for multiple systems to be well equipped to respond in a timely and effective manner at all times, crisis or not. Stronger policies and investment in disaster preparedness are fundamental to ensuring that results achieved are not lost during times of crisis.



Colombia, due to its geographical location, has historically been a crossing point for migrants and refugees all over the world.

© UNICEF/UN0776124/Mendez

CHAPTER 5.

Child rights at the centre of the 2030 Agenda: A call to action

In 2015, the global community made a commitment to transform our world and ensure no one would be left behind. But how do we ensure these good intentions become tangible changes in the day-to-day lives of children?

By galvanizing political commitment, matching ambition with action, building knowledge and evidence, honoring the commitment towards a livable planet, and ensuring financing systems work for children, lasting improvements to every child's well-being are possible. Child-centric actions focused on reaching the SDG targets must be embedded in national strategies and legislation to foster long-lasting change. Systemic issues must be rectified and every child must be ensured access to health care, proper nutrition, school, and safe water and adequate sanitation. By sharing experiences and lessons learned, co-ordinating efforts and pooling resources, we can transform the national and global commitment to children's rights. Together, we can build a resilient and brighter future where every child reaches their potential.

As the United Nations Secretary-General has recently emphasized, **recognizing child rights is a fundamental pillar to achieving the SDGs.**¹⁰⁵

With this in mind, UNICEF calls on the international community to:

Build political commitment within countries via broad national coalitions

- National leadership is key to realizing children's rights: It influences the public and policy discourse and lights the way to a future that respects and promotes child rights.
- Social sector spending should be prioritized as part of national and subnational financing strategies, including in health, nutrition, education, WASH, child protection and social protection. This demonstrates tangible national commitments that incorporate child rights into the core of national development plans.
- Legislative measures can be enacted to facilitate change in societal attitudes and behaviours.
- The engagement of diverse stakeholders – from businesses to community groups – can have a direct, positive impact on children's issues at the grassroots level, serving as a powerful instrument of change while contributing to nations' commitments to include children's rights within the social fabric.
- Robust monitoring and reporting systems are necessary to ensure accountability. Regularly tracking and publicly sharing the progress made towards SDGs not only ensures transparency, but also keeps child rights at the forefront of public and political discussions. Continual evaluation plays a crucial role in shaping the necessary conditions for the realization of child rights.
- Strong national leadership and ownership focused on our greatest investment – our children – can bring about cohesion, collaboration and cooperation across multiple stakeholders including international actors and investments.

Root ambition in reality and take action

- It is critical to support objective assessments of countries' status across SDG areas, being conscious of data gaps. National and subnational targets can then be defined through an inclusive process of consultations. Targets must consider technical capacities, policy and governance constraints, availability of disaggregated data for monitoring, and realistic projections of financing. Feasibility assessments will also be an important source of information for planning and resource mobilization.
- Localization of global targets, contextualized and adapted to local realities and with an equity lens, will help break down goals into easily achievable actions that guide comprehensive yet realistic road maps. Actions should include policy reforms, resource mobilization strategies, multisectoral co-ordination mechanisms and capacity building of implementation systems at national and subnational levels.
- Independent technical advice can be leveraged to help match ambitions to implementable actions grounded in local knowledge.
- The thread of international cooperation can help tie country efforts together, strengthening their collective impact on child rights.

Strengthen commitment towards building a livable planet for every child

- Building a livable planet for every child necessitates robust strategies focused on sustainable development and greater flows of climate finance into child-focused social sectors.
- Emergency preparedness, disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation must be integrated into local planning and budgeting systems to foster climate resilience.
- Strengthening the resilience of the economically and socially vulnerable – particularly against climate-related hazards, shocks and stresses – is integral to this mission.
- Efficient, effective and equitable child-focused social spending can reduce underlying vulnerabilities and support a greener, more sustainable economy.
- Reducing inequities and promoting resilience requires increased investments in essential social services and systems, including health, nutrition, education, WASH and social protection, to strengthen children's adaptive capacity to climate impacts and withstand shocks.
- Addressing the major contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, such as fossil fuel use for energy and transport, via urgent shifts towards clean energy and environmentally sustainable infrastructure is fundamental to a more livable planet.
- International agreements that aim to 'green' the supply chains and reduce environmental footprints must be fulfilled.
- Environmental threats that undermine progress in child health and development – like air pollution, contamination of drinking water, inadequate sanitation and unsafe housing – must be mitigated.
- Children's physical and mental health can be enhanced via efficient urban planning that promotes public transport, active transport opportunities, green spaces and safe public areas.
- Children must be recognized as agents of change. This requires their inclusion in pertinent discussions while also equipping them with reliable, continuous information and quality data and evidence.

Prioritize knowledge and evidence for children

- High-quality evidence plays a fundamental role in our understanding of the multiple societal challenges affecting children and is vital to shaping policies and driving action.
- Strong partnerships and collaboration among stakeholders facilitate data collection, sharing and use. Improved and disaggregated data use can transform and accelerate SDG progress for children.
- Building high-quality evidence requires leveraging insights from behavioural science, which enhances our capacity to use human-centred approaches to investigate and respond to challenges.
- Innovative approaches and partnerships have the potential to support improvements in national statistical systems, helping countries to be ahead of the curve with cutting-edge solutions at scale.

Make financing systems work to accelerate progress

- Achieving the ambition of the SDGs hinges on the capacity of financial systems to adapt and evolve.
- Effective, efficient and equitable investments in children across sectors such as health, nutrition and education generate high economic and social returns. Comprehensive, multisectoral and integrated approaches are needed, however, to minimize fragmentation across these sectors and to facilitate enhanced financing for children's rights.
- Financial systems must evolve to put child rights at the centre and multiply the positive impact on child well-being. This involves:
 - ➔ Identifying and deploying additional financing options and spending more and earlier in the life-course of a child. It is essential that governments provide more for the youngest children and their families, including birth, cash allowances, leave policies and care policies. This requires making finance systems that better deliver for children by making existing subnational and national budget allocations more efficient, transparent and impactful; enhancing government capacity to collect and administer domestic revenues; and ensuring that borrowing (i.e., debt management structures) and foreign direct investment policies are directed towards delivering the rights of children and leaving no child behind.
 - ➔ Recognizing the most pressing challenges faced by children, adolescents and youth and ensuring resources are directed towards programmes designed to address these concerns.
 - ➔ Forging successful collaboration among governments, civil society and the private sector manifested by tangible budget allocations, efficient financing strategies and absorption of innovative funding sources.
 - ➔ Aligning financial strategies with global agendas such as climate change, humanitarian and emergency agendas, and SDG-aligned and responsible business practices.
 - ➔ Exploring innovative domestic and international financing strategies and reforms that underscore the principles of results-based financing, emphasizing equity and effectiveness and improving coherence of investments in cross-cutting areas like child protection and gender equality.
 - ➔ Building in protections for social sector investments via upfront investments in resilience and risk-mitigation to withstand crises.



