



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



UNESCO
INSTITUTE
FOR
STATISTICS



TECHNICAL
COOPERATION
GROUP



SDG 4 indicator benchmarking consultation

Results and next steps

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1. Introduction

In September 2015, the 193 Member States of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – including 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets they rule a universal, transformative agenda that commits the international community to end poverty and hunger and achieve sustainable development in all three dimensions (social, economic and environmental) over the next 15 years (2016-2030).

Succeeding the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the 2030 Agenda represents a real transformation in viewing and achieving development – a global vision of prosperity for people and the planet that aspires to involve everybody and ‘leave no one behind’.

The Agenda 2030 has established four levels of monitoring which have their political endorsement and call for specific frameworks to monitor progress. Data is a key driver of transformation across all sectors, enabling governments to achieve national policy objectives. An indicator framework for the SDGs represents the final act in the making of the 2030 Agenda at all levels. The adoption of the political and technical commitments however have different speed of implementation for the different levels of monitoring. In that aspect, the Global framework has been adopted in 2017; the thematic framework has been as well endorsed by the Education 2030 Steering Committee, the regional frameworks are heterogeneous development while we know the work of countries more through their voluntary national contributions to the HLPF annual review.

In education, the commitments by countries have been expressed in the Framework for Action. Para 97 establishes that each country is reviewing the progress towards the goals to determine how they can be translated into feasible but ambitious development plans, and how they can commit national resources to produce real change based on their own priorities, needs, level of development, capabilities, financial resources, strategies, partnerships, and means of implementation.

Progress will be possible to track only if the definition of the indicator on its methodological side is ready and if a relevant data collection is in place with enough resources for its sustainability through time. The SDGs propose a set of ambitious objectives for 2030 but operationalizing progress becomes difficult. A simple example of how difficult is the tasks is what indicator 4.1.1, the “proportion of children and young people ... achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics, by sex”, is trying to achieve and what constitutes effective progress towards the target. More concretely, it is not clearly specified:

- ✓ what level should be achieved
- ✓ what it means to reach that level

For instance,

- ✓ what is the minimum proficiency level
- ✓ how many children should reach the minimum level



This is not the only case. Target 4.4, for instance, calls for operational precisions by employing the wording “substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills...”, not only does not specify what skills are relevant but also does not clear what would be considered as target completion, because the idea of a “substantial increase” is subjective.

1.1 Objective and structure

In the absence of clear global or regional approaches to benchmarking, the UIS and the GEM have led a national and regional consultation to inform this discussion building, from the bottom up, a mapping of existing *national and regional* benchmarks to better guide on next steps of the TCG while informing the deliberations of the SDG – Education 2030 Steering Committee.

This document present the results of the consultation that was carried out in two levels: regional organizations and countries. In all cases it was consulted the coverage in the monitoring frameworks of the global indicators, the feasibility to set benchmarks or reference points for each level of monitoring and the priorities in terms of certain areas.

The note is structured in a brief discussion on benchmarks and their objectives in section 2. Section 3 and 4 share the results of the regional and national consultation and finally the decisions the UIS is proposing for the TCG to endorse.

2. Benchmarking in the Education 2030 Agenda

The 2030 agenda implies a major reform for most educational systems in the planet and consistently includes the discussion of progress or benchmarks in Para 97 “Para 97. As the primary responsibility for monitoring lies at the country level, countries should build up effective monitoring and accountability mechanisms, adapted to national priorities, in consultation with civil society. They should also work to build greater consensus at the global level as to what specific quality standards and learning outcomes should be achieved across the life course – from early childhood development to adult skills acquisition – and how they should be measured. In addition, countries should seek to improve the quality and timeliness of reporting. Information and data need to be freely accessible to all. National-level data, information and outcomes based on existing reporting mechanisms, together with new data sources as necessary, will inform reviews at the regional and global levels”

The achievement of the agenda depends critically on the progress. It is expected that member states adopt the common objectives in their national planning, enact the policies to achieve them and implement the data reporting and collection mechanism to allow the monitoring. For this reason, a system of indicators has been endorsed at the global level and various levels of monitoring have been established. SDG4 has rapidly adopted both global and thematic frameworks for monitoring while regional and national ones are in progress. The implementation of data availability is crucial to assess process. Lack or poor quality information precludes effective monitoring and misinforms the implementation of the right policies.

