

## Inter-Agency Group on Disaggregated Education Indicators (IAG-DEI): Concept note

10 March 2016

### Background

A focus on equity is a key feature of the Sustainable Development Goals, which are driven by the objective to leave no one behind. Two goals explicitly refer to equality or inequality (Goal 5 on gender equality and Goal 10 on reducing inequality), while most goals include a commitment to reducing disparities. For example, target 4.5 makes a call to *“eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations”*.<sup>1</sup>

Tracking the evolution of disparities at the national, regional and global level has major implications for monitoring. Referring to the Independent Expert Advisory Group on the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development, the synthesis report of the UN Secretary General stressed that *“broader and systematic disaggregation to reveal inequities will ... be fundamental”*.<sup>2</sup>

Under the Millennium Development Goals, education indicators mostly relied on administrative data and global monitoring of inequality mainly captured differences by sex. While the value of this data is universally recognized, survey-based indicators will need to feature more prominently to enable broader equity-oriented global monitoring efforts. The Education 2030 Framework for Action calls for all countries to *“collect, analyse and use disaggregated data, broken down by the specific characteristics of given population groups, and ensure that indicators measure progress towards reducing inequality.”*<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, the Technical Advisory Group on Post-2015 Education Indicators argues that *“education indicators should aim to capture not just national averages but also the variation across different population subgroups defined by group and individual characteristics”*.<sup>4</sup> It envisages that most of its proposed monitoring indicators would be disaggregated.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations. 2015. “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” United Nations General Assembly resolution A/RES/70/1. New York: United Nations.

[http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming All Lives and Protecting the Planet Synthesis Report of the Secretary-General On the Post-2015 Agenda, December 2014.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). 2016. “Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action - Towards Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Lifelong Learning for All.” ED-2016/WS/2. Paris: UNESCO. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002432/243278e.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Technical Advisory Group, Proposed thematic indicators for the Framework for Action of the post-2015 education agenda, May 2015

## Issues

Considerable progress has already been achieved since 2000 in tracking inequality in measures of education participation or learning outcomes as a result of the increasing availability of data from household, student and school surveys. However, several challenges remain that prevent the international community from building on these recent improvements.

- There is no common methodology for the calculation of education-related indicators from surveys. As a result, it is not rare to find different estimates among agencies for specific indicators even though the same data sources are used. Such differences result from several causes, among them the application of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels, the calculation of the age of children, and the treatment of missing values. While most of the differences could be explained by minor methodological differences, an important first step would be to clarify the causes of the differences and reach a consensus.
- There needs to be consensus on key definitions that would enable global monitoring of education using survey data. Among characteristic cases where definitions would be needed, the following examples can be mentioned:
  - Education indicators, e.g. what should be the reference age group for an educational attainment indicator, or which forms of education should be considered as equivalent to being in school.
  - Individual characteristics, e.g. whether measures of socioeconomic status should be made comparable over time and across countries and, if so, how.
  - Inequality indicators, e.g. what measure should be applied to summarize information on the level of disparity for particular education indicators at the national, regional and global level. In fact, a conversation on how education inequality across countries and over time should be tracked has barely begun, which limits the scope for a discussion of what targets the international community should aim to reach.
- Wider coverage of common survey items across countries would be needed. The availability of Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) datasets has been especially helpful but other national surveys be better utilized. Some agencies have access to datasets that are not publicly available but which could be used under certain conditions. Finally, countries could provide survey and census data that could significantly improve country coverage.
- By widening the scope of potential data sources, greater transparency would be needed to assess data quality. A common set of standards would be essential to help inform the use of a data source and, if so, how potential biases in levels or trends should be taken into account.

Addressing these multiple challenges calls for inter-agency coordination in order to: agree what areas to prioritize, harmonize approaches to analysis and reporting, and identify an efficient sharing of tasks, ranging from country consultation to building up a data depository.

Faced with similar challenges, other sectors have already made considerable progress to establish coordination and collaboration mechanisms across agencies in the course of the MDG monitoring process,

for example the Inter-Agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (IGME),<sup>5</sup> the inter-agency group on Joint Malnutrition Estimates<sup>6</sup> and the Joint Monitoring Program for Water Supply and Sanitation.<sup>7</sup>

### **Goal and objectives of the inter-agency group**

In response to the call for a greater focus on equity in the global post-2015 education agenda and for more efficient use of available information, it is proposed that an *Inter-Agency Group on Disaggregated Education Indicators (IAGE-DEI)* be established.

