



GAPS IN SDG PROGRESS FOR CHILDREN

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

This brief presents findings from the analysis of 90 child-relevant indicators across 17 SDGs based on almost 170 country-specific models. This data is being used to quantify the gaps expected to remain in 2030, if governments continue with their current set of public policies and financing decisions.

Key findings include:

- Gaps for children remain significant globally and unequally distributed with many unlikely to be met within the lifetime of children alive today or the next generation.
- The largest gaps are found in Sub-Saharan Africa, followed by South Asia and the Middle East & Northern Africa region. Gaps remain across all income categories, but are largest and most widespread in lower-income groups.
- Globally, more than half of indicators and countries do not reach goals by 2050. Progress is particularly slow for hunger, gender equality as well as many planet-related SDGs.
- 607 million children live in countries where the majority of indicators are regressing or not expected to meet the target until 2080 or after – fully 50 years after the 2030 goal.
- Under current policy and spending priorities, around 750 million children are still living in multidimensional child poverty across low- and middle-income countries in 2030.

This is the first Save the Children analysis using the Policy Priority Inference (PPI) framework, developed at the Alan Turing Institute, a computational model that integrates a large number of empirical data with a deep theoretical framework, taking into account the working of complex systems and political economy considerations. The objective of this analysis is to provide a stronger evidence base to identify opportunities for more strategic investment in policy to maximise impact.

This first analysis provides an important baseline for future work. Forthcoming analyses will focus on synergies of social spending on children as well as the opportunities of increased financing and bottlenecks that hinder progress.

CONTACT

Save the Children UK, Global Outcomes Department (October 2025)

For questions, please contact Oliver Fiala, Senior Research Adviser: o.fiala@savethechildren.org.uk

INTRODUCTION

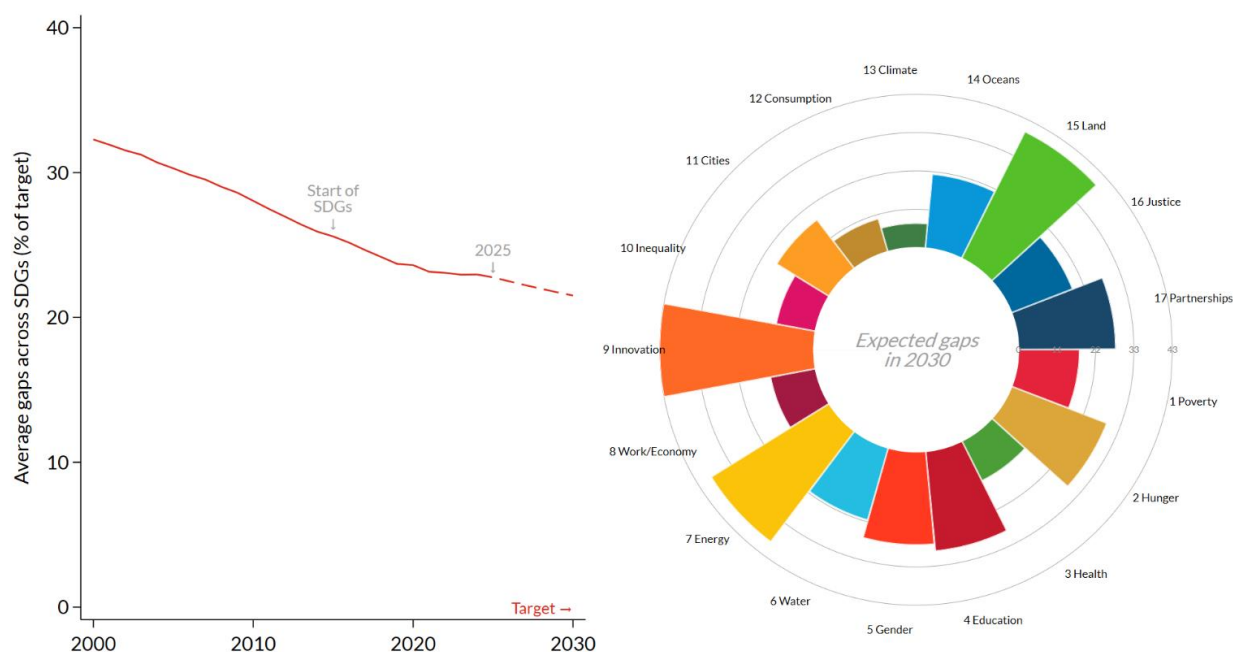
In 2015, leaders from countries all over the world agreed 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to end poverty, tackle inequality and climate change, and create a better future for all people, everywhere. Despite progress on some of the goals since 2015, **most countries are off-track to achieve key SDG promises for children by 2030**. Failing to deliver for children now undermines the global community's hope for a sustainable, peaceful and prosperous future set out under the 2030 Agenda. Delivering on this promise to future generations requires implementing policies and allocating the finance needed to secure the rights and wellbeing of today's generation of children – many SDGs are specific to children and *all* will shape their futures and the post-2030 world they inherit.

