

Abstract:

In 2015, the UN adapted seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that all countries pledged to reach by 2030. To achieve the SDGs, regular monitoring of progress on key data points accompanied by wide dissemination of the findings and incentives/supports to use the results to improve national efforts are all essential.

Availability of good quality education contributes to the success of virtually every single development goal. SDG4 aims to “ensure inclusive and quality education for all”. Pre-primary education has been shown to improve school readiness and educational achievement. Provision of universal pre-primary education is also a long-term investment in a thriving society.

This paper presents an approach to monitoring progress on SDG target 4.2, “ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education.” The UN’s current Indicator for target 4.2 is “Percentage of children (36-59 months) receiving at least one year of a quality pre-primary education program.” In the case of pre-primary education, while it is important to measure attendance at pre-primary using enrollment rates per the Global Monitoring Indicators framework, an indicator of national policy stipulating government provision of free and compulsory pre-primary education would be a useful immediate measure of steps taken to advance progress. An approach to monitoring that involves making comparable, quantitative, analyzable data on national policies readily available to policymakers, civil society organizations and citizens on the performance of their own and other countries would increase accountability and transparency, thereby strengthening and complementing the existing “follow up and review” monitoring plan.

We assess how many countries have a policy in place to support the SDG target 4.2 of ensuring that all children receive at least one year of pre-primary education. Drawing on a new, rigorously created quantitative, globally comparable database of indicators of the provision of tuition-free pre-primary education, we demonstrate the feasibility and utility of these data to assess country action on one of the SDG targets. The status of pre-primary education provision in 163 countries is assessed based on the sources available as of 2015. The focus is on the provision of free and compulsory pre-primary education because children must enroll in pre-primary education in order to receive its benefits and studies have shown that one of the greatest barriers to enrollment especially among poor families is the tuition.

The availability and duration of free, and free and compulsory pre-primary education globally, and variation in availability by level of economic development and geographic region are investigated. Globally, we found there are substantial gaps in the provision of pre-primary

education. Around the world, fewer than half the countries with available data make at least one year of pre-primary education financially accessible by providing tuition-free programs. Just 27% of countries examined offer free pre-primary for two or more years. This study also highlighted substantial variation in the provision of free pre-primary education by national income, which often leaves children in the poorest countries deprived of the opportunity for early learning. Only a small minority of low-income countries provide free pre-primary education. Similar variation exists in the distribution of policies ensuring that pre-primary education is universal. One third of the upper-middle-income countries but only 15% of low-middle-income countries provide at least one year of free and compulsory pre-primary education. Our analysis also illustrates the global accessibility gap between primary education and pre-primary preparation. As of 2014, 159 countries had made primary education free and compulsory. Yet fewer than half (44%) of the countries that provide free primary education also offer at least one year of free pre-primary education as of 2015.

Next, this paper demonstrates how the quantitative data on national policies can be utilized to examine a relationship between policies and outcomes. Even after controlling for per-capita GDP and degree of urbanization, national provision of at least one year of free pre-primary education is associated with an average increase of 16.4% in net pre-primary enrollment rates. However, a binary indicator of provision of public, free and compulsory pre-primary education and a simple measure of years of education provided are broad, high-level indicators of progress and do not address the full scope of SDG4 which specifies ensuring access to “quality” education. An important next step thus would be to increase efforts to gather quantitative, comparable data on indicators of policies affecting the quality of pre-primary education on a global basis including teacher training requirements, age-appropriateness and inclusiveness of curriculum, availability of learning materials, and quality of school’s environment, among others. Evidence on the importance of these indicators - especially teacher training and preparation requirements - to quality of the programs and children’s outcomes is growing but further and more comprehensive, i.e., including all nations globally, assessment requires additional global data. Additional global data collection on the quality of pre-primary education would further enhance efforts to monitor fulfillment of target 4.2, and support the achievement of the UN’s SDG4.

This study illustrates the potential for using policy data in monitoring progress towards the SDGs and in assessing the relationship of policy steps to outcomes using one target – universal access to pre-primary education – as an example. Use of this approach – making quantitative, comparable, systematic national policy data available for analysis to complement outcomes data – would represent an important step towards better monitoring of progress towards the SDGs.

Tracking both policies and outcomes is essential in order to analyze and determine the relative effectiveness of different approaches, thereby providing policymakers with the tools to plan and allocate resources to make optimal choices with respect to achieving the SDGs.