ANNEX 1.

List of SDG indicators by thematic groups

INDICATOR GROUP	SDG NUMBER	INDICATOR LABEL
Survive and Thrive	2.2.1*	Prevalence of stunting among children under 5
	2.2.2a*	Prevalence of wasting among children under 5
	2.2.2b*	Prevalence of overweight among children under 5
	3.1.1*	Maternal mortality ratio (number of maternal deaths per 100,000 live births)
	3.1.2*	Skilled birth attendant (percentage of deliveries attended by skilled health personnel)
	3.2.1*	Under-five mortality rate
	3.2.2*	Neonatal mortality rate
	3.3.1a*	Number of new HIV infections per 1,000 uninfected population, both sexes 0–14
	3.3.1b*	Number of new HIV infections per 1,000 uninfected population, both sexes 15–19
	3.7.2	Adolescent birth rate (number of live births to adolescent women per 1,000 adolescent women)
	3.8.1*	Coverage of essential health services
	3.b.1*	Proportion of the target population covered by all vaccines included in their national programme - DTP3
	5.6.1	Proportion of the target population covered by all vaccines included in their national programme - MCV1
	Learning	4.1.1.a.m
4.1.1.a.r		Proportion of students in Grade 2 or 3 achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in reading
4.1.1.b.m		Proportion of students at the end of primary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in mathematics
4.1.1.b.r		Proportion of students at the end of primary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in reading
4.1.1.c.m		Proportion of students at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in mathematics
4.1.1.c.r		Proportion of students at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in reading
4.1.2.b*		Completion rate for children of primary school age
4.1.2.c*		Completion rate for adolescents of lower secondary school age
4.1.2.d*		Completion rate for youth of upper secondary school age
4.1.4.b		Out-of-school rate for children of primary school age
4.1.4.c		Out-of-school rate for adolescents of lower secondary school age
4.1.4.d		Out-of-school rate for youth of upper secondary school age
4.2.1		Proportion of children aged 36–59 months who are developmentally on track in at least three of the following domains: literacy-numeracy, physical development, social-emotional development and learning
4.2.2		Adjusted net attendance rate, one year before the official primary entry age

INDICATOR GROUP	SDG NUMBER	INDICATOR LABEL
Protection from Harm	5.2.1*	Proportion of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15–49 years subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months (WHO modelled estimates)
	5.3.1	Proportion of women aged 20–24 years who were married or in a union before age 18
	5.3.2	Proportion of girls and women aged 15–49 years who have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting
	8.7.1	Proportion of children engaged in economic activity and household chores
	16.2.1	Proportion of children aged 1–14 years who experienced physical punishment and/or psychological aggression by caregivers in last month
	16.2.3f	Proportion of women aged 18–29 years who experienced sexual violence by age 18
	16.2.3m	Proportion of men aged 18–29 years who experienced sexual violence by age 18
	16.9.1	Proportion of children under 5 years of age whose births have been registered with a civil authority
Safe and Clean Environment	1.4.1*	Proportion of population using at least basic drinking water services
	1.4.1*	Proportion of population using at least basic sanitation services
	6.1.1*	Proportion of population using safely managed drinking water services
	6.2.1a*	Proportion of population using safely managed sanitation services
	6.2.1b*	Proportion of population with a handwashing facility with soap and water available at home
	6.2.1c*	Proportion of population practising open defecation
Life Free of Poverty	1.1.1*	Children living in households with less than US\$1.90 PPP, updated to US\$2.15, both sexes
	1.2.1*	Proportion of population living below the national poverty line, both sexes
	1.2.1b*	Projected children living in households with income below the national poverty line, both sexes (as a % of all children), COVID-19 projections
	1.2.2	Proportion of children living in multidimensional poverty, internationally comparable indicators and thresholds, both sexes
	1.3.1	Proportion of child population covered by social protection floors/systems, both sexes
	5.1.1	Legal frameworks that promote, enforce, and monitor gender equality – Area 3: Employment and economic benefits

Note: Asterisks '**' against the SDG number represent those indicators that are modelled (i.e., they include observed data indirectly). Modelled indicators can be of different types; for each indicator the internationally accepted methodology is followed.

ANNEX 2.

Using anchored rank distribution to benchmark country level and performance on child-related SDGs

Anchored rank percentiles allow us to benchmark a country's performance by anchoring or fixing specific reference values and then identifying the percentile or average percentiles where a country or specific countries rank. This method provides a relative sense of how far each country is from the best-performing one measured in the group – e.g., income group, region – while retaining an absolute reference by anchoring the percentiles in historical data.

Looking at data in this way offers a clearer perspective of what is possible for different expected values – either target values or rates of change required to meet the target. Analysis based on anchored rank percentiles provides politicians, policymakers and advocates a common metric on the effort, ambition and actions required for countries to meet their targets. This enhanced picture helps stakeholders to manage and align expectations and work towards realistic goals.

Our analysis used this approach to benchmark the level and rates of change of countries on 48 child-related SDGs. To understand each country's performance on each indicator, a database of all episodes of annualized change – the degree to which countries have been progressing towards their targets, either positively or negatively – was created. This provided a total of approximately 80,000 episodes for 198 countries across 48 indicators. Details on capturing where individual countries stand today – their level – and how well they are progressing towards their child-related SDG targets compared to other groups of countries – their performance – are explained below.

