



The invisibility of adolescents within the SDGs

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Overview

A central pillar of Agenda 2030 is the pledge to ‘leave no one behind’ – a pledge which must not be viewed as a separate course of action, but intrinsic to the achievement of the Agenda as a whole. Moreover, the United Nations (UN) member states made a commitment to reach those furthest behind first, and to fast-track them within the global agenda (United Nations, 2015). Nearly five years into implementation, and as the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) prepares for the 2020 Comprehensive Review, we must consider progress against this pledge.

Though the UN Statistical Commission (2019) has highlighted data disaggregation as a key priority, the indicator framework is not delivering sufficient granularity on age and gender differences to be able to measure progress among particular groups. With only 18 SDG indicators explicitly calling for disaggregation by gender and adolescent- or youth-specific age categories, too little data has been accrued on young girls’ and boys’ lives, which means that their specific needs and vulnerabilities remain largely invisible to policy and programme designers. Although the years between age 10 and 19 are increasingly recognised as a critical time in which to accelerate progress against poverty, inequity and discrimination and to foster positive development trajectories (GAGE Consortium, 2017; Sheehan et al., 2017; United States Agency for International Development (USAID), 2016), this is not matched by global data generated across the SDGs. In the lead-up to the 2020 Comprehensive Review, we present recommendations to bridge this critical gap and highlight the ways in which young people should be considered more explicitly in order to deliver on the promise of the SDGs.

Scale and scope of the challenge

The SDG framework offers an ambitious platform to move beyond a focus on country averages and aggregates that often mask substantial inequalities, and invest in more tailored data to understand intersecting vulnerabilities shaped by gender, age, income, disability, migration status, ethnicity and location, among other factors. Gathering – and being held accountable for – sufficiently disaggregated data is meant to create a nuanced picture of a country’s progress in a world where those who are left behind are all too often not counted, and thus not targeted by policy and programming efforts.

Is this being done? The short answer is ‘no’. There are data gaps on sexual and reproductive health (SRH) for unmarried sexually active adolescents (Azzopardi et al., 2017). Refugee adolescent girls (and, in some cases, boys) are also among the most overlooked populations in data collection and programming efforts (Presler-Marshall, 2018; Samman et al., 2018) while data on the availability of school-based infrastructure for students with disabilities is practically non-existent across countries (UNICEF, 2017).

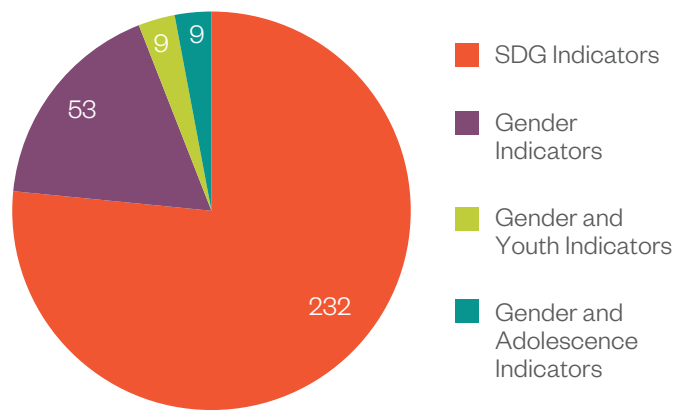
Exclusion within key SDG targets and indicators risks adolescents slipping even further behind. Moreover, the dearth of standardised country reporting on progress towards 'leave no one behind', as embedded in the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process, presents a missed opportunity to reach adolescent girls and boys. In its 2017 submission, for example, Ethiopia omitted any mention of adolescents or youth as a specific population being left behind, while Lebanon's 2018 submission does not include a signposted chapter on 'leave no one behind' at all.

