

Capturing adolescent realities in the global data revolution

Silvia Guglielmi*, Eric Neumeister, Nicola Jones, Arwyn Finnie, Albert Motivans, Emma Samman, Jacqueline Gallinetti, Miriam Temin

*s.guglielmi.gage@odi.org

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (SG, EN), ODI, London SE1 8NJ, UK (NJ, ES); Girls Not Brides, London, UK (AF); Plan International, Woking, UK (JG); Equal Measures 2030, Seattle, WA, USA (AM); Population Council, New York, NY, USA (MT)

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The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's call to leave no one behind has brought a renewed focus on vulnerable populations historically overlooked by researchers and policy makers. Key to this inclusive mission is generating "data which is high quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location".ⁱ Halfway to the endpoint of the Agenda 2030, tracking of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) has revealed substantial gaps in data on adolescence, despite increasing recognition that the ages of 10–19 years are a crucial life stage for accelerating progress against poverty, inequity, and discrimination.ⁱⁱ ⁱⁱⁱWe outline challenges in generating robust adolescent-specific SDG data and identify approaches that can deliver the age-disaggregated and sex-disaggregated data that are crucial to tailoring policies and interventions to improve adolescent wellbeing across domains.

The minimal focus on adolescents in the SDGs is disproportionate both to their share of the global population (16%; 1.3 billion) and to the cognitive, emotional, and social importance of the second decade of life.^{iv} Fewer than 10% of the 231 SDG indicators explicitly require disaggregation of data by age, which has left critical gaps, especially regarding the health needs of adolescents and their opportunities to express voice and agency. Young adolescents (10–14 years) are particularly overlooked within SDG data.^v Data collection efforts usually use a wide youth age range of 10–24 years or put adolescents into broad child age bands (0–17 years), which risks overlooking issues specific to adolescents. This is problematic because physiological, cognitive, and socioemotional development progresses rapidly during adolescence (especially early adolescence, because of the onset of puberty). Intra-adolescent age differences are also pronounced for risk behaviours; for example, sexual activity and substance use are most prevalent in older adolescents.^{vi} Despite calls for globally standardised age-disaggregated health data to shed light on adolescent lives and increase comparability across contexts, these standards have yet to be implemented universally.

If the SDGs are to drive tangible change in the lives of adolescents, alternative data collection methods must be integrated into SDG reporting to make priority concerns visible and should include approaches that ask adolescents directly about their experiences, opinions, and beliefs on sensitive topics, such as sexual violence, child marriage, female genital mutilation or cutting, and their experience of gender-responsive curricula and teaching in schools.^{vii} We highlight data collection tools that give insights into the lives of adolescents but rarely feature in the UN SDG Indicator Database:

- Longitudinal studies, including those that blend quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods data, can provide insight into the social and structural determinants of adolescent wellbeing over time and identify what type of policies and programmes work to support adolescents at distinct developmental junctures.^{viii} Data from longitudinal studies are important in the data revolution required to meet the SDGs by offering long-term evidence on adolescents, including information about the structure, breadth, and timing of interventions that tackle multidimensional complexities. Ongoing longitudinal studies include the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence programme, which oversamples marginalised adolescents to improve understanding of the intersectional vulnerabilities experienced by adolescents with disabilities, ever-married girls, young mothers, those who are not in school, and refugees; the Global Early Adolescent Study, which looks at adolescents aged 10–14 years in diverse countries across income status; and Young Lives, which includes an oversampling of low-income areas across countries.
- Nationally representative quantitative surveys compile a broad range of monitoring indicators on the basis of population-based samples, but generally do not have enough of the regional or contextual insights that qualitative data contribute. Collecting qualitative data for small populations (eg, adolescents with disabilities) or rare events (eg, fertility in 10–14 year olds) can be expensive. Although the Demographic and Health Survey and Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey are primary survey data sources for the UNSDG Indicator Database, the Violence Against Children and Youth Survey is a representative household survey for adolescents and young people aged 13–24 years, rather than the household heads, and measures multiple forms of violence. This survey measures indicators explicitly related to SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 16 on promoting just, peaceful, and inclusive societies, disaggregating findings by age, sex, and other social characteristics. Although the data from these indicators would be useful for understanding adolescent experiences of violence, they are not included in the official SDG database.
- Adolescent-led participatory data collection reflects the shift to meaningfully engage adolescents in identifying core issues affecting their lives and how to more effectively deliver solutions.^{ix} Two solid examples of this approach include ActionAid’s COVID-19 research led by girls and the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence study’s participatory method that actively involves married adolescent girls and refugee adolescents with peer-to-peer interviews, photography, and videography, identifying psychosocial vulnerabilities and pervasive gender inequalities.⁹ Self-reported data use technology with crowd-sourced, large-scale platforms, offering real-time data analysis, such as UNICEF’s U-Report, which enables adolescents and young people to talk about the issues that matter most to them, empowering them to engage with citizen decision-making processes.^x Because participants must have access to the internet to participate, the results have been found to over-represent urban and wealthier adolescents with access to smartphones and the internet, but new methodologies can help correct for this bias.

Although the SDG database is not sufficiently disaggregated to guide what works for adolescents globally, complementary datasets can facilitate a deeper understanding of the complex constructs that are the focus of the Agenda 2030. Longitudinal mixed-methods data, domain-specific surveys, and participatory tools can help to highlight the

underlying dynamics of household survey data, and should thus contribute to the SDG measurement ecosystem on adolescent wellbeing. Capturing adolescent realities from multiple datasets could involve bringing data into a single, easy to access, open data portal, and examining how different datasets can be effectively combined. The resulting evidence will highlight priority areas for existing policies and programmes as adolescents transition into early adulthood and beyond. The world's largest-ever generation of adolescents deserves as much.

ⁱ UN Statistics Division. Guidelines for the global data structure definition for Sustainable Development Goals indicators. New York: UN Statistics Division, 2021.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Patton GC, Sawyer SM, Santelli JS, et al. Our future: a *Lancet* commission on adolescent health and wellbeing. *Lancet* 2016; 387: 2423–78.

^{iv} UNICEF. Adolescents. 2022. UNICEF. <https://data.unicef.org/topic/adolescents/overview/> (accessed May 20, 2022).

^v Guglielmi S, Jones N. The invisibility of adolescents within the SDGs. Gender and adolescence: global evidence. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence, 2019.

^{vi} Diaz T, Strong KL, Cao B, et al. A call for standardised age-disaggregated health data. *Lancet Healthy Longev* 2021; 2: e436–43.

^{vii} Jones N, Presler-Marshall E, Małachowska A, et al. Qualitative research toolkit to explore child marriage dynamics and how to fast-track prevention. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence, 2019.

^{viii} Dunn K, Banati P. Strength in numbers—how longitudinal research can support child development. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, 2015.

^{ix} Ozer EJ, Piatt AA. Adolescent participation in research: innovation, rationale and next steps. Innocenti research briefs. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, 2017.

^x UNICEF. U-Report. Evaluation of innovation in UNICEF work case studies. New York: UNICEF, 2019.