There are various examples on how benchmarks or points of reference have been implemented at the regional and global experiences. One of the salient examples of how to use benchmarks as catalysers of policy reforms is the one at the European level (see Box). The approach lies on learning, ownership and peer pressure to guide policy implementation that has been widely examined with different reviews according to the area and criteria to define success.

Box 1. The EU open method of coordination (OMC)

The open method of coordination (OMC) was introduced at the Lisbon European Council meeting in 2000 as an additional means of EU policy coordination, *beyond* the Treaty-based instruments of economic policy coordination (BEPGs and EGs). In general, this entails some of the following elements: (i) fixed guidelines set for the EU, with short, medium and long-term goals; (ii) quantitative and qualitative indicators and benchmarks; guidelines translated into national and regional targets; and (iv) periodic monitoring, evaluation.

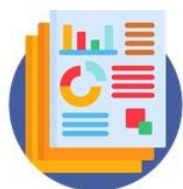
The tools of this soft supply-side coordination at European level are: (i) the exchange of information among policy-makers; (ii) learning from each other's experience, practices and intentions; (iii) national ownership; and the monitoring that helps to take appropriate policy action.

Source: Ioannou, Demosthenes and Ferdinandusse, M. and Coussens, Wouter and Lo Duca, Marco, Benchmarking the Lisbon Strategy (June 26, 2008). ECB Occasional Paper No. 85. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1084911>.

Although benchmarking (or point of reference) is most of the times seen as a method to “naming and shaming” and peer pressure to bolster change, it aims for more than that. The use of benchmarking could be a very powerful tool for setting progress and identifying objectives and, then, it is more a transparent and learning device (based on systematic comparisons on common indicators. The learning occurs in various dimensions: on the analysis of internal practices, the situation of a country vis-à-vis successful policies in other countries and in the development of the methodologies). More concretely, information sharing and mutual learning of best practices builds capacity.

The two usual caveats the mechanical “one fit for all” recommendation model and the generation of ranking could be avoided by helping countries define their own point of reference with relationship with the common indicators (according to their starting level), and by including as much qualitative evidence and assessment as possible.

The SDG agenda is not relying on models of the type of the EU but instead on a formative and learning process based on common indicators. Operationally, the way forward seems to be letting each Member State decide on the priority areas to set objectives to account for national policy focus and peculiarities. Member States could thus choose their priorities. A common approach and a common list of indicators to track progress are key to success and could be taken as a stepping stone to gain acceptance and the achievement of the end goal. Setting regional points of reference is a natural second stepping stone. A legitimate convenor of the process is key to success.

Figure 2.1. SDG 4 monitoring and accountability in SDG4**REPORTING**

The UIS has a fundamental role in Indicators development and as the official source of SDG 4, the UIS compiles and produces education-related data and metadata from various sources at the national, regional and international levels and support countries .

**MONITORING**

Producing reports monitoring progress towards the achievement of SDG 4, as well as commitments and follow-up actions in support of the Education 2030 Agenda. This is the role of the Global Education Monitoring Report.