Adolescents and the SDGs

The Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research programme seeks to advance global understanding on the gendered dimensions of adolescent experiences, which remain largely invisible in policy and programming. We know that poverty, hunger, equity, inclusivity, and access to technology are not gender- and age-neutral. We also know that gender disparities grow in in virtually every sector as children enter adolescence (Freccero and Whiting, 2018; Save the Children, 2019; UNDESA, 2019; UNICEF, 2016).

Out of 232 SDG indicators we have identified less than 8% are gender- and adolescent or youth-specific. UN Women's most recent gender snapshot (UN Women, 2019) found 53 gender-specific indicators, meaning those that explicitly call for sex disaggregation or refer to gender equality as the primary objective. Of those, only 18 indicators call for a minimum adolescent/youth age disaggregation dimension – 9 by the 'adolescent' age band (10–19 years) and 9 by the 'youth' age band (15–24 years) (see Figure 1).¹ Further restricting the visibility of adolescents, is the fact that

Figure 1: 18 gender and adolescent/youth indicators in the SDG Framework



Note: we have calculated only Tier I and Tier II indicators, which have an agreed methodology, as of September 2019.

the 18 gender- and adolescent/youth indicators cover just 6 goals; the other 11 goals do not disaggregate data by gender or age at all (see Figure 2).

Exacerbating the challenges around measurement of progress for adolescents is data availability. Country data generated in the 18 gender and adolescent/youth SDG indicators is sparse. Analysis from 2010–2017 found 75% of countries submitting comparable data for 7 indicators and 50%–75% of countries submitting comparable data for 3 indicators. This means the other 8 indicators had less than 50% of countries submitting data (see Figure 3). Troublingly, the percentages of sheer data availability do not take into account the quality of data reported and the extent to which the minimum disaggregation dimensions are being

Figure 2: Gender and adolescent-specific indicators are included in SDGs 1, 3, 4, 5, 8 and 11





Adolescent boys in Afar, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2019

respected in the production of country data. In fact, only 8 of the 18 indicators have country-level age-disaggregated data reported in the database, as of March 2019 (see Figure 4).

Investing in robust data to understand adolescent girls' and boys' lived experiences and future challenges will prove critical in achieving their wellbeing and enabling them to develop their full capabilities. As the IAEG-SDGs continues to fine-tune the minimum disaggregation dimensions, it is important to operationalise multiple agencies' recommendations. This includes the recommendation from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) Population Division, UNICEF and UNESCO's Institute for Statistics, that minimum age disaggregation

distinguish between adolescents in the 10–19 age band and youth in the 15–24 age band (IAEG-SDGs, 2018). Worryingly, early adolescents are especially vulnerable to being left behind (World Health Organization (WHO), 2014), and the 10–14 cohort is disproportionately neglected across programming. Early adolescents are also slipping through the cracks of data collection efforts. In SDG indicator 3.7.2 tracking adolescent birth rate, for example, no country data has yet been generated for the 10-14 cohort. This is particularly troubling when considering data gathered from DHS and MICS surveys which document for example that as many as 30% of girls are married before 15 in Chad, 29% in Central African Republic and 22% in Bangladesh.

Figure 3: Percentage of countries with globally available data for the 18 indicators from 2010 to 2017

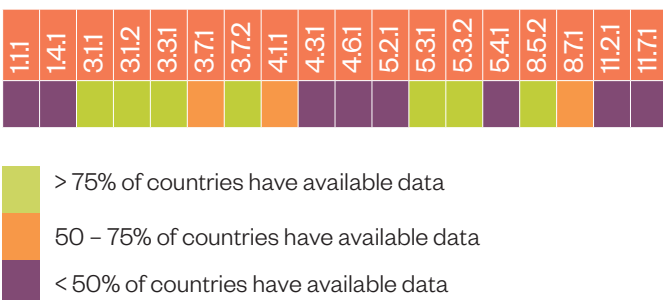
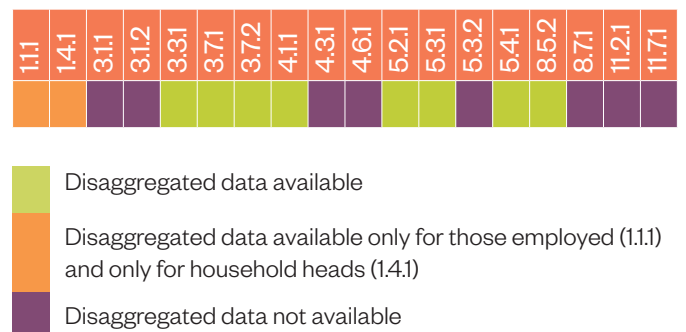