It is recommended that the **initial focus** of the Inter-Agency Group be on three key indicators currently proposed by the Technical Advisory Group to monitor SDG Target 4.1:

- Completion rate (primary, lower secondary, upper secondary)
- Out-of-school rate (primary, lower secondary, upper secondary)
- Percentage of children over-age for grade (primary, lower secondary, upper secondary)<sup>8</sup>

The **goal** of the Inter-Agency Group would be to promote the use of survey data for education monitoring purposes at the global, regional and national level, ensuring standardized analysis and reporting in order to complement evidence available through administrative data.

The **benefit** will be increased efficiency and consistency in the processing of survey data by different agencies and strong legitimacy for equity-related survey-based indicators to serve the post-2015 education agenda, with particular emphasis on the increasing use of such data by countries.

It is proposed to progressively achieve the following **objectives** in the course of the next 3-5 years:

#### *1. Harmonize the processing of survey data*

The Inter-Agency Group will identify issues where harmonized procedures are needed to calculate education indicators. Based on a review of different approaches followed by the participating agencies, standard methodologies will be agreed and developed.

#### *2. Define indicators*

Given that the main, if not exclusive, source of data for official global education indicator reporting has been administrative records, there has been less emphasis on defining indicators of education access, participation, completion and attainment that rely on surveys. A consensus would be needed in some areas, for example on what should be the reference age group for a measure of educational attainment at different levels.

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<sup>5</sup> See [www.childmortality.org](http://www.childmortality.org). In addition, a compilation of articles presents how methodological issues were tackled [www.ploscollections.org/article/browseissue.action?issue=info:doi/10.1371/issue.pcol.v07.i19](http://www.ploscollections.org/article/browseissue.action?issue=info:doi/10.1371/issue.pcol.v07.i19).

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.who.int/nutgrowthdb/estimates/en/>.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.wssinfo.org/>.

<sup>8</sup> It is proposed that this group focuses on indicators of education access, participation, completion and attainment, as issues of learning outcomes are substantively different. However, interactions should be encouraged with other related initiatives, such as the effort led by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics to establish a group that would help guide the development of a global learning metric.

### *3. Harmonize the definition of individual characteristics*

As the proposal of the Technical Advisory Group on Post-2015 Education Indicators has argued, there are currently only three individual characteristics (and their combinations) that can be used to track global progress in reducing inequality in education access and participation: sex, location and wealth (or a related measure of socioeconomic status). However, especially in the latter case, there may be a need to harmonize the definition of the wealth quintile. The question that arises is whether efforts should be made to develop comparable measures of wealth (and, if so, whether this should be done in cooperation with other sectors that use this information) or, if not, how such a decision can be justified. Note that many national household surveys do not provide information on wealth but on consumption expenditure, which may be more robust but may be weakly correlated with wealth.

### *4. Document, evaluate and pool survey data sources*

The availability of DHS and MICS datasets has been a breakthrough thanks to major efforts by the relevant organizations to standardize them. However, these surveys still offer limited coverage for several parts of the world and their frequency is often problematic. For the full potential of survey (and census) data to be exploited, it is therefore necessary to also develop a depository of sources outside DHS and MICS that can be used to calculate the indicators of focus. The International Household Survey Network has already carried out valuable work in documenting the types of information that surveys collect (e.g. whether surveys ask questions on current or past attendance or whether information on the highest grade attended is available).

Multiple data sources should be used for each country, where possible, in order to correct for biases that may be present in any particular survey. Agencies will share the responsibility for adding to the list of data sources that can be used. All surveys will need to be assessed in terms of their quality, including sampling and non-sampling errors, before a decision can be made whether or not to consider a survey as an input to calculations. Previous insights of individual agencies (or other inter-agency groups) on the quality of particular surveys can inform the process.

### *5. Calculate current and historic values on mean and dispersion*

The data will be processed to produce estimates on the key indicators for every country. Using smoothing techniques and where possible, as in the case of attainment rates, retrospective information, the objective should be to produce a time series for the mean value stretching back at least to 2000 (or 1990) to enable an assessment of progress during the EFA period.

While there are clear limitations to doing that also for population breakdowns by individual characteristics (given that characteristics such as location and wealth are not fixed), techniques will be developed to also estimate, at a minimum, baselines for population sub-groups.