Insightful analysis to guide progress

When looking at neonatal mortality, for instance, analyzing recent data provides more than 4,000 observations of episodes (i.e., annualized changes of the indicator). The left panel of the figure below (see Figure 22) shows the empirical distribution of all episodes of changes (positive or negative) of this indicator in the last two decades. The observed episodes of annualized change ranged from -20 to +20 and approximately 80 per cent of the observed spells represented a spell in which a country improved this indicator (as a negative indicator, less is better). These episodes are ranked from worst to best performance, which is then translated into an equivalent percentile ranging from 0 to 100. This metric provides an average percentile for each country. This was carried out for all 48 indicators for which episodes of temporally comparable change of value were available and across all three groups (by income group, by region and globally).

The average percentile allows the systematic position of individual countries to be identified. For example, suppose we observe three episodes of performance of a country: one in the 15th percentile, one in the 50th percentile and another in the 65th percentile. In that case, the country's average percentile of performance in this indicator will be 43, and they will therefore fall in the 40th–60th cut-off. Using this standardization, the average position of all countries per indicator were grouped as either 'very strong' (above 80th percentile), 'strong' (60th–80th percentile), 'moderate' (40th–60th percentile), 'weak' (20th–40th percentile) and 'very weak' (below 20th). This example illustrates that countries' performances can fluctuate across episodes – sometimes performing poorly and other times having strong performance – but the final score can be seen as the most probable value for the country. Due to this fluctuation across episodes and the use of fixed cut-offs, few countries exhibit average recent performance that lands in the bottom two categories (below 20th and 20th–40th, i.e., very weak and weak, respectively). To be in these categories, a country would have to either consistently underperform across all episodes or not achieve sufficiently strong results in some episodes to elevate its average above the 40th cut-off. Alternatively, countries can place in the bottom two categories if they have already achieved their SDG target, as can be seen in Figure 22 in the cases of Austria and France.

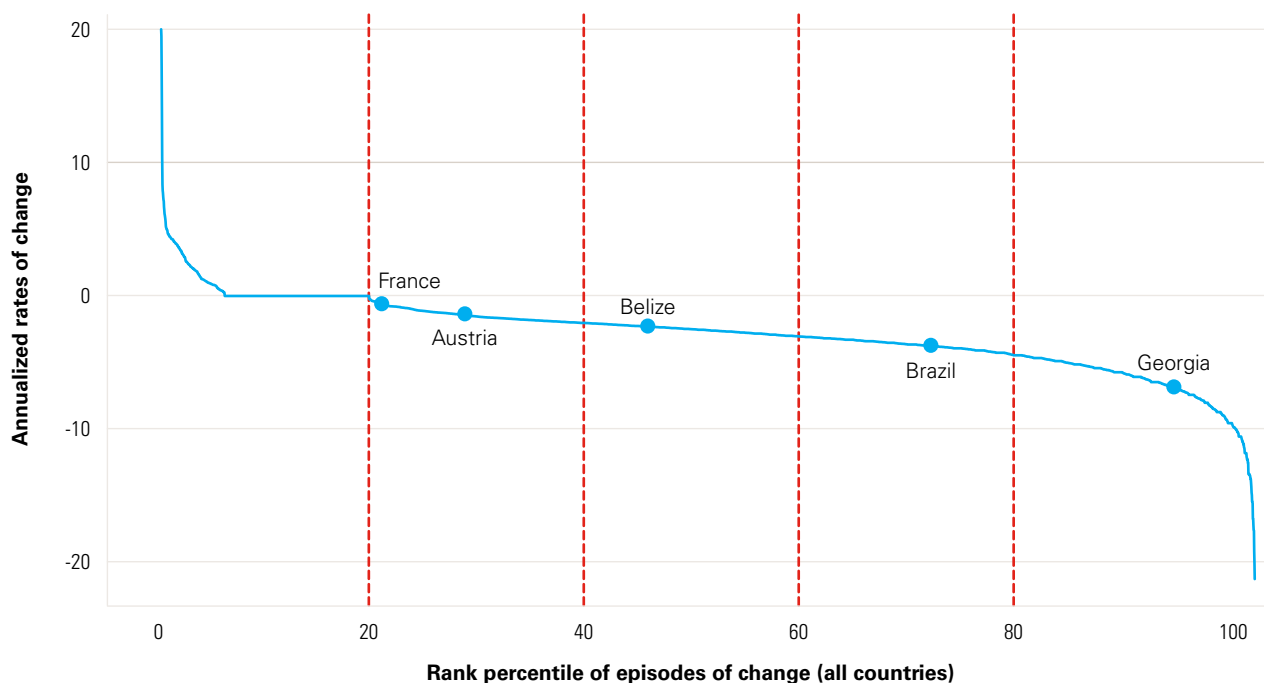
Box 13.

Average percentiles in practice: Monitoring health interventions

To illustrate the use of anchored rank percentiles and benchmarking, suppose that in a nationwide effort to combat malnutrition, a health ministry introduces a new dietary supplement programme for school-age children. To evaluate its success, the ministry decides to benchmark against data from two years prior, specifically the average rate of childhood malnutrition. With the programme in place, schools and health centres do not just assess the current nutritional status of children in isolation; instead, they compare the present data to the established benchmark from two years ago. This ensures that any fluctuations in nutritional levels — perhaps due to seasonal food availability or regional economic changes — are viewed in the context of a consistent past standard. If, over the subsequent years, a significant portion of children register better nutritional metrics than the benchmark, it serves as a positive indication that the dietary supplement programme is making a tangible difference.

In another initiative, the health ministry introduces a new outreach campaign to increase immunization rates in remote areas. Recognizing the challenges and variability in reaching distant communities, they opt to benchmark the success of this campaign against the average immunization coverage from the previous year in these areas. As health workers roll out the campaign, they constantly compare the current immunization rates to this set benchmark. This approach ensures that the effectiveness of the outreach is not merely judged by raw numbers but is instead measured against a well-defined standard from the past. For instance, if, in a particular remote region, the immunization rate exceeds the benchmark consistently over several months, it signals that the outreach efforts are indeed breaking barriers and achieving their intended goals.

