

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?

Under SDG 4, there is a global commitment to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030, its first target being that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.

Monitoring equity and learning is a foundation of the agenda. However, our [projections](#) for the 2019 High Level Political Forum showed that at current rates only 93% of children will be completing primary, 85% of adolescents will be completing lower secondary and 60% of youth will be completing upper secondary school by 2030. The share of those in school not achieving minimum skills in reading is 51% for primary and 63% for lower secondary education. Combining data on completion and learning means that the prospects of achieving this target are dim as we enter the Decade of Action for the SDGs.

The Education 2030 Framework for Action had 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.

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

a. Monitoring benchmarks at regional level reinforcing political commitment

Setting benchmarks cannot be done at the global level, given the very large differences in starting points between countries. It is therefore proposed a bottom up approach consisting in defining benchmarks as minimum levels to be achieved by each country in a region and relying on national ownership. Countries within each region tend to have more challenges in common 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 them being feasible for countries to justify lack of progress under peer and public scrutiny. Benchmarks must be used to promote policy dialogue, based on a 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 helped set a measurement agenda, as testified by progress made in country-level reporting on some of those indicators. However, the 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 (TCG) in its [last meeting](#) in August 2019.. However, more work is still needed to fill the data gaps in some of the indicators to be benchmarked to ensure that progress can be monitored over time, which is key in this proposal:

- develop methodologies to improve comparability between countries and over time; and
- cover the cost of collecting data in some of the poorest countries through international support.

Table 1 summarizes the current status and needs for the benchmarked indicators.

Table 1. Proposed benchmark indicators and methodological challenges

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

Benchmark indicators and target levels need clear communication

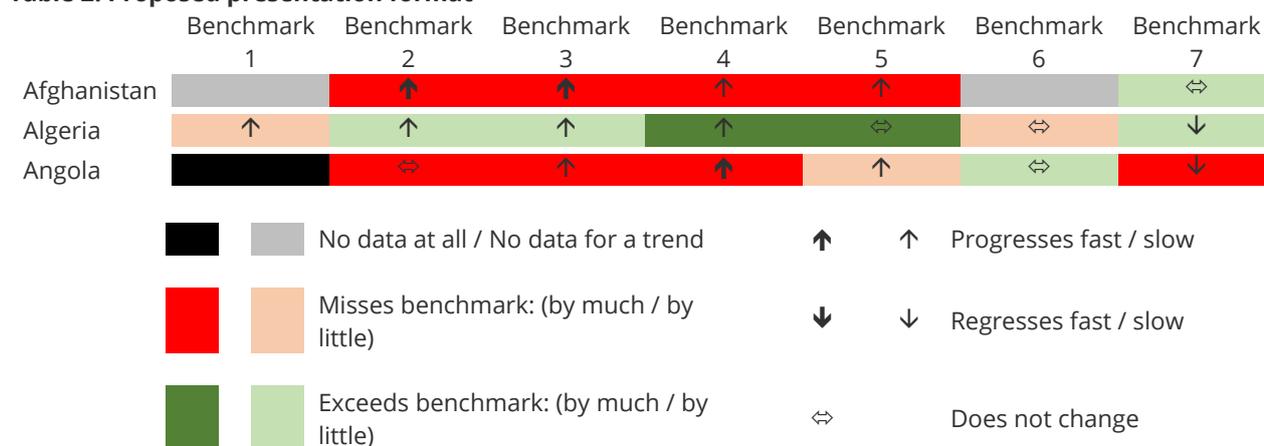
The benchmark indicators need to be presented in a form that facilitates follow up, synthesizes progress, identifies gaps and guides efforts, mapping and monitoring. It should be immediately clear:

- where data is available and how frequently, and what is the reliability.
- how countries are doing vis-à-vis the regional benchmarks and their distance from the reference points
- how fast countries are moving vis-à-vis the regional benchmarks

Table 2 provides an indicative presentation format once benchmarks are agreed. Two issues need to be addressed for this presentation to be complete:

- which level or domain to focus on for benchmark indicators which refer to multiple levels or domains;
- what rate of progress is to be considered as satisfactory

Table 2. Proposed presentation format



How does a benchmark process fit into the Education 2030 architecture?

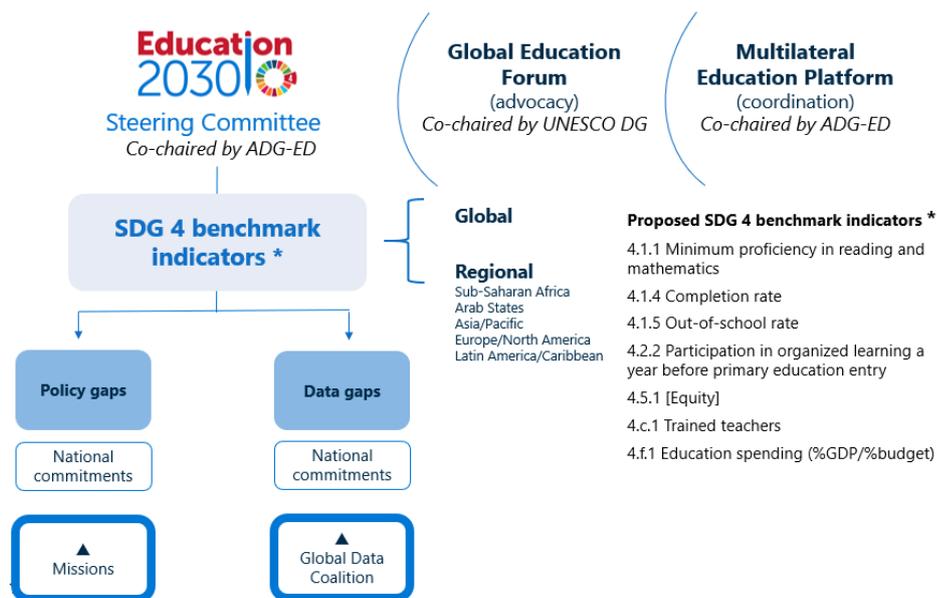
Benchmarks will need to integrate evidence on data with follow-up action on policies. Lack of progress towards the benchmarks should trigger national commitments to develop policy responses or, in the absence of data, to collect data. The international community can accordingly help through a **mission-oriented approach** in specific policy areas (e.g. teachers) or through the **Global Data Coalition** to fund

the collection of relevant information, the development of new methodologies and global public goods. Figure 1 summarizes how the different components are articulated.

The alignment and focus would lead to several objectives:

- strengthen capacity and capabilities in countries to design and implement the SDG4 agenda
- strengthen national monitoring capacity and increase the quality, frequency and coverage of data for key indicators
- improve coordination, oversight and transparency of global effort to use resources efficiently and effectively in supporting countries.

Figure 1. Benchmarking process within the SDG 4 architecture



Note: Mission-oriented initiatives are large-scale interventions aiming for a clearly defined goal or solution to be achieved. Missions have a clearly defined (societal or technological) target, preferably qualified and/or quantified.

Next steps and timeline

To summarize, in order to make progress in setting, communicating and monitoring benchmarks for a select set of SDG 4 indicators, the following activities need to be completed.

On the measurement challenges:

- data gaps and methodologies (on trends and progress rates) need to be identified in the framework of the Technical Cooperation Group and its working groups for the benchmark indicators

Table 3 summarizes key actions in 2020 and 2021 for selected actors.

Table 3. Selected key actions by actor

Actor Objective	Action	Time
Regional steering committees Leadership of benchmark process at the regional level	Initiate discussion with countries Adopt regional benchmarks in next two sessions Steer peer dialogue processes to link benchmarks with policy responses Implement country engagement strategies	2020 and 2021
Technical Cooperation Group Technical work on benchmarks	Make necessary methodological developments Identify data gaps that need to be filled	2020
UNESCO Institute for Statistics	Support technical work on benchmarking	Ongoing
Global Education Monitoring Report	Support communication on benchmarking	Ongoing

Steering Committee steering role	Monitors on benchmarking process as per November decisions Steer regional definition progress in 2020 Begin linking benchmarks with policy responses through missions	2020/2021
Multilateral Education Platform / Global Education Forum Political Support to benchmark use	Add political support to the benchmarking initiative	2020/2021