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Context: Why ICAN?

Global goal for education: Sustainable Development Goal 4

In September 2015, 193 countries adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that provided a framework for measuring progress over the next 15 years.

SDG 4 focuses on ensuring “inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.” It sets bold and ambitious new targets that aim to ensure that all children are included, stating that “no education target should be considered met unless met by all” (UNESCO 2015, p. 7)

Each global goal consists of a number of targets and associated indicators that guide countries in measuring progress towards the goal. This 'global indicator framework' defines a 'target' as a specific, measurable objective that contributes to achieving one or more of the goals; and 'indicators' as markers that enable the measurement of change over time. Since 2015, there have been intensive efforts to design metrics intended to measure and track countries' progress towards the SDG targets via their respective indicators.

SDG 4 includes 10 targets and 11 indicators to measure progress towards achieving the global goal (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018). The first target (SDG 4.1) states: “By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.”

Within Target 4.1, the first indicator (SDG 4.1.1) tracks the “proportion of children and young people:

- (a) in Grade 2 or 3;
- (b) at the end of primary education; and
- (c) at the end of lower secondary education

achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics, by sex”.



Availability of comparable data to monitor SDG indicator 4.1.1 (a)

Foundational reading and numeracy skills are the building blocks for future progress, both in school and beyond. The collective experience of the PAL Network over the past 15 years demonstrates that children who fail to acquire these foundational skills in the early grades fall further and further behind, with few opportunities to catch up later on.

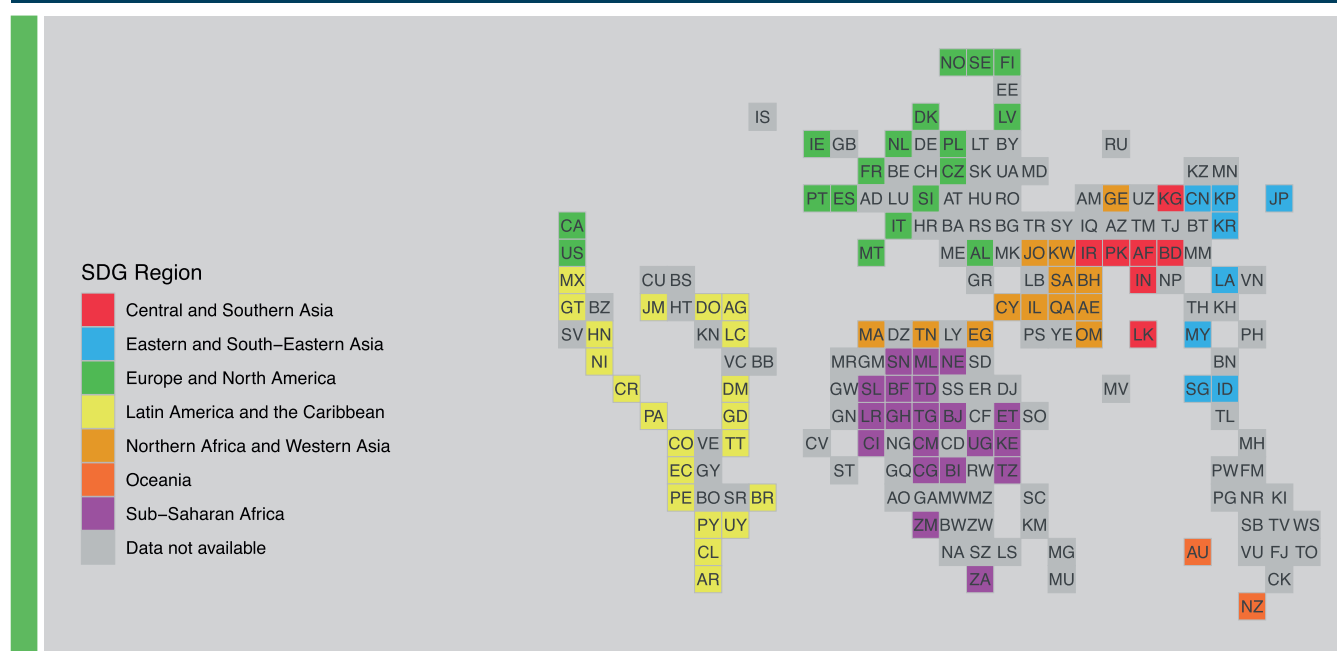
This has enormous implications for equity, since research also shows that the most marginalised are more likely to fall behind (Rose, Sabates, Alcott, and Ilie, 2016). It is therefore critical to measure learning early so that corrective measures can be implemented early in children's school trajectories. These are the major arguments underlying the inclusion of SDG 4.1.1 (a) for class 2 or 3 as an indicator of progress towards the larger SDG 4.1 target.

As the custodian agency for SDG 4, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) has mapped the data availability of assessments that measure learning progress for class 2 or 3 in reading and mathematics for Indicator 4.1.1 (a), shown in Figure 2.1 below. Data availability is based primarily on data published by agencies and organisations specialised in cross-national (international or regional) learning assessments. Data are currently comparable only for countries which participated in the same assessment. The UIS database also contains data from national assessments that followed a specific reporting protocol devised by the UIS to guarantee minimum quality and comparability standards.

Figure 2.1 shows countries with at least a single data point from 2010 to 2019 for class 2 or 3, either for reading or mathematics. While learning assessment data exists in a number of countries across the Global South, these data are of limited relevance for tracking progress towards SDG 4.1.1 (a), for the following reasons:

- Most of these assessments are conducted in schools and therefore do not present a complete picture of learning that includes all children.
- Robust estimates are unavailable for many low- and middle-income countries, where only

Figure 2.1: Data availability map for global indicator 4.1.1 (a) in class 2 or 3 (reading or mathematics)



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2019), p. 15

about two-thirds of children and youth are actually in school (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017a).

- Although several countries include early grade assessment within their national assessment programs, every country sets its own objectives and standards. As a result, the performance levels defined in these assessments are not always consistent or comparable.

Existing international assessments such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) targeted at classes 4 and 8, and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) targeted at 15-year-olds, are steadily increasing their coverage to low- and middle-income countries. However, assessments of foundational learning are required much earlier if existing gaps are to be identified and remedied in time. Among the regional learning assessments, only Programme d'Analyse des Systèmes Educatifs de la CONFEMEN (Programme for the Analysis of Education Systems or PASEC) in French speaking Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Laboratorio Latinoamericano de Evaluación de la Calidad de la Educación (Latin-American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education or LLECE) in Latin America, assess learning outcomes for children in class 2 and 3, respectively. Other regional assessments such as the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) in Southern and Eastern Africa, Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) in the Pacific Islands, and the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) in South East Asia, all focus on the end of primary schooling.

Assessments that include foundational learning for children in early primary grades include the Early Grade Reading/Math Assessment (EGRA and EGMA), as well as UNICEF's Foundational Learning Module in the household-based Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS). However, the tasks covered by these assessments are limited, especially in numeracy, and do not cover a number of important domains such as spatial orientation, measurement and shape recognition that commonly exist in curricula for primary classes 2 or 3 as well as in the minimum proficiency level criteria established for SDG 4.1.1 (a).

In summary, despite significant progress in obtaining more and better learning assessment data with greater geographic coverage, there is still more to do to ensure that assessments of foundational skills are designed for the realities of Global South countries and available in the public domain.

In projections made in 2019, well before the current COVID-19 pandemic, the UIS warned that the need for accurate, timely and comparable data on learning had never been more urgent, with the prospects of reaching SDG 4 far from certain (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019). The outlook in 2020 is significantly worse, and the need to act swiftly correspondingly greater.



References

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