Figure 22. Benchmark of the rate of change using a single indicator: Neonatal mortality (SDG 3.2.2)



Source: Authors' calculation using UNICEF Global Database, accessed from Data Warehouse as of August 2023, <https://data.unicef.org/dv_index/>.
Note: 4179 observations.

Where countries are today: Charting levels

A country's level is based on the distribution of the latest value observed for each country to identify which rank percentile each country is in, and uses the same distribution to benchmark the value of the 2030 target of each country and indicator.

Box 14.

Benchmarking levels: Comparing child poverty rates

Suppose we are comparing child poverty rates across five countries. We choose the country with the lowest child poverty rate as our anchor because that represents the best performance.

Countries and their child poverty rates (based on latest available data): Country A: 1 per cent; Country B: 4 per cent; Country C: 7 per cent; Country D: 10 per cent; Country E: 15 per cent

Choosing an anchor: Country A has the lowest child poverty rate at 1 per cent. This is our anchor.

Ranking the other countries: Now, the performance of the other countries is ranked relative to Country A.

- Country B: Its rate is 3 percentage points higher than Country A. This might place it at, say, the 80th percentile, indicating it is doing relatively well but not as well as Country A.
- Country C: Its rate is 6 percentage points higher than Country A. This could place it at the 60th percentile.
- Country D: With a 9-percentage-point difference from Country A, it might be at the 40th percentile.

- Country E: Its rate is 14 percentage points higher than Country A, possibly putting it at the 20th percentile.

Country targets for child poverty rate: Country A: 0 per cent; Country B: 2 per cent; Country C: 2 per cent; Country D: 2 per cent; Country E: 5 per cent

Ranking the targets of countries on the distribution of the latest value:

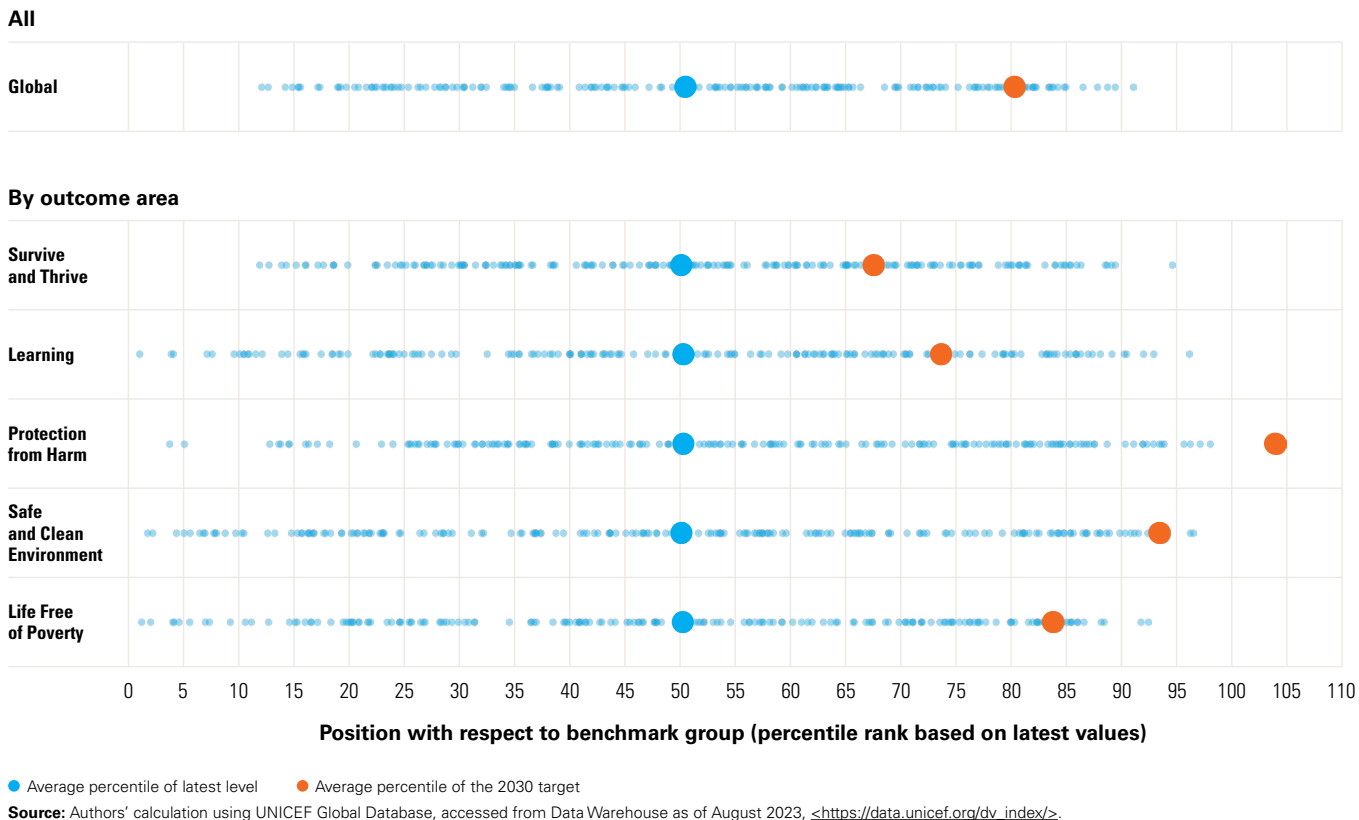
- Country A will continue at the top 80th percentile.
- Countries B, C and D all want to reach 2 per cent, which implies also reaching the top 80th percentile.
- Country E's target would require moving from the bottom 20th percentile to the 60th percentile.

Interpreting the anchored rank percentile: By anchoring the data to the best performance (Country A in this case), stakeholders can easily see how other countries fare in comparison. The benchmarking of the target on the distribution of the latest values also gives a common metric of the effort a country will have to put in to reach a specific target.

Figure 23 shows the average percentile for each country across all 48 indicators, reflecting where countries aim to be by 2030 (represented by an orange dot) benchmarked against where they stand today (represented by a blue dot). The distance between these two dots can be interpreted as the average expected effort countries must make to reach their goal by 2030. The blue dot for the world will be at the median, as it represents the average of where countries are across all indicators. To reach the 2030 targets, countries would need, on average, to jump to the top 20 per cent (80th percentile) – i.e., countries will have to reach the level of the top performers of today.