**FOLLOW-UP AND REVIEW**

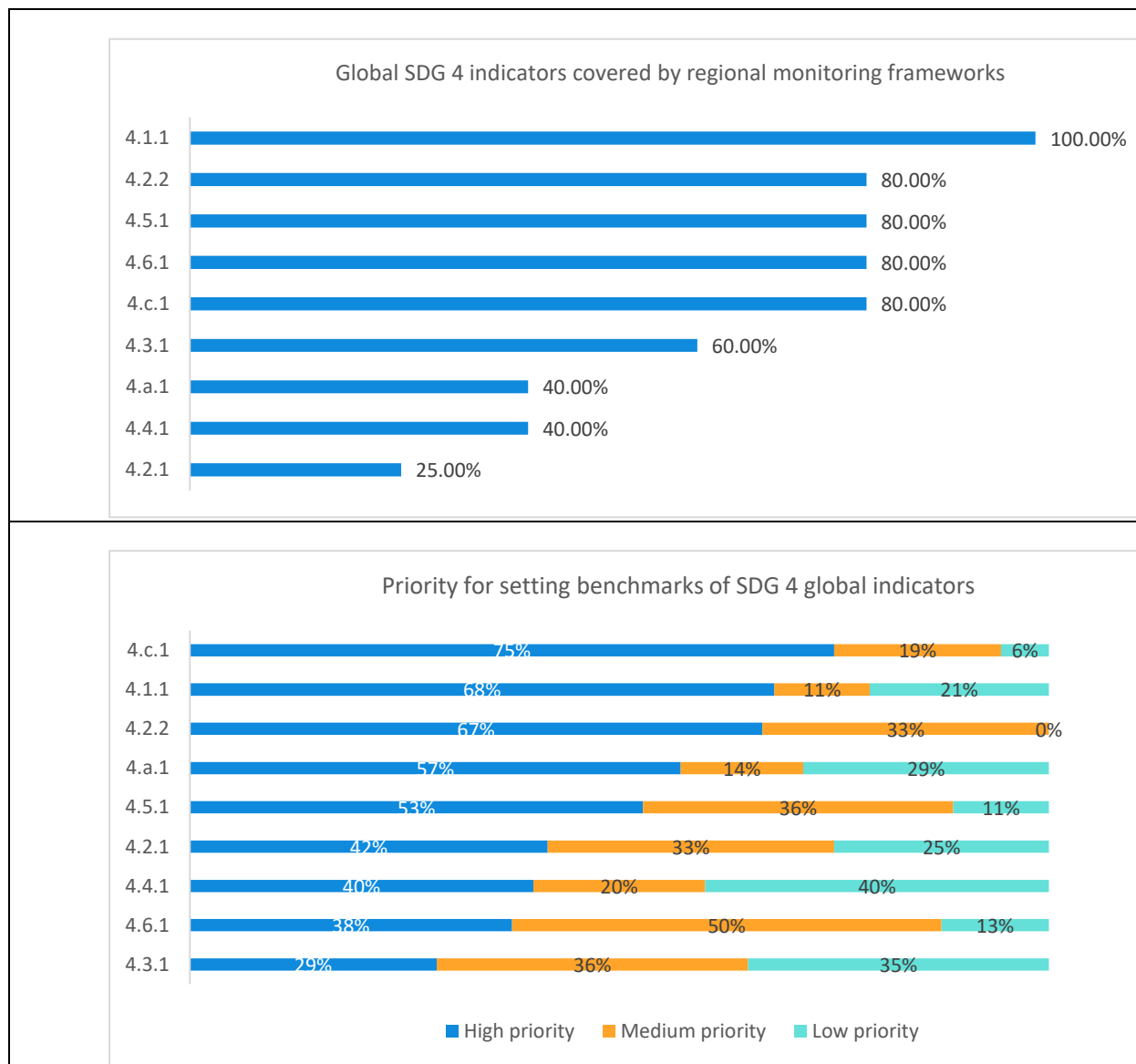
UN regional and global bodies are expected to analyze the system reports with the specialized intergovernmental bodies of the UN system. Sharing national experiences, with all countries is key through participation in voluntary reviews

3. What do data tell us on regional benchmarking?

The following organizations have responded to the consultation: Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Secretariat, Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura (OEI), African Union, Caribbean Community (CARICOM), European Commission (DG EAC), and the Pacific Community (SPC).

The [consultation](#) included two aspects of the SDG 4 indicators: coverage in the regional monitoring frameworks and feasibility of setting regional benchmarks, both described in the Figure 3.1. Learning, early childhood participation, equity, functional literacy and numeracy, and teaching (4.1.1, 4.2.2, 4.5.1, 4.6.1 and 4.c.1) related indicators are most common in frameworks; and teaching, learning, early childhood participation, and school infrastructure (4.c.1, 4.1.1, 4.2.2, and 4.a.1) related indicators (and, therefore, policies) are indicated as having high priority for setting benchmarks for them at the regional level.

