Measuring children’s well-being: the Child Flourishing and Futures Index

Global warming is worsening crises of conflict and migration of which children are primary victims – globally, half of refugees today are under age 18. Under business-as-usual scenarios, the future of all children will be compromised by rising ocean levels, increased mortality from extreme weather, proliferation of diseases like malaria and dengue, and a crisis of malnutrition. Children around the world are protesting to remind us, “our house is on fire.”

A global index, presented in a landmark WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission (2020), shows that, of 180 countries examined, no single country provides the conditions needed for a child to live a healthy life today and tomorrow. Wealthier countries perform better on child ‘flourishing’ indicators (combining data on survival, such as under-five mortality and adolescent suicide, with data on well-being, such as educational achievement, nutrition, and protection from violence), but threaten children’s future through excessive carbon emissions. In contrast, the poorest countries fail to ensure that children survive and thrive today, though they contribute little to the climate crisis.

Countries including Albania, Armenia, Costa Rica, Jordan, Moldova, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, Uruguay, and Viet Nam show it is possible to prioritize child health and well-being while still remaining on track to beat CO2 emissions targets per capita by 2030. Other countries should follow suit.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) indicators provide a strong foundation for monitoring progress; however there are huge gaps in data collection. Most countries do not regularly collect data for many child-related indicators. SDG monitoring needs a strong boost in investment, including for subnational disaggregation. Harnessing citizen accountability (e.g. using online reporting apps) and improving routine country systems is essential to act on a new agenda with children at the centre of the SDGs.

Political solutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urgently reduce CO2 emissions to meet Paris climate agreement targets</th>
<th>Improve collection of data</th>
<th>Develop user-friendly dashboards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The leaders of all countries exceeding CO2 targets must act urgently to ensure a future for children.</td>
<td>Heads of state should direct national institutions to improve country information systems and citizen-led data and accountability.</td>
<td>U.N. agencies should issue simplified regular reports to help countries assess how to improve policies for children’s well-being.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>