This initial result is just a reference; it becomes more useful as we unpack this average by showing it across outcome areas (see Figure 23) and within outcome areas by income groups (see Chapter 2)

Figure 23. Benchmarking where countries are and where they aim to be by 2030



How countries' progress compares to others: Charting performance

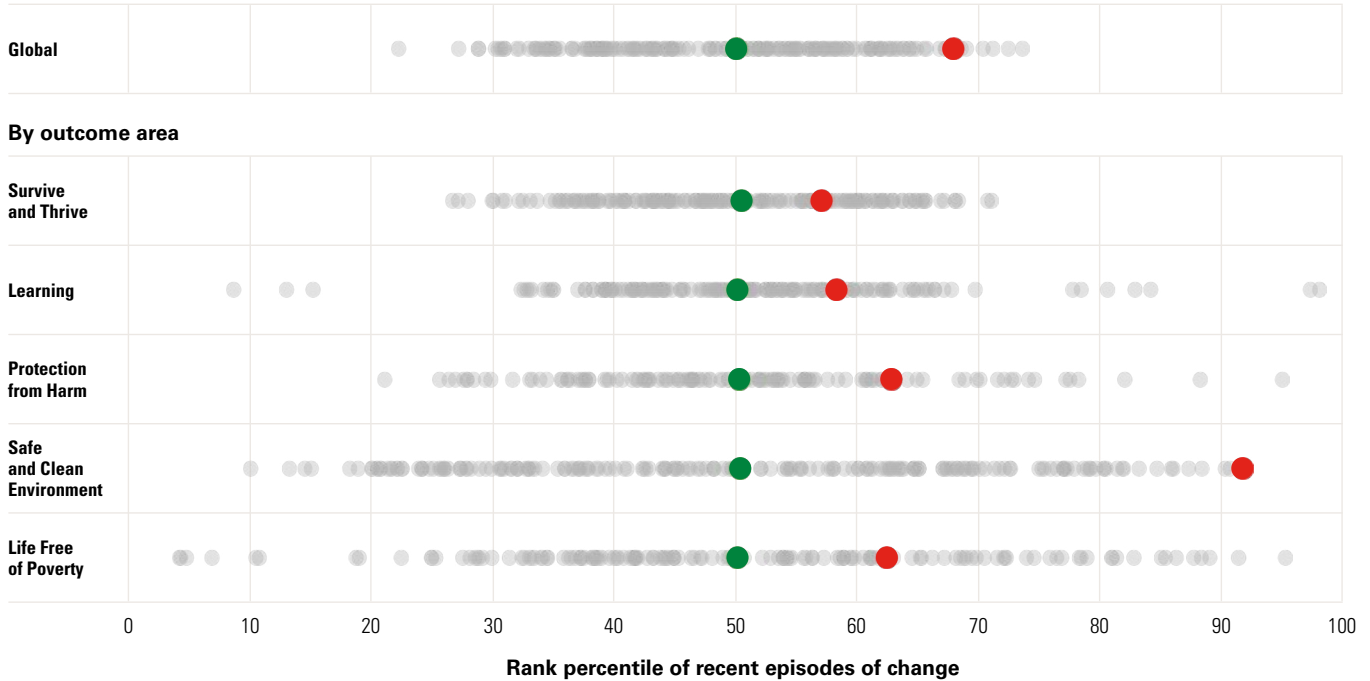
Performance uses the distribution of observed rates of change or speed at which countries have been progressing towards specific child-related SDG targets (both the historical rate of change and the expected rate of change needed to achieve respective SDG target).

We built a database with 38 of the 48 indicators for which temporally comparable data are available. A total of 80,000 episodes of change were identified and close to 500,000 benchmark values were created for the historical performance and expected performance to reach the target by 2030, using the three different benchmark groups (by income group, by region and globally). Using the same approach that was used to determine levels, all exercises were conducted at the country level, but for simplicity aggregated patterns were summarized by thematic outcome area and income group. Country-specific results can be found in the accompanying online dashboards or by downloading our database.

The observed recent rate of progress provides a benchmark against which to compare the acceleration required for countries to reach their 2030 targets. Figure 24 shows this information for the world, with the red dot indicating the average percentile of performance required for countries to reach their 2030 targets and the green dot representing the benchmark value indicating the average recent rate of progress. This exercise shows that countries must accelerate from the 50th to the 65th percentile to reach their respective child-related SDG targets. This metric is useful as it indicates that 35 per cent of observed episodes have fallen at a higher percentile of performance (i.e., above the 65th percentile), suggesting that, while the acceleration required is significant, it is not outside recorded history.

Figure 24. Benchmarking countries' expected rate of progress to meet their 2030 targets against the recent distribution of performance

All



● Average percentile of recent change ● Average percentile of required change

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

Note: Grey dots represent recorded episodes of change (i.e., year-on-year change) for a specific country and indicator.

This exercise used the historical distribution of performance as the anchor, essentially using past performance data to set a context or reference for understanding present-day performance.

Anchored rank percentile provides a relative sense of performance. It can be particularly useful when absolute values or differences are hard to interpret on their own. By benchmarking against a top (or bottom) performer, a context is created that makes it easier to grasp where each country stands. This method simplifies complex data and provides decision makers with a clearer picture of how countries are doing relative to an easily understandable reference point or anchor.

Box 15.

Benchmarking performance: A quick explainer

Imagine you are in a race with runners from different countries. You want to see how each runner (country) performed today relative to the fastest runner. The fastest runner is your anchor.

The anchor: The fastest runner finishes the race in 10 minutes. This becomes our anchored value, our baseline.

Percentile rankings: Now, instead of just comparing times, you rank the performance of all other runners based

on this anchor. If a runner finishes in 11 minutes, which is only slightly slower than our anchor, they might be in the 90th percentile. A runner finishing in 20 minutes might be in the 50th percentile, indicating they are further away in performance from our anchor.

This goes beyond the very basic breakdown by finish – 1st place, 2nd place, etc. – and provides insight into how well each runner performed compared to the winner.