Figure 3.1: Coverage and priority of global indicators in regional frameworks

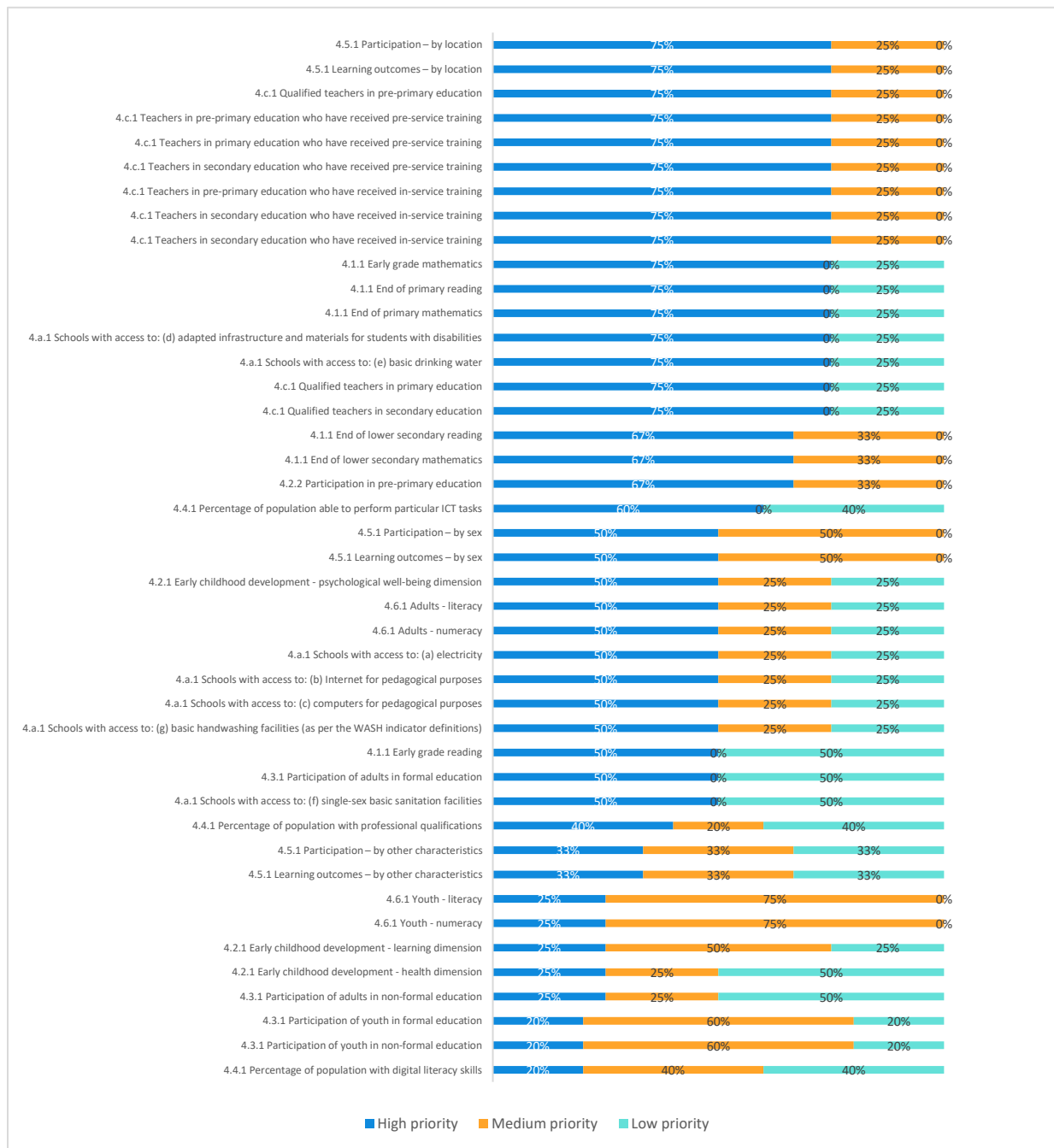


Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

A more disaggregated vision was possible at the regional level as global indicators were split in relevant dimensions. Participation in non-formal education, digital skills and some dimensions of early childhood education, other areas of learning outcomes outside reading and mathematics, are at the bottom of the regional agenda



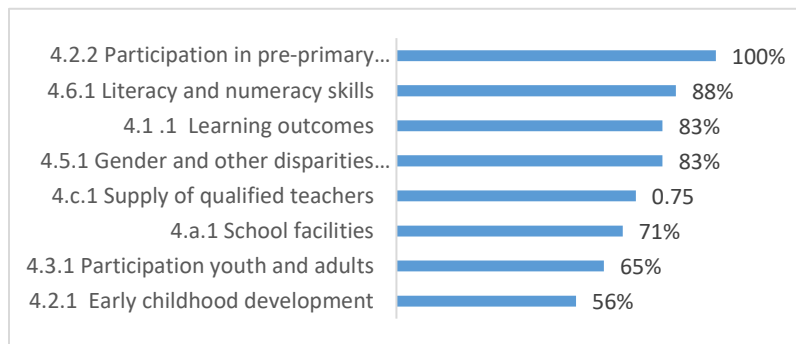
Figure 3.2: Priority for setting benchmarks of global SDG 4 indicators by relevant dimensions



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

When it comes to feasibility, the picture appears slightly different (Figure 3.3) with 4.2.2 atop followed by 4.6.1; however, this could be related to the fact that youth literacy is one of the [MDG indicators](#) for the youth group (15 to 24 years) while learning and equity appear to be areas where it is possible to define a common regional point of reference.