Figure 4: Availability of adolescent or youth age disaggregation in the Global SDG Database, as of March 2019



‘Leave no one behind’ reporting

The Voluntary National Review process is a country-led and country-driven initiative to follow up on progress, successes and challenges in implementing Agenda 2030, using the annual High Level Political Forum as a sharing platform.

However, the lack of clear guidelines on what countries are meant to report on represents a missed opportunity. Upon analysing the 47 VNRs submitted in 2017, the Committee for Development Policy/UNDESA found that although 39 countries mentioned the ‘leave no one behind’ pledge, only 16 referred to specific strategies to reach those furthest behind first or even target them, thus ‘render[ing] the reference rhetorical’ (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2018). Though a UN Handbook (UNDESA, 2018a) to guide the VNR process has been circulated, prescriptive and standardised guidelines on how to enact and fulfill the pledge are lacking. The Synthesis Report on 2018 VNRs (UNDESA, 2018b) showed that countries are increasingly aware of the needs of young people, yet nearly five years into implementation of Agenda 2030, there is still little tangible progress in meeting their age- and gender-specific needs.

Key actions to accelerate progress

As the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) prepares for the 2020 Comprehensive Review we recognise that there are multiple competing demands around indicators, but

would nonetheless underscore that urgent action is taken to address the very limited visibility of young people in the SDG indicators. Without this, we risk missing the critical window of opportunity that the second decade of life represents, to fast-track social change not only for the 1.2 billion plus individuals in this demographic, but also for their countries if we are to collectively capitalise on the potential of today’s unprecedentedly large youth cohort. We propose four priority actions to accelerate progress as follows:

1. Prioritise integrating gender- and age-disaggregated indicators into existing surveys

Most (65%) of the countries reviewed in ODI’s 2019 Leave No One Behind Index were found to be ‘data-ready’, meaning they have conducted household surveys in the past three years (Chattopadhyay and Manea, 2019). Notwithstanding the fact that data sources for this component relate to a mixture of externally administered surveys and national census surveys, the high number of data-ready countries is an encouraging entry point for incorporating additional gender, adolescent and youth disaggregation in existing household surveys, which can then be used to inform targeted policies and programmes. For the 35% ‘partially data-ready’ or ‘not data-ready’ countries, we recommend that further analysis is conducted on how best to support these countries to populate survey data.



Adolescent girl in Jordan © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2019



Adolescent girls at school in Chittagong, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2019

2. Disaggregate data on the 10–24 age group into three age bands (10–14; 15–19; 20–24) so as to better capture the specificities of this critical juncture in the lifecourse

Owing to the major physical, cognitive, social and sexual transitions that adolescents experience, a growing evidence base suggests that monitoring and investing in the transition from childhood to adulthood will prove vital in consolidating recent gains made on early childhood development (Dahl et al., 2018; Patton et al., 2016; Sawyer et al., 2018; UNICEF, 2018) and in leveraging adolescent-responsive interventions across sectors. Needs, vulnerabilities and developmental milestones differ widely across the 10–24 year age bracket, and while there is considerable diversity within and across contexts there is also a general recognition that age-tailored interventions are critical. For example, 10 to 14 sees the onset of puberty, 15 to 19 the honing of vocational skills and secondary educational learning and 20+ see transitions to work spheres, further educational prospects and initiating one’s own family life.