Percentile of the mean vs. mean of the percentile

Whether to use the percentile of the mean or the mean of the percentiles to benchmark country performance depends on what is being specifically understood or compared. To know how the average performance of a specific country compares to the performance of all countries, percentile of the mean would indicate the proportion of countries performing worse or better than the average performance of the chosen country.

For a more general overview of country performance that captures several key points across a range of data (not just the average), the mean of the percentiles would be used. This would provide a more nuanced view of performance across countries.

It is important to remember that both approaches are statistical tools and neither is inherently better – their use depends on specific needs and the questions being asked. In many cases, using a combination of statistics provides the most comprehensive view of the situation.

Meet Fatima. She suffers from a muscular atrophy, a rare disease that weakens muscles.

© UNICEF/UN0737337/Chnkjji



Endnotes

1. Secretary-General's remarks to launch the Special Edition of the Sustainable Development Goals Progress Report, United Nations, New York, 25 April 2023, <www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2023-04-25/secretary-generals-remarks-launch-the-special-edition-of-the-sustainable-development-goals-progress-report-delivered> accessed 12 September 2023.
2. UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, *Prospects for Children in the Polycrisis: A 2023 global outlook*, UNICEF Innocenti, Florence, 2023.
3. UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, 'Shortfalls in Social Spending in Low- and Middle-Income Countries', Innocenti Policy Brief 2022-01, *COVID-19 and Shrinking Finance for Social Spending*, UNICEF Innocenti, Florence, 2022.
4. United Nations Children's Fund, Center on Poverty and Social Policy at Columbia University and the York Policy Engine at The University of York, *Too Little, Too Late: An assessment of public spending on children by age in 84 countries*, UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, Florence, 2023.
5. Ibid.
6. UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, 'Monitoring the Social Costs of Climate Change for Low- and Middle-Income Countries', Policy Brief 3, *Social Spending Monitor*, UNICEF Innocenti, Florence, 2022.
7. This domain includes 13 indicators focusing on child survival and well-being.
8. Since wasting is a relatively short-term condition, and cross-sectional surveys only capture children who are wasted at the time of the survey, these official SDG statistics should be viewed as an underestimate of the number of children affected.
9. Knight, Joseph A., 'Diseases and Disorders Associated with Excess Body Weight', *Annals of Clinical & Laboratory Science*, vol. 41, no. 2, Spring 2011, pp 107–121.
10. Miller, Carol T. and Kathryn T. Downey, 'A Meta-analysis of Heavyweight and Self-Esteem', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, vol. 3, no. 1, February 1999, pp. 68–84; Luppino, Floriana S., et al., 'Overweight, Obesity, and Depression: A systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal studies', *Archives of General Psychiatry*, vol. 67, no. 3, March 2020, pp. 220–229.
11. NCD Risk Factor Collaboration (NCD-RisC), 'Worldwide Trends in Body-Mass Index, Underweight, Overweight, and Obesity from 1975 to 2016: A pooled analysis of 2416 population-based measurement studies in 128.9 million children, adolescents, and adults', *Lancet*, vol. 390, no. 10113, 16 December 2017, pp. 2627–2642.
12. World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Population Fund, World Bank Group and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs – Population Division, *Trends in Maternal Mortality 2000 to 2020: Estimates by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group and UNDESA/Population Division*, WHO, Geneva, 2023.
13. World Health Organization and United Nations Children's Fund, 'SAB Joint Database', UNICEF, New York, 2023.
14. United Nations Children's Fund, 'Global Database', <<https://data.unicef.org/>>, accessed 13 September 2023.
15. United Nations, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report: 2022*, United Nations, New York, 2022.
16. Comprising 14 indicators, this area emphasizes child education and learning.
17. The World Bank, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, US Agency for International Development and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, *The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 update*, World Bank, Washington, D.C. 2022.
18. Global Education Monitoring Report Team and UNESCO Institute for Statistics, '2023 SDG4 Scorecard on Progress Towards National SDG 4 Benchmarks: Key findings', ED/GEM/MRT/2023/FS/1, UNESCO, Paris, 2023.
19. This category, with its seven indicators, reveals the persistent rights violations millions of children face.
20. Global Database.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. This outcome area includes six indicators which show that despite significant strides, universal access to even a basic level of drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services remains elusive.
24. Over 1,000 per day from deaths attributable to unsafe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (attributable fraction from diarrhoea, ARIs, PEM and STH based on latest WHO estimates). <www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240075610>
25. Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 26 (2023) on children's rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change, CRC/C/GC/26, CRC, Geneva, 22 August 2023.
26. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 'What is the Triple Planetary Crisis?', UNFCCC, Bonn, 13 April 2022, <<https://unfccc.int/blog/what-is-the-triple-planetary-crisis>>, accessed 12 September 2023.
27. <<https://data.unicef.org/resources/childrens-climate-risk-index-report/>>
28. Covering 7 indicators, this area covers indicators related to gender equality, child poverty and social protection.
29. United Nations Children's Fund, *The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis: Introducing the Children's Climate Risk Index*, UNICEF, New York, 2021.
30. Fiala, Oliver, et al., 'Nowcasting Impact of COVID-19 on Multidimensional Child Poverty', *Statistical Journal of the IAOS*, vol. 38, no. 3, 13 September 2022, pp. 853–859.
31. Visit <<https://data.unicef.org/sdgs/>>.
32. Fixed cut-offs of percentiles are based on observed distribution of performance. Therefore, the proportion of countries in each category is not necessarily 20 per cent of all countries.
33. All the benchmarking exercises presented in this report used anchored percentiles based on the historical distribution of performance for each individual indicator. As a consequence, the cut-offs used for each performance category are fixed between 0 to 100, in 20 percentile increments.
34. With more than 120 out of 199 countries having met their target, most countries have very low observed rates of improvement.
35. The World Bank, *World Development Report 1990: Poverty*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1990.
36. United Nations Children's Fund, 'The Millennium Development Goals: They are about children', UNICEF, New York, May 2003.