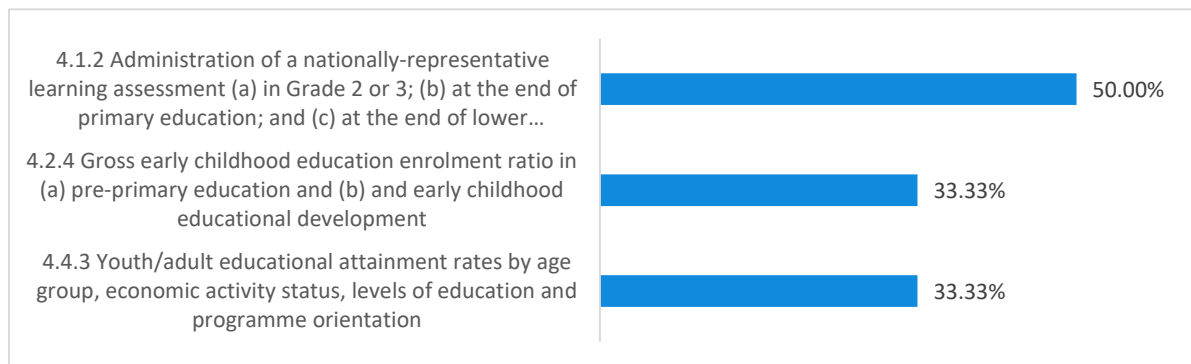
Figure 3.3: Feasibility of setting regional benchmarks for global SDG 4 indicators



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

Another vision of coverage was possible at the regional level as all thematic indicators were consulted. Figure 3.4 shows that there are just three thematic indicators with regional benchmarks. The rest of the thematic indicators do not have regional benchmarks.

Figure 3.4: Thematic SDG 4 indicators with regional benchmarks

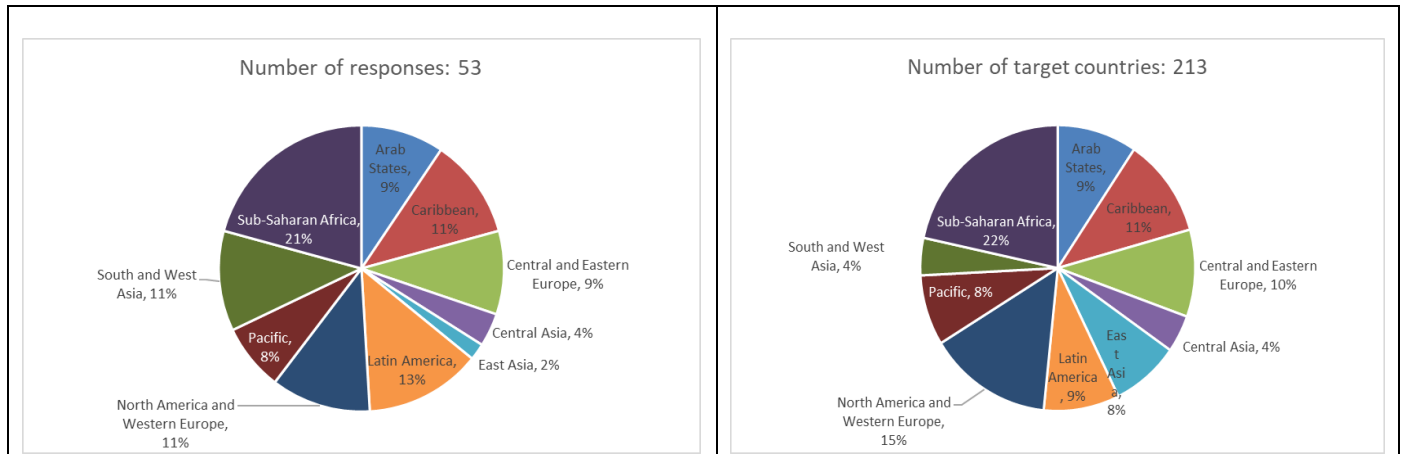


Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

4. National Consultation on benchmarks

The [national consultation](#) was sent to all member states and although not everybody replied, we got around 60 answers and, most importantly, regional representation that ensure some lessons and take away (Figure 4.1). The consultation at the national level focused on the global indicators and information was requested not only on the exact global indicators but on the existence of some indicator for the constructs as well as the policy documents that backed the reference point..