### *6. Publish estimates*

In order for the work of the Inter-Agency Group to receive wider recognition, the aim will be to summarize periodically (if possible, annually) the main findings on the key indicators in a report.

### *7. Consult with countries*

A consultation process will be undertaken routinely to explain to interested countries the methodology by which these estimates are arrived at to promote a better understanding and to allow countries to review and comment on the results. This process will lead to revisions in estimates and will help build capacity. In addition, such a process is also expected to lead to countries making more data sources available for inclusion in the calculations.

### *8. Advise on education questions in surveys*

A longer-term objective, based on the experience to be accumulated and the gaps identified, may also be to help mobilize greater standardization in how education questions are asked in surveys (e.g. extending the work that the UIS and the International Household Survey Network have carried out in the past).

### *9. Incorporate information from administrative data*

Once a clear process has been established for producing estimates and reporting on indicators using survey data, another longer-term objective of the IAG will be to gradually incorporate information from administrative data in order to enrich the estimates (especially on out-of-school rates) and produce series that are consistent across data sources.

## **Benefits for countries**

While the establishment of an Inter-Agency Group is an initiative led by the organizations involved and will help improve the more efficient and consistent use of available data, it is ultimately intended to support countries to monitor the new education agenda within the framework of the SDGs. In particular:

- As a consequence of the absence of standardized methods of processing and reporting the data, there is currently uncertainty in countries concerning their progress towards international goals, especially with respect to equity. The work of the Inter-Agency Group will help clarify the methods to be used to report on equity-related education indicators.
- The consensus on methods will be used to guide capacity building efforts in countries in a coherent way and will make it more likely to attract funding for programmes aimed to build capacity, notably in ministries of education, to analyze, interpret and use disaggregated data in education. Regional workshops will be a mechanism for peer learning.

## **Membership and governance**

It is proposed that as lead UN agencies, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, UNICEF and the World Bank are the founding members of the Inter-Agency Group.

Once the basic premises and directions of this proposal are agreed among the member organizations, the next step will be to agree on *Terms of Reference* based on this proposal, as well as an indicative workplan of activities for the first two years. They will nominate a representative and will meet once or twice a year to discuss progress and next steps, including work-sharing arrangements. In addition, they would agree on the cost of the activities and possible mechanisms of sharing or fund raising.

In addition, it is proposed that an *Expert Group* be formed consisting of independent specialists from research institutions with technical expertise in related areas, to validate the methodologies, help identify data sources and advise on future developments. The Expert Group would meet once or twice a year.

## Risks

In order for the Inter-Agency Group to proceed there will need to be clear support by the member agencies in the form of a willingness to work towards the goal, release personnel time, and allocate financial resources, where necessary, to help achieve the objectives. An agreement on the Terms of Reference will be used to ensure the commitment of the agencies and their respective responsibilities.

The Inter-Agency Group will also need to be accepted by countries, which – in their vast majority – are less prepared to recognize survey data for reporting on measures of education access, participation, completion and attainment. The strategies to be employed should include transparency in the methodology used and – to the extent possible – consultation to receive feedback and help build understanding of the approach.

## Indicative list of next steps and timeline

Indicative date	Activity
April 2016	First meeting of Inter-Agency Group to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss the concept note</li> <li>• Agree on Terms of Reference</li> </ul>
May 2016	Second meeting of Inter-Agency Group to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agree on key education indicators for harmonization and common reporting</li> <li>• Exchange and review methodologies employed by respective agencies</li> <li>• Agree on harmonizing methodologies for producing estimates for key indicators</li> <li>• Discuss potential data sources other than DHS and MICS and methods of sharing</li> <li>• Identify members for an Expert Group</li> </ul>
June-November 2016	Implementation of agreed harmonized methodologies to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process DHS and MICS data since 1990</li> <li>• Process other national household survey data since 1990</li> </ul>
November 2016	First meeting of Expert Group / Third meeting of Inter-Agency Group
December 2016- April 2017	Development and implementation of methodology to consider approaches to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Derive smooth time series for key education indicators from multiple data sources</li> <li>• Derive population sub-group estimates</li> </ul>
May 2017	Fourth meeting of Inter-Agency Group
June-August 2017	First draft of report on selected education indicators
November 2017	Second meeting of Expert Group
December 2017	Publication of report on selected education indicators