Under current policy priorities – and without substantial additional investments in children and families – around 750 million children are still living in multidimensional child poverty across low- and middle-income countries in 2030. 3.4 million children under 5 are expected to die before their fifth birthday every year and as many as 224 million children might be out-of-school by the end of the decade – despite the SDGs promising to end preventable deaths of children under 5 years of age and to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education.

SDG PROGRESS FOR CHILDREN BY 2030

Progress is slowing down and large gaps will remain in 2030 if current trends continue. Globally, the largest gaps are found across hunger and nutrition (SDG 2), affordable and clean energy (SDG 7), industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9), and life on land (SDG 15). Average gaps also remain larger than 20% of their targets in quality education (SDG 4), partnerships to achieve the goals (SDG 17), gender equality (SDG 5), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), life below water (SDG 14), and clean water and sanitation (SDG 6).

Figure 1: Average gaps remaining across SDGs (as percentage of SDG targets)



Includes 72 indicators across 168 countries for which data covers at least 50% of the global population.

Across all indicators and goals, gaps remain largest in West- & Central Africa as well as East & Southern Africa, where average gaps under current trends remain around 30% of the targets in 2030. Those are followed by South Asia (26%) and Middle East & Northern Africa (23%). The gaps are expected to be lowest in Western Europe and Northern America, however even in those regions the average SDG gap remains above 10% of the target.

The targets and indicators behind these gaps vary between different levels of income (see Figure 2). In low-income countries, gaps remaining in 2030 can be found in almost all SDGs. Gaps in lower-middle income countries are overall lower and more concentrated on specific indicators. In both upper-middle income and high-income countries, gaps remain in more selected SDGs and indicators.

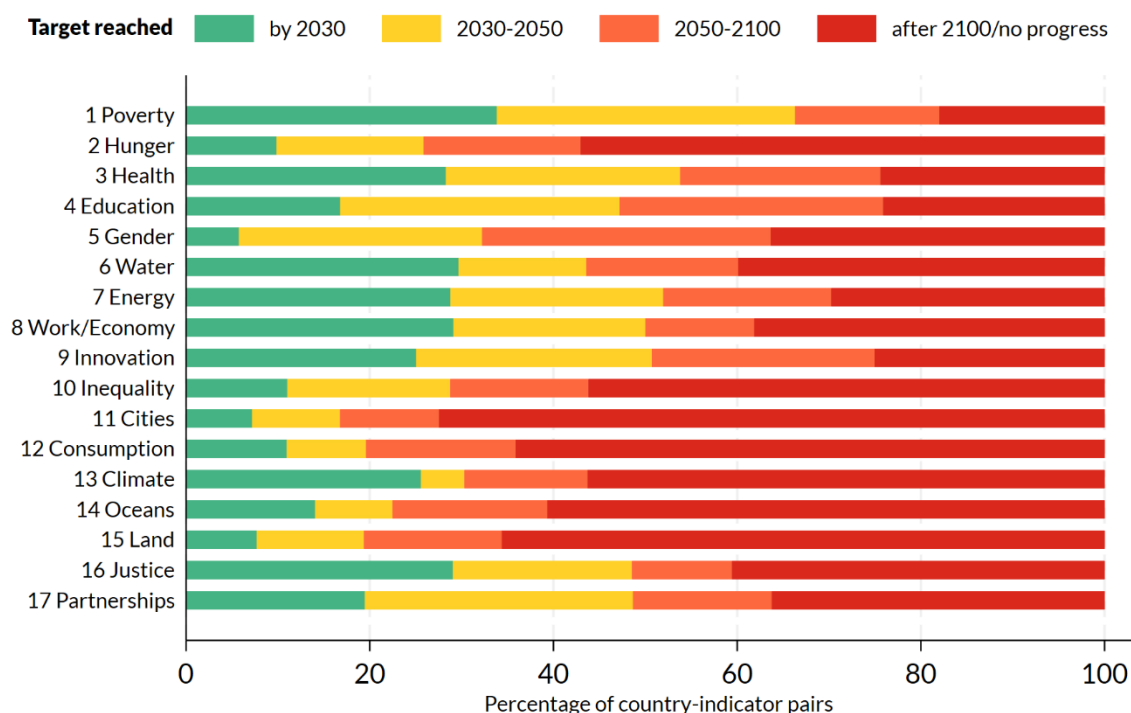
Figure 2: Average gaps remaining in each SDG indicator in 2030, by income group



WHEN WILL SDG TARGETS WILL BE MET FOR CHILDREN?