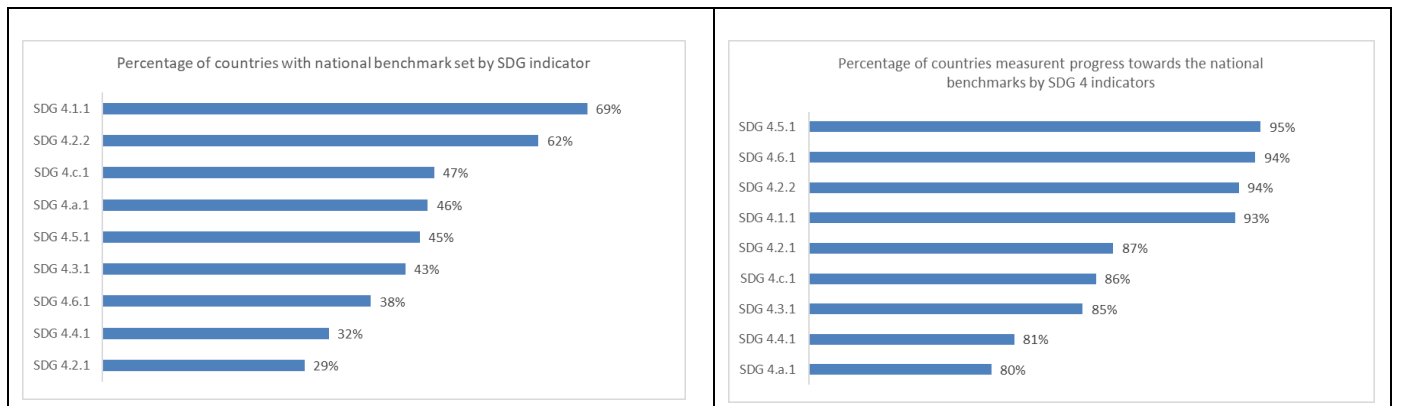
Figure 4.1: Distribution of countries and responses in the national consultation



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

The results show (Figure 4.2) the coverage of benchmarks on the national frameworks of the global indicators as well as the existence of some mechanism to track progress towards the achievement. Learning and equity (4.1.1 and 4.5.1) again appeared atop of the agenda. Given the low coverage on the measurement of indicator 4.6.1, the reference to literacy is very likely related to the MDG indicator. Early childhood comes next and countries are giving priority to participation (4.2.2) over development (4.2.1).

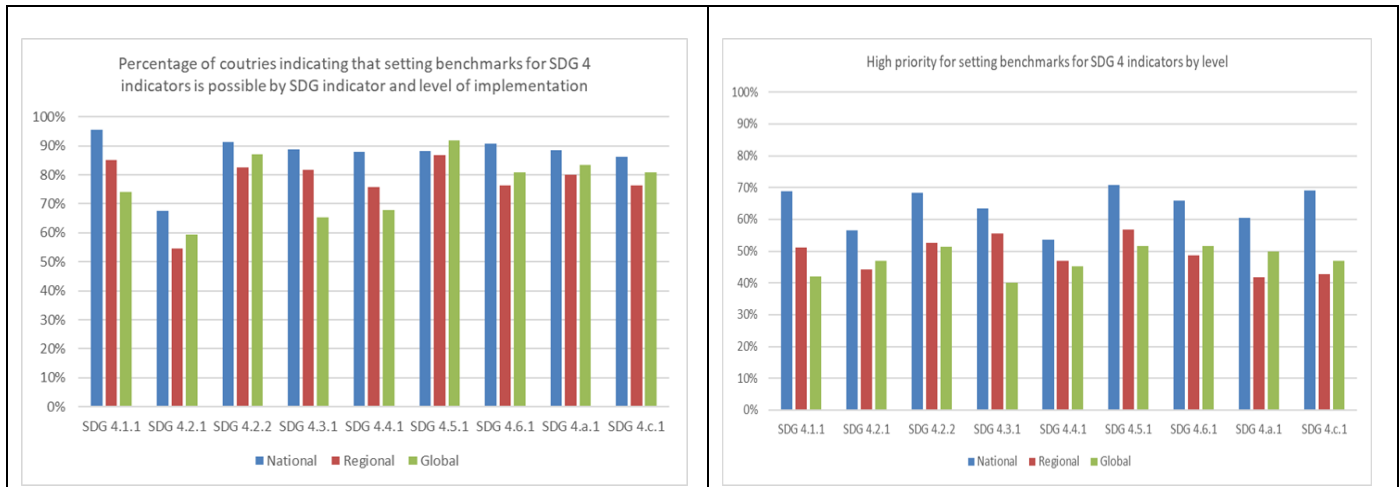
Figure 4.2: Distribution of countries and responses in the national consultation



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

According to Figure 4.3 national benchmarks appeared to be more relevant and prioritized over the regional and global levels regardless of the indicator. Points of reference for ECD and ICT skills appeared to be slightly less prevalent in the national frameworks.

Figure 4.3: Distribution of countries and responses in the national consultation

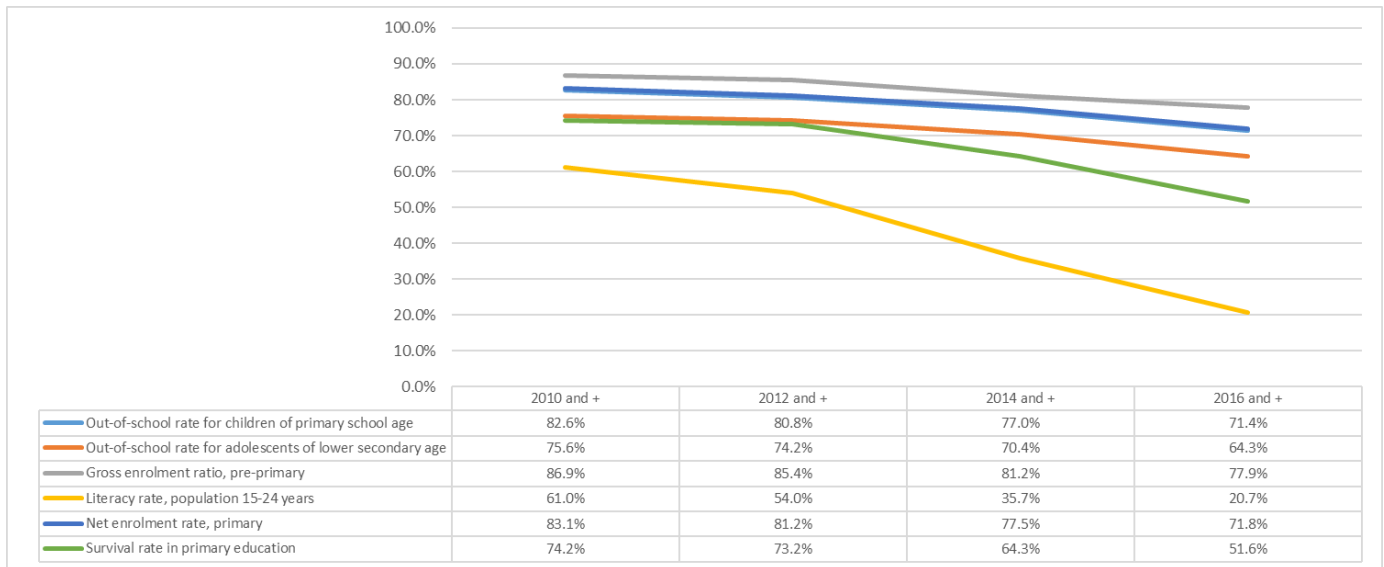


Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

5. The relevance of data availability

The availability of quality data under a common definition is a key input to the monitoring process. The difficulties in collection still for the MDGs indicators are reflected in Figure 5.1.. The Figure shows that the periodicity to monitor should be defined according to various criteria, one of them the availability of data sources that make available the reporting.

Figure 5.1: Coverage of MDG indicators by different aggregation by year

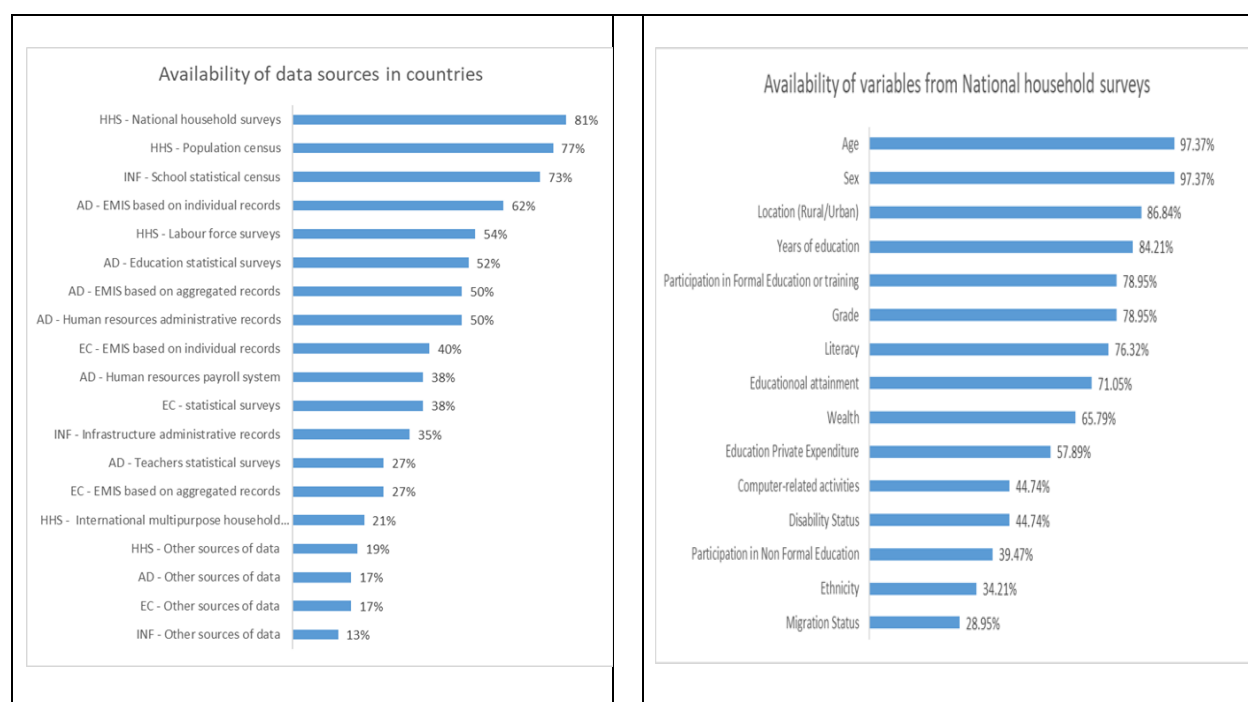


Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

Adding to the former mapping, Figure 5.2 shows the coverage at the national level of sources of information and the type of variables collected. The data collection systems in education include various data sources—administrative data, socio-demographic and population data, households surveys, learning assessments and some special surveys.

With the focus on equity, the SDGs demand on countries capabilities of education systems for disaggregation that is not necessarily available. How to sustain progress to ensure no one is left behind? Figure 5.2 on the panel in the right shows the limits based on the sample of respondents to date, which are among the concerns of the [IAEG-SDG](#). These are only examples of a broader mapping the UIS is carrying forward and that would help UIS to better assist countries by understanding their data ecosystems.

Figure 5.2: Consultation on sources of information



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

6. Lessons and next steps

Monitoring frameworks have been put into place to help countries measure the progress they are making towards achieving objectives, information sharing and mutual learning from experiences and to understand what areas to prioritize and allocate domestic and international resources.

A significant factor in the success of the SDGs is to be able to monitor progress through monitoring targets and measuring progress related to common indicators. According to the principle of national ownership, countries are responsible for monitoring progress on national-defined points of reference. International agencies can provide assistance to strengthening national capacities. The UIS has been



recognized as having a fundamental global role in developing methods and standards and helping to address the monitoring challenges.

Therefore, the next step is to support countries in the definition of points of reference for the global indicators at the national level in close collaboration with the regional organizations that support that level of monitoring.



Please provide your feedback by completing the questions that follow. Thank you.

Your name (please print): _____

Your organization/country: _____

1. **Do you agree to develop national benchmarks for as many global indicators, where possible, in alignment with regional frameworks?**

Strongly agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

We would appreciate any comments that you may wish to make:

2. **Do you agree that the UIS should support the development of national benchmarks, where possible, in collaboration with regional organizations?**

Strongly agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

We would appreciate any comments that you may wish to make: