Towards a successful Decade of Action for SDG 4 through the use of benchmarks

Why do we need benchmarks to tighten the follow-up and review process to achieve SDG4?

The Education 2030 Framework for Action called on countries to establish "*appropriate intermediate benchmarks (e.g. for 2020 and 2025)*" for the SDG indicators, seeing them as "*indispensable for addressing the accountability deficit associated with longer-term targets*" (§28).

Fulfilling this neglected commitment to set benchmarks would help renew emphasis on achieving SDG 4. But to be effective in mobilizing action, benchmarks must be designed and communicated in a way that is informative and encourages policy makers to respond. Countries have started from different points and move at different speeds. Without clear and shared understanding of the starting point in 2015, the minimum levels that should be achieved and the expected pace, there is a risk that lack of progress will go unnoticed.

The effectiveness of the process to set and monitor benchmarks rests on two crucial factors.

a. Political commitment is needed to adopt and monitor benchmarks at regional level

Setting benchmarks as requested by the Framework for Action cannot be done at the global level, given the very large differences in starting points between countries. It is, therefore, proposed to define benchmarks as minimum levels to be achieved by each country in a region. Countries within each region tend to have more common challenges but also more opportunities for learning from each other.

The adoption of benchmarks requires strong action and responsibility on the part of countries and coordination mechanisms.

The effectiveness of setting benchmarks relies on their feasibility for countries. They, therefore, require national ownership. Benchmarks must be used to promote policy dialogue, based on common understanding of countries' different contributions to achieve a regional target. It should lead to a clear identification of policy gaps to align actions to fill them.

b. Measurement challenges need to be overcome

The availability of an SDG 4 monitoring framework with global and thematic indicators since 2015 has helped set a measurement agenda, as testified by progress made in country-level reporting on some of those indicators. However, a relatively large number of indicators may also have distracted countries with weaker capacities. Benchmarks would help make more targeted progress on a select set of indicators.

A set of indicators to be benchmarked was adopted by the Technical Cooperation Group on the Indicators for SDG 4 (TCG) at its last meeting in August 2019. The decision was based on a review of proposals by TCG members, which concluded that it would be possible to set benchmarks for six of the 43 SDG 4 indicators plus the Framework for Action expenditure indicators at the regional level based on past trends, country coverage, frequency of data and policy relevance. **Table 1** summarizes the current status and needs for the benchmarked indicators:

Table 1. Proposed benchmark indicators and data challenges

Indicator	Comparability	Trend	Availability (last 5 years)	Availability (trend)
1. Global indicator 4.1.1 Minimum learning proficiency in reading and mathematics	No, methodology is pending. Treatment of out-of-school children not agreed.	Yes, but only for international assessments	65%	39%
2. Global indicator 4.1.2 Completion rate	Yes	Yes, but needs development	85%	77%
3. Thematic indicator 4.1.5 Out-of-school rate	Yes, but needs development for upper secondary and fragile/conflict countries	Yes	79%	79%
4. Global indicator 4.2.2 Participation rate one year before primary	Yes	Yes	74%	70%
5. Global indicator 4.c.1 Percentage of trained teachers	No, methodologies are pending.	Yes	64%	36%
6. Framework for Action benchmarks Education expenditure as share of budget and GDP	Yes	Yes, but needs further work	60%	52%
7. Global indicator 4.5.1 [Equity indicator to be defined]	To be defined	To be defined	…	…

Benchmark indicators and target levels need clear communication

The benchmark indicators need to be presented in a form that facilitates follow up, synthesizes progress, identifies gaps, and guides efforts, mapping, and monitoring. It should be immediately clear:

- where data are available and how frequently, and what is the reliability'
- how countries are doing vis-à-vis the regional benchmarks; how fast countries are moving vis-à-vis the regional benchmarks.

Benchmarks will need to integrate evidence on data with follow-up action on policies. Lack of progress towards the benchmarks should trigger national commitments to develop policy responses or, in the absence of data, to collect data.

Decisions to be made by Regional Steering Committees

Organizations to take part in the virtual meeting are asked to provide feedback and advice on how they could support the benchmarking process and how the process could support their education agenda. In particular, the meetings will aim to:

- Confirm the willingness of the regional steering committee to support a benchmarking process (with whatever adaptations they feel are needed);

- Decide whether benchmarks should be set at sub-regional level (or any other country group);
- Identify the next opportunity in the region to bring the benchmarking process as an item on the agenda for Member States to discuss;
- Ensure technical support to organize these regional discussions.