3. Harmonise country reporting on ‘leave no one behind’ commitments, including a focus on adolescence and youth







In forthcoming VNRs, countries should report on measures to identify, consult with and fast-track the most marginalised groups – including adolescents.




UNICEF and UNFPA as lead agencies with a mandate to support the wellbeing of young people could provide technical support to countries submitting VNRs to ensure a stronger focus on progress for young people, as reflected in the following:

- vulnerability assessments and increasingly refined data-gathering efforts to understand the needs of the most marginalised adolescents and their intersecting vulnerabilities across the SDGs;
- efforts to engage with adolescent groups through stakeholder consultations or other participatory processes;
- elaboration of national strategies and policies designed to fast-track marginalised adolescent groups, including the financial resources allocated to diverse sectors.

4. Finally, as the IAEG-SDGs completes the arduous work of proposing refinements, deletions and amendments of the SDG framework to the Commission by March 2020, we propose that gender and adolescent/youth age disaggregation be included in the following SDG targets with the potential to improve adolescent well-being (see Figure 5) by the three aforementioned age bands.

Figure 5: SDG targets with the potential to improve adolescent well-being

SDG Targets	Additional minimum disaggregation dimensions required by gender and age	Tier III targets lacking an agreed methodology	
1 NO POVERTY 	Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere		
	1.2 Reduce poverty	✓	
2 ZERO HUNGER 	Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture		
	2.1 Ensure access to safe nutritious food	✓	
	2.2 End all forms of malnutrition, including stunting and wasting, addressing the nutritional needs of adolescent girls	✓	
3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING 	Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages		
	3.1 Reduce the global maternal mortality rate	✓	
	3.4 Promote mental health and well-being	✓	
	3.5 Prevent substance abuse	✓	
	3.6 Reduce deaths and injuries from road traffic	✓	
	3.8 Achieve universal health coverage	✓	
4 QUALITY EDUCATION 	Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all		
	4.4 Increase ICT skills	✓	
	4.5 Eliminate gender disparities in educational and vocational training	✓	
	4.7 Promote skills needed for sustainable development		✓
	4.a Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all	✓	
5 GENDER EQUALITY 	Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls		
	5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere	✓	
	5.c Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of girls	✓	
6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION 	Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all		
	6.1 Universal access to safe drinking water	✓	
	6.2 Access to equitable sanitation and hygiene for all	✓	

SDG Targets	Additional minimum disaggregation dimensions required by gender and age	Tier III targets lacking an agreed methodology	
8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH 	Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all		
	8.6 Reduce the proportion of NEETs	✓	
	8.8 Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments	✓	
	8.b Operationalise a global strategy for youth employment and implement the Global Jobs Pact of the International Labour Organization	✓	
13 CLIMATE ACTION 	Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts		
	13.b Promote mechanisms for raising capacity for effective climate change-related planning and management in least-developed countries and small island developing states, including focusing on youth		✓
16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS 	Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels		
	16.1 Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates	✓	
	16.2 End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children	✓	
	16.3 Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all	✓	
	16.7 Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels	✓	

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Endnotes

¹ Please note that there are several discrepancies in the minimum disaggregation dimensions, the SDG metadata and the availability of country data as follows:

- 3.3.2 TB incidence – The IAEG-SDG data state that the indicator is disaggregated by the 15-24 age category, although the metadata states that the disaggregation criteria is "children / adults".
- 3.4.2 Suicide rates - The IAEG-SDG data state that age and sex are not minimum disaggregation dimensions although there are available data disaggregated by sex and age in the global database.
- 8.5.1 Average hourly earnings - Although the metadata as well as IAEG-SDG data state this indicator should be disaggregated by age, there are no set age bands specified. The ILO (custodian agency for this indicator) advises that data should ensure disaggregation by youth (15-24) and adults.
- 8.6.1 Proportion of NEETS. The IAEG-SDG data states that sex is not a minimum disaggregation dimension although there is sex disaggregation available in the global database.