Our analysis is based on almost 170 country-specific models, each estimating countries' progress on up to 90 individual indicators. In practice, this allows us to identify more than 12,000 country-indicator-pairs to compare progress against different SDGs, and estimate how long it will take for targets to be met based on current progress. Figure 2 presents these findings grouped by SDG highlighting how long children today and in many cases children in future generations will have to wait for critical SDG targets like ending child marriage or completing primary education to be met.

Figure 3: Percentage of countries and indicators reaching defined SDG targets



Our analysis shows that:

- Only 20% of these indicators-country pairs in our analysis are expected to **reach their target by 2030**. For example, let's consider good health and well-being (SDG 3). Across all countries and indicators within SDG 3, only 28% are on track to be reached by 2030. However, the picture is very mixed for different targets and indicators underneath: while 74% of countries are on track to reach the targets for under-five mortality, no country is expected to achieve their ambition on providing Universal Health Coverage by 2030.
- A further 20% are expected to **reach the target by 2050**. For instance, for quality education (SDG 4), 27% of countries are expected to reach targets on youth literacy and 31% on out-of-school rates in this time period.
- 18% are expected to reach the target between **2050 and 2100**. For example, for stunting or maternal mortality, around one quarter of countries are expected to reach the targets in the second half of this century.
- 41% of indicator-country-pairs are either stagnant, **regressing or not expected to meet the target until after 2100**. Many planet-related indicators (such as species on the Red List or air pollution associated with imports) and indicators related to justice (SDG 16), but also obesity or labour rights are examples where actually the vast majority of countries are not reaching targets until after the end of this century.

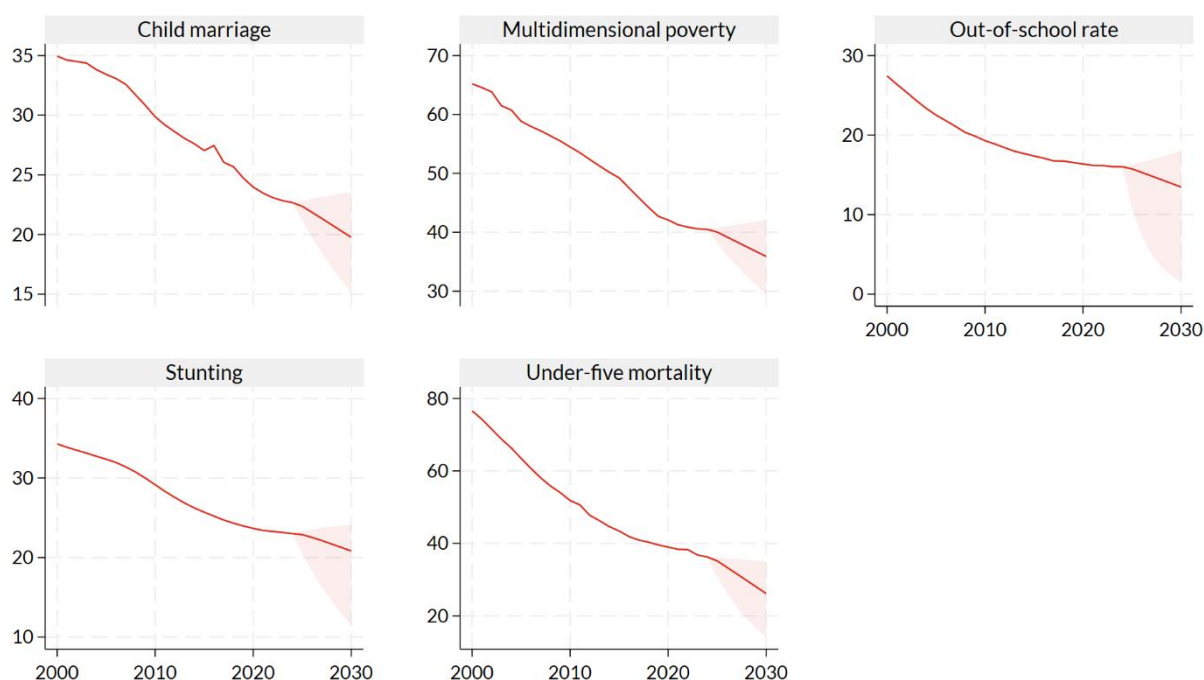
Globally, more than half of indicators and countries do not reach goals by 2050. And 607 million children live in countries where the majority of indicators are regressing or not expected to meet the target until 2080 or after – fully 50 years after the 2030 goal.

As Figure 3 shows, countries and indicators in hunger (SDG 2), gender equality (SDG 5), inequality (SDG 11), sustainable cities & communities (SDG 12) as well as planet-related SDGs are those that are the furthest off track to be met by 2030. While this aligns with the overall trends shown in Figure 1, this is not always the case. In some instances, the gaps might be relatively small (as a share of the target), but based on current trends, slow progress mean it will take a long time to close these gaps (indicators related to inequality, sustainable cities & communities and climate change are examples for this).

IMPACTS ON SELECTED CHILD OUTCOMES

Average progress towards SDGs reflects changes in individual indicators across all policy areas. Under current policy priorities – and with business-as-usual financing decisions – progress in many child-specific outcomes progress is expected to be slow over the next 5 years. Figure 4 shows the trajectory for six selected child outcomes across poverty, health, education, nutrition, and child protection until 2030.

Figure 4: Progress of selected child-related outcomes in low- and middle-income countries (measured by deaths/1,000 live births for under-five mortality and percentages for other indicators)



Weighted average across 107-168 countries (depending on indicator). Range of possible outcomes based on progress in 10% of fastest/slowest countries.

More specifically, our analysis suggests that across selected child outcomes in 2030:

- More than 8.5 million girls are still getting married by age 18 every year.
- Around 750 million children in low- and middle-income countries are expected to live in multidimensional poverty.
- As many as 224 million children might be out-of-school.
- 127 million children under five years of age are stunted.
- 3.4 million children might die before their fifth birthday, mostly from preventable diseases.

NEXT STEPS FOR ANALYSIS & RESEARCH

There have been efforts in recent years to provide [global data snapshots on where the world is in meeting the 17 SDGs for children](#). The analysis above builds on some of this work but aims to provide greater clarity on where the gaps are at the indicator and country level, as well as on the time it will take to reach the goals set out in the 2030 Agenda.

Crucially, this analysis also provides the foundation to develop future pathways, based on alternative financing decisions and policy choices, while taking into account the synergies and trade-offs between different policy areas. Future analyses will focus on the synergies of social spending on children as well as the potential impacts of increased fiscal space, and identifying potential structural bottlenecks will help to provide policy recommendations and a stronger evidence base to identify strategic investment in policy to maximise impact.

SHORT METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

This analysis utilises the Policy Priority Inference (PPI) framework, developed at the Alan Turing Institute, a computational model that integrates a large number of empirical data with a deep theoretical framework, taking into account the working of complex systems and political economy considerations. The framework estimates the link between public expenditure and development quantitatively while accounting for complex interdependencies between different policy areas, as well as public governance.

The model requires two broad sets of input data. First, we use a wide range of development indicators, describing countries' progress over 24 years (requiring multiple observations) on a wide range of outcomes. Our database includes 90 indicators across a wide range of policy areas (and all 17 SDGs), choosing child-specific or child-relevant indicators where possible. As with the original model described by Guerrero & Castañeda (2023), the [SDG Index](#) published as part of the Sustainable Development Report 2024 by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network builds the foundation of the analysis, providing us with data of 39 indicators. This is complemented by other child-relevant indicator from a wide range of global databases, including from UNICEF, UNESCO, and Save the Children's own [Child Atlas](#). We identify targets for each indicator, either taken from the SDG indicator framework or assessed based on the distribution of values across countries.

Second, we use data on public government expenditures using a database created by Gethin (2024), combining data on general government revenues and expenditure by economic function from 18 different sources. The dataset includes information government expenditures on health, education, social protection, economy, environment, housing, safety, and general public services from 2000 until 2023. We complement this data by estimates of overseas development aid by economic function. Our [full methodological note](#) provides more detail on this.

Our model estimates data for 168 countries globally (across all income groups and regions), covering 98% of the global child population. We built a specific model for each country and the availability of data differs for each indicator and country. When we present gaps on goal-level or across countries, we use unweighted averages of indicator gaps (including only indicators for which data is available for at least half of selected countries). The development gaps itself are calculated as the gap between the expected value in 2030 (as estimated by the model) and the target and expressed as percentage of the target value.

As with any computational analysis, important caveats remain. Lack of and low granularity of data, simplified model assumptions, and limited time horizons mean that results need to be interpreted with caution. While the underlying model can work with less data compared to other existing approaches, it still depends on high-quality and granular data on both development indicators as well as public finance decisions. As a consequence, our analysis focuses on indicators for which time series data over a longer time period exist, leaving out other important measures of progress in specific targets and goals, for which data is less readily available. Similarly, public expenditure data in a global model cannot be linked to individual projects and indicators, limiting the effectiveness of the model.

Finally, the computational model assumes that the main interdependencies between policy areas and structural issues and parameters remain the constant over time, basically assuming that existing policies remain in place. This means that the model is best in capturing short- and medium-term impacts, while long-term estimates are less reliable. And while the analysis can highlight positive and negative examples of effective government programming, it cannot identify the underlying cause of this progress.