Overview of operationalizing the proposed benchmarking approach

The proposed methodology is based on two guiding principles:
- Benchmarks for (1) outcome indicators (4.1.1, 4.1.4, and 4.1.5) and (2) process indicators (4.2.2 and 4.c.1) are set so that they are feasible to attain by 2030, based on historical trends for a region given its starting point; and
- Benchmarks for (3) expenditure indicators represent minimum levels of expenditure as described in the Framework for action in terms of expenditure and public budget.

When there are various education **levels** (e.g. primary and secondary in indicators 4.1.1., 4.1.2, 4.1.4. 4.c.1) and/or domains (e.g. reading and mathematics in indicator 4.1.1) involved, the UIS proposes to select one level or domain for the benchmarking exercise as described in **Table 2**.

The **baseline** year is 2015 and the intention is to take stock of the benchmarked indicators at least in 2020, 2025 and 2030. In some cases, data are not available for these reference years. For instance, indicator 4.1.1 is typically available every three or more years given the frequency of the assessment, in which a country participates. For other indicators, data are available in general on a yearly basis but not for all countries. It is, therefore, proposed to take the average of the indicator value in the latest 3-to-5-year period to reduce the effect of annual variation in the indicator. For example, if a country's latest value was in 2017, the average of values for 2015 to 2017 was used.

Table 2 – Summary of Methodological definition

Indicator	Indicator reporting options (1)		Proposal for benchmark point (2)	How to estimate baseline (3)		Sources (4)
	Levels	Domains		Baseline year	Method	
Global indicator 4.1.1 Minimum learning proficiency in reading and mathematics	3 Grades 2/3; end of primary; end of lower secondary	2 Reading; mathematics	End of primary, reading (4.1.1b)	2015	According to protocol for reporting the indicator	Learning assessments
+ combined with completion rate	3 (as above)	2 (as above)	End of primary reading (4.1.1b) (x) completion	2015	According to protocol for reporting the indicator	Learning assessments and household surveys
Global indicator 4.1.2 Completion rate	3 Primary; lower secondary; upper secondary	–	Primary	2015	Last value in 2011-2015	Household surveys and censuses
Thematic indicator 4.1.5 Out-of-school rate	4 Pre-primary; primary; lower secondary; upper secondary	–	Lower secondary	2015	Last value in 2011-2015	Administrative data and household surveys

Global indicator 4.2.2 Participation rate one year before primary	1	–	–	2015	Last value in 2011-2015	UIS education survey
Global indicator 4.c.1 Percentage of trained teachers	4 Pre-primary; primary; lower secondary; upper secondary	–	Primary	2015	Last value in 2011-2015	UIS education survey
Education expenditure as share of public budget	1	–	–	2015	Last value in 2011-2015	UIS education survey and other sources
Education expenditure as share of GDP	1	–	–	2015	Last value in 2011-2015	UIS education survey and other sources

Tables 3–6 summarize **potential benchmark values** for each region for countries with available data since 2015.   Tables present estimates for SDG **regions** but they could be adapted to fit other region or subregion definitions, depending on Regional Steering Committee decisions.

Regional averages are estimated for SDG regions only for the sake of argument but different groupings could be considered. Some examples in table in Annex I

Table 3. Regional summary of SDG 4.1.1 (% of students attaining minimum learning proficiency) benchmarks