37. Global Coalition for Foundational Learning, 'Helping Countries Get Comparable Learning Data', Global Partnership for Education, Washington, D.C., 20 July 2023, <www.globalpartnership.org/blog/helping-countries-get-comparable-learning-data>, accessed 23 August 2023.
38. United Nations Children's Fund, *International Classification of Violence against Children*, UNICEF, New York, 2023.
39. These assessments may be not comparable to other sector-specific ones to allow for comparability of achievement and progress across sectors with different types of indicators.
40. Given that each of the 48 SDGs analysed in this report has a different scale, the analysis standardizes using the rank percentile of performance anchored to historical data from the last 20 years in the case of benchmarking the rate of change; and on the latest available data in the case of benchmarking the level and 2030 target. For more details please see Newman, John L. and João Pedro Azevedo, 'Setting Reasonable Performance Targets for Public Service Delivery', Policy Research Working Paper No. 6385, The World Bank, Washington, D.C., 27 June 2013.
41. Setting ambitious and realistic country-specific targets operationalizes the ideal of progressive realization found in human rights frameworks. Progressive realization acknowledges that while some objectives might be pursued immediately, others will be achieved step by step due to practical limitations. Meanwhile, realistic targets represent the feasible steps countries can take towards achieving these goals, keeping in mind country contexts and initial country conditions, and understanding that progress is gradual. Target setting should remain true to the ambition while incorporating interim realistic, time-bound, and measurable milestones to ensure the trajectory towards child-related SDGs remains clear.
42. UNESCO Institute for Statistics, *National SDG 4 Benchmarks: Fulfilling our neglected commitment*, UIS, Montreal, 2021.
43. United Nations Children's Fund, *Is an End to Child Marriage within Reach? Latest trends and future prospects*, UNICEF, New York, 5 May 2023.
44. Chao, Fengqing, et al., 'National and Regional Under-5 Mortality Rate by Economic Status for Low-Income and Middle-Income Countries: A systematic assessment', *Lancet Global Health*, vol. 6, no. 5, May 2018, pp. e535-e547.
45. In this case, the sources of inequality are taken one by one without delving into the important issue of intersectionality.
46. The Human Opportunity Index (HOI) measures how individual circumstances (i.e., characteristics such as place of residence, gender, and education of the household head, which should not determine access to basic goods and services) can affect a child's access to basic opportunities. This measure helps show how far a society is from universal access to an essential good or service and how equitably access is distributed across individuals (in this case, circumstance groups). Thus, HOI is a social indicator combining coverage rates and equality in a single measure. One complimentary feature of this measure is the ability to decompose the dissimilarity index (D-index) for all opportunities. The D-index measures how different groups – such as women, poorer households or ethnic minorities – fare in terms of access to a certain opportunity. The D-index ranges from 0 to 1. A D-index equal to 0 implies that access to an opportunity is the same among the general population regardless of one's particular situation (e.g., whether an urban or rural dweller, male or female, etc.). In other words, there is no inequality. In contrast, a D-index of 1 indicates that a group is completely excluded from access. The D-index is interpreted as the share of opportunities that would have to be 'reallocated' across different groups of children so that all groups would have equal access.
47. Molinas Vega, José R., et al., *Do Our Children Have a Chance? A human opportunity report for Latin America and the Caribbean*, The World Bank, Washington, D.C., 2012.
48. Further analysis on the positive deviants will help identify the policies and conditions that can help accelerate results.
49. *The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis*.
50. World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Levels and Trends in Child Malnutrition: UNICEF/WHO/World Bank Group joint child malnutrition estimates – Key findings of the 2023 edition*, WHO, Geneva, 2023.
51. United Nations Children's Fund, *The Coldest Year of the Rest of Their Lives: Protecting children from the escalating impacts of heatwaves*, UNICEF, New York, October 2022.
52. Save the Children, 'Conflict, Climate Disasters Drive Number of Internally Displaced Children to Record 25 Million in 2021', Save the Children, London, 23 May 2022, <www.savethechildren.net/news/conflict-climate-disasters-drive-number-internally-displaced-children-record-25-million-2021>, accessed 23 August 2023.
53. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 'Whose Time to Care? Unpaid work and domestic work during COVID-19', UN Women, New York, 25 November 2020.
54. Addati, Laura, et al., *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2018.
55. Fraser, Nancy, 'Contradictions of Capital and Care', *New Left Review*, no. 100, July/August 2016.
56. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 'COVID-19 Sends the Care Economy Deeper into Crisis Mode', UN Women, New York, 22 April 2020, <<https://data.unwomen.org/features/covid-19-sends-care-economy-deeper-crisis-mode>>, accessed 21 September 2023.
57. Enguita-Fernández, Cristina, et al., 'The COVID-19 Epidemic through a Gender Lens: What if a gender approach had been applied to inform public health measures to fight the COVID-19 pandemic?', *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie sociale*, vol. 28, no. 2, May 2020, pp. 263–264.
58. International Labour Organization, 'Building Forward Fairer: Women's rights to work and at work at the core of the COVID-19 recovery', Policy brief, ILO, Geneva, July 2021.
59. Addati, Laura, Umberto Cattaneo and Emanuela Pozzan, *Care at Work: Investing in care leave and services for a more gender equal world of work*, International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2022.
60. United Nations Children's Fund, 'Gender Norms and Unpaid Work', UNICEF, New York, January 2023, <<https://data.unicef.org/topic/gender/gender-norms-and-unpaid-work/#:~:text=Globally%2C%20girls%20ages%20>>, accessed 21 September 2023.
61. United Nations Children's Fund, *Seen, Counted, Included: Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities*, UNICEF, New York, 2021.
62. United Nations Children's Fund, *Building Back Equal, with and for Adolescent Girls: A programme strategy for UNICEF 2022–2025*, UNICEF, New York, 2022.
63. Richardson, Dominic, et al., *Supporting Families and Children Beyond COVID-19: Social protection in high-income countries*, UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, Florence, 2020.
64. Save the Children, 'The Number of Children Living in Deadliest War Zones Rises Nearly 20% to Highest in Over a Decade', Press release, Save the Children, Fairfield, Conn. 29 November 2021, <www.savethechildren.org/us/about-us/media-and-news/2021-press-releases/number-of-children-living-in-deadliest-war-zones-rises>, accessed 21 September 2023.

65. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Refugee Data Finder', UNHCR, Geneva, 27 October 2022, <www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>, accessed 9 January 2023.
66. United Nations, Security Council Resolution S/RES/1612, United Nations, New York, 26 July 2005.
67. United Nations Children's Fund, 'More than 300,000 Grave Violations against Children in Conflict Verified Worldwide in Past 18 Years', Press release, UNICEF, New York and Oslo, 5 June 2023, <www.unicef.org/car/en/press-releases/more-300000-grave-violations-against-children-conflict-verified-worldwide-past-18>, accessed 23 August 2023.
68. Ibid.
69. The Safe Schools Declaration, Oslo, 29 May 2015.
70. *Is an End to Child Marriage within Reach?*
71. Estimates derived from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Global Trends: Forced displacement in 2022*, UNHCR, Geneva, 2023.
72. Ortiz, Isabel, et al., *Universal Social Protection Floors: Costing estimates and affordability in 57 lower income countries*, Extension of Social Security – Working Paper No. 58, International Labour Organization, Geneva, 6 December 2017.
73. United Nations Children's Fund, *Transforming Education with Equitable Financing*, UNICEF, New York, January 2023.
74. United Nations Children's Fund, *Child Food Poverty: A nutrition crisis in early childhood*, UNICEF, New York, October 2022.
75. Merry, Sally Engle, 'The Sustainable Development Goals Confront the Infrastructure of Measurement', *Global Policy*, vol. 10, no. S1, pp. 146–148.
76. PARIS21, *The PARIS21 Partner Report on Support to Statistics 2022: A wake-up call to finance better data*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2022.
77. Central Bureau of Statistics, *Nepal Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019: Survey findings report*, Central Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF Nepal, Kathmandu, 2020.
78. Data from 26 countries in Africa show that around 6 in 10 urban children live in slum households, while data from 11 Asian countries show that over 5 in 10 urban children live in slum households.
79. *Too Little, Too Late*
80. See, for example, Save the Children, *Fair Shares? Fiscal equity for children in Kenya*, Save the Children UK, London, 2021.
81. While such differences may not be surprising, as OECD countries have per capita income more than 20 times larger than low-income countries and many inputs in the educational system are consequently cheaper in low-income countries, the huge disparity in per capita expenditure is still too large. It makes it impossible for children in low-income countries to receive the quality education they deserve.
82. United Nations Children's Fund, 'Child Poverty', <<https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-poverty/overview/>>, accessed 21 September 2023.
83. UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, 'Protecting and Transforming Social Spending for Inclusive Recoveries, Innocenti Policy Brief 2021-01, *COVID-19 and the Looming Debt Crisis*, UNICEF Innocenti, Florence, 2021.
84. United Nations, *Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 6: Reforms to the international financial architecture*, United Nations, New York, May 2023.
85. Farah-Yacoub, Juan P., et al., *The Social Costs of Sovereign Default*, Policy Research Working Paper 10157, World Bank Group, August 2022.
86. Chuku, Chuku, et al., 'Are We Heading for Another Debt Crisis in Low-Income Countries? Debt vulnerabilities: Today vs. the pre-HIPC era', International Monetary Fund Working Paper vol. 2023, no. 079, IMF, Washington, D.C., 4 April 2023.
87. United Nations Children's Fund, *Leveraging Large-Scale Sectoral Programmes to Prevent Child Marriage*, UNICEF, New York, 2022.
88. World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, *The Life-Course Approach: From theory to practice – Case stories from two small countries in Europe*, WHO, Geneva, 2018.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid.
91. United Nations Children's Fund, *Early Childhood Development: UNICEF vision for every child*, UNICEF, New York, 2023.
92. *The Life-Course Approach*.
93. Global Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction & Resilience in the Education Sector, *Comprehensive School Safety Framework 2022–2030 for Child Rights and Resilience in the Education Sector*, Global Alliance, 2022.
94. UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning, United Nations Children's Fund, Global Partnership for Education, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, *Education Sector Analysis: Methodological guidelines – Volume 3*, IIEP-UNESCO, UNICEF, GPE and UK FCDO, Paris, New York, Washington, D.C. and London, May 2021.
95. United Nations Children's Fund, *Being Prepared and Acting Fast: A series of case studies on UNICEF's role in the delivery of effective social protection response to COVID-19*, UNICEF, New York, October 2021.
96. UNICEF Venture Fund, 'Frontier Tech Solutions for Climate Action', New York, 28 October 2022, <www.unicefventurefund.org/story/frontier-tech-solutions-climate-action#:~:text=For%20example%2C%20investing%20in%20>, accessed 21 September 2023.
97. Habitat for Humanity, United Nations Human Settlements Programme and United Nations Children's Fund, *Children, Cities and Housing: Rights and priorities*, Habitat for Humanity, UN-Habitat and UNICEF, Atlanta, Nairobi and New York, May 2022.
98. United Nations, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special edition – Towards a rescue plan for people and planet*, United Nations, New York, 2023.
99. The International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, *The Learning Generation: Investing in education for a changing world*, The Education Commission, New York, 2016.
100. World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund and World Bank Group, *Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development: A framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential*, WHO, Geneva, 2018.
101. *Early Childhood Development: UNICEF vision*.
102. Dornan, Paul and Martin Woodhead, 'How Inequalities Develop through Childhood: Life course evidence from the Young Lives cohort study', *Innocenti Discussion Paper* No. 2015-01, UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, Florence, February 2015.
103. United Nations Children's Fund, *Global Annual Results Report 2022: Goal area 5 – Every child has access to inclusive social protection and lives free from poverty*, UNICEF, New York, June 2023.
104. United Nations Sustainable Development Group, *United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework*, United Nations, New York, 3 June 2019.
105. 'Secretary-General's remarks to launch the Special Edition of the Sustainable Development Goals Progress Report'.

An Internally displaced child living in Bawa internally displaced persons site, where 2,000 people, more than half of them are children, have fled violence, conflicts, and food insecurity.

© UNICEF/UN0696214/N'Daou



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**

**© United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF),
September 2023**