

Putting children at the centre of the Sustainable Development Goals



Bosch/UNICEF

All countries agreed on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, yet five years later, 250 million children are still at risk of not meeting their development potential (43% of children in low- and middle-income countries).¹ Child well-being is both an indicator and a foundation of social and economic development, **and children are at the heart of the concept of sustainability.** A landmark WHO-UNICEF-*Lancet* Commission recommends that policy-makers place children at the heart of their efforts to achieve the SDGs.

Successful societies invest in their children, and **decision-makers need a long-term vision** for their country's future. For example, an Indonesian programme that built schools and provided access to education in the 1970s was found to benefit the next generation through increased household income, improved living standards, and government services made available via higher taxation.² Early investments in children's health, nutrition, education, and development accumulate throughout the child's lifetime, also benefiting their children and society as a whole.

Investments in children are among the most cost-effective that governments can make. **For each US\$ 1 spent on health, lower-middle income countries gain US\$ 20 benefit.** Low-income countries reap nearly US\$ 7 benefit for reducing adolescent marriage and over US\$ 10 benefit for improving education. Conversely, the cost of inaction for not providing universal preschool, home visits to follow child development, and improved nutrition is substantial and could reach more than 10% of GDP.³

An analysis of the SDGs suggests a financing gap of US\$ 195 per person in low-income countries. The WHO-UNICEF-*Lancet* Commission suggests multiple mechanisms to raise public

financing – investments for children that will ultimately pay for themselves. In addition to urgently reducing greenhouse gas emissions to preserve children's futures, policy-makers must address threats to children's well-being originating in all sectors, for example:

- **Industry and environment:** exposure to air pollution and a poor diet in early life increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, obesity, type 2 diabetes, and metabolic syndrome⁴
- **Transport:** road injury is the leading cause of death for young people aged 5–29 years, and the cause of lasting trauma and disability for millions of children and families⁵
- **Child protection:** violence against children violates their rights, seriously impacts their mental and physical well-being, and is strongly linked with later anti-social behavior⁴

Political commitment at executive level is needed to leverage synergies and coordinate a deliberate, multisectoral approach. Country leaders, international agencies, and civil society should reframe their understanding of the SDGs as being for and about children – a political message that supports social and economic development at all levels.

POLICY SOLUTIONS

Ensure high-level coordination across sectors

Heads of state and government may assign one mechanism to coordinate work across sectors and assess all policies' effect on children.

Track budget allocations

Heads of state and government may designate a monitoring system to track budget allocations for child well-being and mobilize domestic resources.

Improve multilateral support

U.N. agencies should refocus the SDG agenda toward children with an effective multisectoral approach and reduced fragmentation.

1. Black MM et al. Early childhood development coming of age: science through the life course. *The Lancet* 2017; 389: 77–90.

2. Akresh R et al. Long-term and intergenerational effects of education. Cambridge, MA, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2018.

3. Richter LM, Daelmans B, Lombardi J, et al. Investing in the foundation of sustainable development: pathways to scale up for early childhood development. *The Lancet* 2017; 389: 103–18.

4. Clark H et al. A future for the world's children? A WHO-UNICEF-*Lancet* Commission. *The Lancet* 2020, 395: 613–614.

5. WHO. Global status report on road safety 2018. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2018.

Read the WHO-UNICEF-*Lancet* Commission report:

<http://www.thelancet.com/futurechild>