Country group	Reading grades 2/3				Reading primary				Reading lower secondary				Countries in group
	Minimum benchmark 2030	Countries achieving minimum benchmark (latest)	Countries with latest data	Average baseline value 2010±2 years	Minimum benchmark 2030	Countries achieving minimum benchmark (latest)	Countries with latest data	Average baseline value 2010±2 years	Minimum benchmark 2030	Countries achieving minimum benchmark (latest)	Countries with latest data	Average baseline value 2010±2 years	
SDG: Africa (Sub-Saharan)	55.9	1	14	55.7	**14.9**	**20**	**27**	**37.8**	26.5	1	3	53.3	51
SDG: Asia (Central and Southern)	58.7	1	5	75.7	**26.6**	**4**	**5**		41.2	2	4	35.0	14
SDG: Asia (Eastern and South-eastern)	67.8	4	6	65.2	**63.8**	**0**	**2**		28.4	11	13	58.8	17
SDG: Asia (Western)	78.0	3	9	69.2	**92.0**	**0**	**2**	**81.9**	44.1	7	10	69.3	18
SDG: Europe	85.4	17	19	94.9	**100.0**	**0**	**10**	**97.9**	54.0	36	40	78.7	50
SDG: Latin America and the Caribbean	74.0	11	19	78.0	**34.2**	**12**	**17**		35.2	11	15	52.5	48
SDG: Northern America	100.0	0	2	97.8		**0**	**0**		82.2	1	2	89.4	5
SDG: Oceania	95.5	0	2	92.7		**0**	**0**		81.9	0	2	85.6	25
	Mathematics grades 2/3				Mathematics primary				Mathematics secondary				
SDG: Africa (Sub-Saharan)	53.4	5	13	28.9	13.3	11	25	8.7	19.0	1	4	5.3	51
SDG: Asia (Central and Southern)	53.9	0	4	33.2	26.6	4	5	61.8	33.3	3	4	34.4	14
SDG: Asia (Eastern and South-eastern)	51.3	5	9	64.5	76.4	0	1		25.3	12	14	42.6	17
SDG: Asia (Western)	47.8	1	9	13.2	75.9	0	3	50.4	26.3	11	16	36.2	18
SDG: Europe	79.0	8	15	64.5	83.6	1	13	79.5	47.4	38	40	75.1	50
SDG: Latin America and the Caribbean	59.2	10	17		28.3	12	17		22.0	10	16	35.9	48
SDG: Northern America	83.0	0	2			0	0		76.6	1	2	87.3	5
SDG: Oceania	76.4	0	2	67.9	91.6	0	1	62.9	80.6	0	2	82.0	25

* The average baseline is weighted by the total school age population in each country.

* The minimum benchmark is the minimum of individual country benchmarks in each region (i.e. feasible for all countries)

Table 4. Regional summary of SDG 4.1.2 (completion rate) and SDG 4.1.4 (out-of-school rate) benchmarks

Region	Primary			Lower secondary			Upper secondary		
	Mean at baseline	Mean 2030 benchmarks	Countries	Mean at baseline	Mean 2030 benchmarks	Countries	Mean at baseline	Mean 2030 benchmarks	Countries
Completion rate									
SDG: Africa (Northern)	**n.a.**	**n.a.**	**0**	n.a.	n.a.	0	n.a.	n.a.	0
SDG: Africa (Sub-Saharan)	**61.5**	**77**	**19**	38.7	55.5	19	21	34.1	19
SDG: Asia (Central and Southern)	**85.2**	**91.9**	**8**	77.5	85.4	8	55.9	65.1	7
SDG: Asia (Eastern and South-eastern)	**89.4**	**95**	**6**	68.7	79.6	6	49.7	58.8	6
SDG: Asia (Western)	**90**	**94.4**	**2**	77.4	86.1	2	52.6	61.1	2
SDG: Europe	**95**	**100**	**1**	93.7	96.6	1	80.3	81.9	1
SDG: Latin America and the Caribbean	**89.6**	**95.7**	**17**	72.8	82.6	17	53.9	62.5	17
SDG: Northern America	**99.7**	**100**	**1**	98.8	100	1	93.7	95.5	1
SDG: Oceania	**n.a.**	**n.a.**	**0**	n.a.	n.a.	0	n.a.	n.a.	0
World	**79.3**	**88.6**	**54**	62.1	73.9	54	43.1	53.2	53
Out-of-school rate									
SDG: Africa (Northern)	11	6.1	4	**7.8**	**4.1**	**2**	27.3	20.1	2
SDG: Africa (Sub-Saharan)	16.4	8.9	35	**33.8**	**23**	**29**	52.8	40.2	31
SDG: Asia (Central and Southern)	4.5	2.1	10	**9.5**	**5.1**	**7**	31.5	23.2	10
SDG: Asia (Eastern and South-eastern)	3.2	0.5	14	**10.7**	**6.8**	**13**	22.2	15.4	12
SDG: Asia (Western)	4.8	1.7	14	**8.3**	**4.5**	**13**	18.4	12.2	12
SDG: Europe	1.9	0.3	39	**2.3**	**0.5**	**38**	10.2	5.5	38
SDG: Latin America and the Caribbean	6	2.7	29	**10.1**	**5.9**	**29**	23	15.9	31
SDG: Northern America	0.5	0	2	**0.4**	**0**	**2**	7.8	2.7	2
SDG: Oceania	5.4	1.9	14	**11**	**6.2**	**9**	35.2	25.5	11
World	6.8	3.1	161	**12.6**	**7.8**	**142**	26.8	19	149

Table 5. Regional summary of SDG 4.2.2 and SDG 4.c.1, benchmarks

Region	Participation rate one year before primary			Trained teachers			Countries in group
	Mean at baseline	Mean 2030 benchmark	Number of countries	Mean at baseline	Mean 2030 benchmark	Number of countries	
SDG: Africa (Northern)	54	74	8	87	100	8	51
SDG: Africa (Sub-Saharan)	42	67	51	65	89	51	14
SDG: Asia (Central and Southern)	59	67	14	75	84	14	17
SDG: Asia (Eastern and South-eastern)	..	100	18	..	..	18	18
SDG: Asia (Western)	45	70	18	..	..	18	50
SDG: Latin America and the Caribbean	96	100	49	83	100	49	48
SDG: Northern America and Europe	94	100	57	..	..	57	5
SDG: Oceania	80	100	25	..	..	25	25
SDG: World	67	84	240	81	100	240	51

Table 6. Regional summary of Expenditure benchmarks

4.e Public expenditure on education (percent of GDP and government budget)

Region	Percent of GDP			Percent of government budget			
	Mean at baseline	Mean 2030 benchmark	Number of countries	Mean at baseline	Mean 2030 benchmark	Number of countries reporting	Number of countries
SDG: Africa (Northern)	6.6	4	2	22.6	15	2	51
SDG: Africa (Sub-Saharan)	4	4	18	17.1	15	18	14
SDG: Asia (Central and Southern)	4	4	11	14.7	15	11	17
SDG: Asia (Eastern and South-eastern)	3.3	4	11	13.4	15	12	18
SDG: Asia (Western)	3.8	4	9	15.2	15	9	50
SDG: Europe	5.1	4	34	12.3	15	34	48
SDG: Latin America and the Caribbean	4.9	4	17	18.3	15	17	5
SDG: Northern America	n.a.	4	0	n.a.	15	0	25
SDG: Oceania	5.9	4	2	15.3	15	2	51

Annex I– Regional Mappings

WBG	SDG	UNSD
Low income		Africa
Upper middle income	Africa (Northern)	Northern Africa
High income	Africa (Sub-Saharan)	Sub-Saharan Africa
Lower middle income		Eastern Africa
		Middle Africa
		Southern Africa
		Western Africa
		Americas
	Latin America and the Caribbean	Latin America and the Caribbean
		Caribbean
		Central America
		South America
	Northern America	Northern America
		Asia
	Asia (Central and Southern)	Central Asia
		Southern Asia
	Asia (Eastern and South-eastern)	South-eastern Asia
		Eastern Asia
	Asia (Western)	Western Asia
	Europe	Europe
		Eastern Europe
		Northern Europe
		Southern Europe
		Western Europe
	Oceania	Oceania
		Australia and New Zealand
		Melanesia
		Micronesia
		Polynesia

Annex II -Regional Organizations

	Education agenda / strategy	Monitoring framework	Report on strategy / monitoring framework	Targets and benchmarks in monitoring framework
Asia/Pacific BANGKOK				
Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)	Work Plan on Education 2016-2020		Yes	No
Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO)	Education Agenda 2035			No
South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)	SAARC Development Goals	In process of development	No	No
SPS Pacific Community	Education Quality Assessment Programme	Yes	Yes	No
Latin America/Caribbean SANTIAGO				
Caribbean Community (CARICOM)	Human Resource Development 2030 Strategy	Yet	No	No
Central American Educational and Cultural Corporation (CECC)	Central America Education Programme (PEC)	Yes	Yes	No
Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS)	OECS Education Sector Strategy	Yes	Yes	No
Arab States BEIRUT				
Arab League Educational Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO)				
Sub-Saharan Africa DAKAR/NAIROBI				
African Union (AU) + Regional Economic Communities, e.g. ECCAS, ECOWAS, IGAD, SADC	Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025	In process of development	No	No
Europe and Northern America PARIS				
Council of Europe (COE)	–			No
European Union (EU)	Education and Training 2020	Yes	Yes	Yes
Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)	–		Yes	No

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UIS (2019a) *SDG 4 indicator benchmarking consultation*. Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

UIS (2019b) *Sixth meeting of the Technical Cooperation Group on the Indicators for SDG 4 Education 2030 Post meeting consultation on indicator development and monitoring*. Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics