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CHILD-CENTRED APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN HIGH-INCOME COUNTRIES: CONCEPTUAL ISSUES AND MONITORING APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was agreed upon globally through a long political process. By ratifying its Declaration, high-income countries became accountable participants in the development process while retaining their obligations as donors. Although few of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are explicitly child-focused, children are mentioned in many of the 167 targets. Drawing on a well-recognized socio-ecological model (SEM) of child development and a life course perspective, this paper proposes an analytical framework to help navigate through the SDG targets based on their relevance to child well-being. The application of this framework in thinking through policy options illustrates the interdependence of SDGs and their targets within a sector (vertically) and across the 17 Goals (horizontally). A five-step process for choosing measurable SDG indicators links the proposed analytical framework with the challenges of SDG monitoring. The paper contributes to debates on the implications of the SDGs for children by facilitating their adaptation to the national context through a ‘child lens’. The proposed analytical approach helps to articulate a context-specific theory of change with a focus on human development outcomes, so that public investments inspired by the SDGs bring tangible results for children.
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1. INTRODUCTION

A child born in September 2015 – when world leaders adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets – will turn 15 in 2030, a benchmark year for the achievement of the SDGs. These children should be the main beneficiaries of actions to realize the just world vision to achieve equality, sustainability and empowerment, since they are the generation who will take the SDG agenda forward into the post-2030 era. What kind of world and opportunities will be available for today’s children a decade from now will depend largely on policy efforts that governments and their partners put in place starting today. The SDGs and more broadly Agenda 2030 provide a framework for global action and thus a remarkable opportunity to work collectively towards better outcomes.

Essentially, the SDGs are about progress realized by government actions, often conducted through inclusive partnerships with multi-sector stakeholders. Despite some inevitable limitations and ambiguity in the formulation of some targets (Vandemoortele, 2015) and the lack of overarching objectives (Constanza et al., 2016), the SDG framework is seen by many as a step up from the eight goals and 18 targets of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This is due to its holistic approach to development and a focus on an inclusive agenda of ‘leaving no one behind’ (United Nations, 2013; Osborn, Cutter and Ullah, 2015). The universality of the SDGs is arguably the biggest leap forward and the SDG framework is distinct from the MDGs in that it was adopted by both rich and poor nations. As much as it is a celebrated development of international efforts, one cannot underestimate the challenges it poses to the policy process in high-income countries.

Governments in high-income countries are expected to provide support to meeting the humanitarian and development needs of low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) alongside their own efforts to implement the national socio-economic agenda within their domestic political context. In order to promote human development globally, governments and their partners have to reconcile these different roles and bring policy coherence through institutional mechanisms and practices that enhance integral implementation of SDGs (OECD, 2017) – both at home and overseas. Years of austerity policies and constrained public spending in some countries, for example, have forced many governments to reassess social priorities reflected in many SDGs and associated targets. This could result in adopting a ‘mix and match’ strategy of SDG implementation. This is not necessarily problematic, as long as human development and social objectives remain as important as economic and environmental concerns. In this paper, we argue that one way to ensure this is to put children at the heart of this process.

The aim of this paper is to make a case for a child-centred approach to the SDGs, which draws on the global commitment to respect, protect, promote and fulfill children’s rights as outlined by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). This paper contributes to the broader debate on SDGs in high-income countries by providing a conceptual approach to adapting the 169 SDG targets to domestic policy through the lenses of child well-being and well-becoming. It draws on the nested structure of the widely recognized socio-ecological model (‘SEM’) formulated by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994) and the life course perspective of human development (Elder, 1974; Elder and Rockwell, 1979) to highlight how child-specific SDG targets are embedded also in actions formulated at the family, community and policy levels. It does so through a non-exhaustive mapping of selected SDG targets on the ‘SDG wheel’ (see Figure 2, Section 2.1) with child outcomes at its core. It also recognizes the cross-cutting nature of a number of SDGs and their targets such as gender
or inequality. The socio-ecological perspective underscores the links between the SDG targets horizontally (across 17 goals) and vertically (under one goal). This conceptual approach directs policy focus to human development outcomes as the ultimate policy objectives, with equity and empowerment as integral parts of the policy development process under the SDG framework.

Previous attempts to provide a transparent methodology to analyse different SDGs and related targets within the context of developed countries (Osborn, Cutter and Ullah, 2015; Nicolai et al., 2015; Sachs et al., 2016) have not incorporated a child focus as their analytical foundation. However, an academic and policy debate is emerging, which aims to understand the implications of the sustainable development agenda for children. For example, Dornan (2017) discusses trends and challenges of meeting SDGs and targets with respect to child poverty in LMICs. A more practical guide to achieving a global vision of ending child poverty within the SDG framework was offered by the Global Coalition to End Child Poverty and UNICEF (2017). Caprani (2016) discusses the advances made by the sustainable development agenda with respect to children’s rights, equity and inequality as compared to MDGs. Minujin and Ferrer (2016) review key SDG characteristics in the context of the child rights movement, including the World Summit for Children and the Convention on the Rights of the Child with a focus on social accountability, local action and children’s voices as engines of progress.

Relevant to the discussion in this paper, UNICEF developed the ‘landscape’ of SDGs for children (UNICEF, 2016a), which operationalized the SDGs in connection with the UNICEF priority areas and strategic plans. This framework consists of four rings, each representing a specific level of the SDG agenda and its implementation within the UNICEF mandate. UNICEF (2016b) has also developed a mapping of the global goals against the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It offers an innovative way of cross-linking each sustainable development goal with the relevant CRC article and vice versa. The mapping takes a broad interpretation of the Sustainable Development Agenda, connecting the expected direct outcomes in each target with associated child-related issues.

The analytical framework presented in this paper differs from these operationalizations of SDGs in two important ways. Firstly, it applies broadly to all SDGs, even those that do not contain a reference to children. Moreover, by incorporating a life course perspective, it adds an important temporal dimension to a child-focused operationalization of SDGs. Secondly, it links conceptual ‘mapping’ of SDG targets with issues of SDG implementation and monitoring. Taking a broader, non-institutional approach, our framework might appeal to an interdisciplinary audience of experts and policy advocates who are interested in further adaptation of the SDG framework to the national context.

The paper is structured as follows: Part one outlines why a child-centred lens is essential for SDG progress and how we can apply it. It draws on the ideas of the socio-ecological model as an appropriate child-centred development perspective and summarizes evidence to date that shows its applicability to child outcomes highlighted by the SDGs. Part two operationalizes a child-centred SDG framework by linking SDG targets to a socio-ecological model with examples that categorize targets according to four levels of environmental influence. Part three applies the child-centred SDG framework to the policy development process and proposes evaluative criteria for selecting SDG indicators that are consistent with this approach. The paper concludes with a summary and key messages.
2. THE IMPORTANCE OF A CHILD LENS FOR ACHIEVING THE SDGS

2.1 Definition of a child-centred approach to development

The term ‘child-centred approach’ requires some clarification as its connotations vary in the literature and across different policy contexts. In pedagogy and areas related to early child development, it is used to describe teaching and caring processes in which children’s needs and interests are given the highest priority. This approach stresses every child’s right to education, with appropriate attention given to universal stages of development. It recognizes a child as a unique individual who is treated with respect and consideration in regard to age, gender, culture, temperament, etc. The approach also enables children to voice their concerns and participate actively in the learning process (Morrison, 2009). This concept of the child-centred approach is also applied in child protection, particularly in reference to safeguarding practices. There it is understood as the system in which everyone recognizes children and young people as individuals with rights – including the right to participate in the process of making decisions about them – in line with their age and stage of development (Munro, 2011). Thus, it draws more explicitly on the rights of the child as formulated by Convention on the Rights of the Child, underlying children’s agency and their roles in their families and communities, including rights as well as responsibilities. More specifically, the child-centred protection framework should “examine how social workers understand the child’s journey from needing to receiving help; to explore how the rights, wishes, feelings and experiences of children and young people inform and shape the provision of services, and look at the effectiveness of the help provided to children, young people and their families” (ibid, p: 49).

‘Child-centredness’ has received its share of criticism, partly on the basis of its apparent neglect of the family and the broader cultural environment. It has been pointed out that the concept might be insensitive to the cultural diversity of family practices (Woodhead, 2006) or be grounded in an essentially Western notion of childhood in which children historically have not been embedded in community practices (Fleer, 2003). Fleer (ibid) argues that although children are placed at the centre of early childhood development (ECD) curricula, infants and toddlers in Western communities are given toys and materials that do not relate to the real world or are detached from the day-to-day activities. This is in contrast to many non-Western cultures where “children are a part of the adult world – spaces and places are not created, but rather learning is viewed as embedded in everyday activity” (p.67). This paper adopts a broader ecological perspective of child development formulated by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994) as an analytical tool that extends beyond the sectoral boundaries of early childhood education or child protection. The emphasis here is on public actions to achieve better child outcomes through the interlinked influence of family, community, policies and institutions.

For the purpose of this paper we define a child-centred approach to sustainable development as a rights-based policy process which:

- recognizes childhood as a critical stage of the human life cycle requiring enhanced public investment;
- acknowledges direct and indirect (e.g. through the family) impacts of all policy actions on child well-being throughout the progressive stages of child development;
- assesses the SDG progress in the context of countries’ success on child-specific as well as child-relevant indicators; and
d. underscores the importance of children’s voices and participation in the process of social and civic development.

These are general, mutually reinforcing principles that can be extended or complemented depending on policy objectives and societal context.

2.2 Why should the SDG agenda focus on children?

Age locates an individual within a social structure (Elder and Rockwell, 1979), which affects evolving opportunities, risks and constraints. The timing of public action over the human life cycle determines the extent of individual outcomes and, consequently, the effectiveness of public investments. It is non-controversial to say that the well-being of children today translates into the well-being of adults tomorrow. This is because prevention or ‘front-loading’ strategies ensure effectiveness and higher returns on public investment (OECD, 2009, 2015).

There are many compelling reasons to put children at the centre of the SDG agenda. Firstly, childhood has been recognized as an appropriate stage for policy focus on normative and moral grounds given that governments have committed to realizing children’s economic, social, political and cultural rights to the maximum extent possible under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. For example, formulating the multidimensionality of child poverty as violations of children’s rights is one concrete example of the rights-based approach applied to policy practice. Secondly, alongside addressing family and community needs, public investments at an early stage of human development are justified based on purely economic and social grounds due to expected wider benefits to individuals and society at large. In the context of developed countries, investments in children are often seen as the most cost-effective way to break the cycle of disadvantage and promote social mobility (European Commission, 2013) or as a vehicle for strong and inclusive growth (OECD, 2016a).

Childhood is a time of rapid development, increased risks and also enormous opportunities. A wealth of evidence suggests that public returns on investments in children are high, particularly when policy ensures that the most disadvantaged children are benefiting from the provision (Sylva et al., 2004; Heckman, 2006; Rees et al., 2012). The effects of ECD programmes are a good example. High-quality ECD programmes produce long-term improvements in school success and school attainment; some are also found to be associated with reduced delinquency and crime in childhood and adulthood (Barnett, 2008), better employment chances and higher earnings (Heckman et al., 2010; Engle et al., 2011). High-quality educational provision is a cost-effective way to address the intergenerational transmission of socio-economic disadvantage and has the potential to alter developmental trajectories as well as protect against risks (Doyle et al., 2009). These findings support the theory of life cycle skills formation under which fundamental skills acquired in early years produce and foster skills later in life (Heckman, 2008). Health interventions throughout children’s lives are also shown to be among the most effective ways to receive high returns on public investments (Rees, Chia, Anthony, 2012). Comprehensive support of children’s health enables the prevention of ill health, disability and early death (Laxminaryan et al., 2006). For example, an analysis across 62 LMICs shows that even a small reduction in child deaths can boost economic growth (Grimm, 2010).

1. Here we refer to Article 4, which relates to the allocation of public resources.
The cost of ‘leaving children behind’ can be high. Every Child a Chance Trust (UK) estimated the
costs to the national economy and public that arise from failure to master basic skills taught in the
primary school years to be between £198 million and £2.5 billion every year (Every Child a Chance
Trust, 2009). This contrasts with social benefits of alternative actions. Using econometric simulation
techniques, OECD estimated that bringing all low-performing students to a level of minimal
proficiency would imply aggregate GDP increases for the OECD countries of close to US$ 200 trillion
in the present value based on historical growth relationships (OECD, 2010).

The rationale of putting children at the heart of the SDG agenda also includes practical considerations
that reflect a growing demand to monitor how children in rich and poor countries are doing within a
multidimensional, child-specific framework (Richardson et al., 2017). Immediate concerns of economic
capacity, environmental sustainability and social progress can be debated and addressed in terms
of the general population. Yet, the overriding equity and equality agenda of SDGs is inseparable
from the concerns about how society treats, supports and includes children and young people in
the community over the next fifteen years or so. By focusing on the well-being of children and the
opportunities available to them in society, SDG policy efforts will allow governments to achieve many
SDG targets faster and in more cost-efficient ways.

2.3 How the environment and public action affect children

Child development, needs, behaviour and outcomes are embedded in a wider environment and policy
context. Ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) describes a nested, socially organized
structure of micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems or ‘levels’ – such as family, neighbourhood,
policies and institutions – which influence individual growth and development. Figure 1 illustrates
this framework for the selected examples of themes prominent within the SDGs. What distinguishes
this approach from other developmental theories is its attempt to explain how all the environmental
influences on child development are related to each other (Bee and Boyd, 2007). Bronfenbrenner
stipulates two main propositions. Firstly, from early years to later stages of the life course, human
development happens through progressively more complex reciprocal interactions between a child
and his/her immediate environment, referred to as proximal processes. Secondly, the power, form,
content and direction of the effect can vary systematically as a joint function of a) the characteristics
of the developing individual; b) the proximity of the immediate (e.g. family) and more remote
environment (neighbourhood or institutions) in which the process takes place; and c) the nature of
developmental outcomes in question (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Children’s and young persons’ experiences resulting from the interactions at each level of social
hierarchy play an important role in determining their chances or opportunities in society. The family
is seen as the filter through which the larger society influences child development. As such, the family
has a dual role in helping society to socialize its members but also serving as a buffer against harmful
elements or risks.
The original theory was extended through a Process-Person-Context-Time Model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998) to give special importance to the time dimension, which emphasizes the importance of building human capital and skills for the future. Different fields and disciplines adapted the framework that is commonly known today as the Social-Ecological Model (SEM). The key advancement made by, and the reason for a wide applicability of, the ecological theory is its ability to integrate and conceptualize the environment and its influence on human behaviour and outcomes (Richard, Gauvin and Raine, 2011). The conceptual coherence and flexibility of this model are helpful for the task of navigating through comprehensive but often disconnected SDG targets by providing guidance on how these targets relate to children’s developmental needs, healthy growth and protection from harmful practices.

At the time of its introduction, the ecological theory enjoyed support from a comparatively small range of relevant research (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Today, the nested structure of environmental influences offered by SEM has been applied and tested in a variety of disciplines and research fields using advanced econometric methods such as multilevel modeling. Below, we briefly review findings of some systematic studies on the direct and indirect influences of the micro-, meso- and macro-environments on child outcomes relevant for the SDG framework.

*Child nutrition (Goal 2)*

A study across 65 countries showed that children’s nutritional intake and anthropometric status can be influenced by both individual parental behaviour and the quality of their care input, household food security and healthy environment, as well as community-level factors such as cash transfers and services (Smith and Haddath, 2002). Yet despite continuous research efforts, evidence to date on the influences of community and institutional factors is inconclusive, showing at best modest direct effects. For example, the analysis of child stunting in Nigeria showed that low literacy, unemployment and poverty rates at the community level can have a modest positive association with stunting (Adekanmbi, 2011). A meta-study on the link between childhood obesity – a nutritional outcome
more relevant for developed countries – and population-level interventions aimed at preventing and reducing obesity among children aged 5 to 18 showed modest effects (Cauchi, 2016). Although there is solid evidence showing a positive impact of conditional and non-conditional cash transfers on food security and dietary diversity in beneficiary households (e.g. Adato and Basset, 2009), the effects on child nutrition are mixed (Leroy et al., 2009; Manley et al., 2012; Owusu-Addo and Cross, 2014). The lack of conclusive evidence across a range of countries and studies does not negate the influence of wider factors on child nutrition; however, it probably points to a more nuanced and not so well understood mechanism between child nutrition and a wider range of contextual factors. For instance, a recent review of the literature examining the effects of cash transfers on child nutrition points to the role of programme design (size and longevity of the transfer) and suggests a lack of good understanding of the pathways from policy provisions to child nutritional outcomes (de Groot, 2015).

Health behaviour and outcomes (Goal 3)

The role of factors at the macro- and meso-levels for health outcomes is usually examined through the angle of socio-economic inequalities. The macroeconomic context contributes to social disparities and stratification in the society at large and to the socio-economic conditions of communities and families. This, in turn, determines individual susceptibility to environmental risks and conditions ranging from ambient air quality to housing conditions, access to services of high quality and/or individual awareness of health issues (WHO, 2010).

Empirical evidence is generally supportive of the links. A systematic review found a statistically significant association between the infant mortality rate (IMR) and income inequality reported in ten studies; a relationship between IMR and other indicators of less redistributive social and economic policies in six studies; and a positive relationship between low birth weight and income inequality in three other studies (Spencer, 2004). Income inequality, measured by the Gini index, was found to have a direct influence on the use of alcohol and drunkenness among 11- and 13-year-olds after adjustment for sex, individual-level family affluence and country-level GDP per capita in 34 countries (Elgar et al., 2005). Similarly, income inequality was found to be associated with higher levels of peer violence (school bullying) perpetrated by both male and female 11-year-old children in 35 countries (Elgar et al., 2009). Both studies indicate that wider socio-economic environment and nation-wide distributional policies can affect children and young people’s behaviour independent from family socio-economic status (SES) or neighbourhood context.

Population-wide policies were shown to have a ‘trickle down’ effect on health outcomes. A meta-analysis of 11 studies showed that smoke-free legislation (local and national bans on smoking in workplaces, public places or both) was associated with substantial reductions (by 10 per cent) in preterm births and hospital attendance for asthma among children (Been et al., 2014). A systematic review of 33 studies based on multilevel modelling showed an independent association between the socio-economic characteristics of a neighbourhood (e.g. household income level) or built environment (including residential density, land use mix, number of leisure and sport facilities etc.) and individual-level health outcomes and health-related behaviour (Schüle and Bolte, 2015). Moreover, the majority of studies in that review found cross-level or within-level interactions between the macro- and meso-level factors and individual and household characteristics such as sex, ethnicity or family SES.
**Education (Goal 4)**

A wealth of evidence shows that drivers of early child development, students’ achievement and education-related outcomes are multilevel, encompassing individual, family, community and school factors as well as national policies. The influence of family socio-economic background (often measured by parental education, occupation status, income poverty or a combination of these measures) on academic achievement in school is well recorded in different disciplines (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997; Goldthorpe, 2004; Jerrim, 2012; Sullivan et al., 2013; Singh, 2015). However, a similarly large body of literature examines the ‘school effects’, which can be defined in terms of school location (urban-rural), the socio-economic composition of the school body, resources within the school, standards of teaching, governance structure and system-wide policies such as sorting of potential students into different school streams or groupings (OECD, 2004; OECD, 2016b).

A systematic review of evidence found consistent positive effects of school-level policies, a good school climate, high average socio-economic status, and urban location on a range of pupil outcomes including school achievement (Sellström and Bremberg, 2006). On average across OECD countries, 37 per cent of variation in students’ performance in mathematics in the PISA 2012 assessment was explained by differences between schools (school characteristics) and 63 per cent by differences within schools (socio-demographic profile of students) (OECD, 2013).

Community characteristics also matter. A recent study covering 21 LMICs pointed to the relative importance of local community characteristics, which explained 36 per cent of the total variation in preschool uptake compared to a 12 per cent contribution at the country level. The community-level poverty rate and malnutrition were particularly important in explaining inter-country differences in preschool attendance (Delprato et al., 2016).

Evidence on the role of an enabling (policy) environment such as public spending on education is more nuanced. While the lack of investment in school infrastructure and other resources can be detrimental for school outcomes, there is little evidence that the relationship has a linear progression once the system reaches a certain minimal level of quality (Hanushek, 2003; Wei, Clifton and Roberts, 2011; OECD, 2016b). Although money alone cannot lead to improved educational results, more investment seems to contribute to more equitable outcomes. For example, a study examining the role of macro-structural factors in explaining the academic performance of immigrant youth across 24 developed countries confirmed the increasing positive and independent role of educational spending (per student) on immigrant students’ performance over the last decade (Riederer and Verwiebe, 2015).

Educational studies also show synergies between the different child outcomes, pointing to their interdependence and the importance of comprehensive policy approaches. A recent analysis of systematic reviews showed positive effects of school policies to engage students within the school environment on reducing smoking, drinking alcohol and drug use (Shakleton et al., 2016). A systematic review of 141 studies conducted in 40 developing countries found that comprehensive interventions, designed to include income and parental support, early stimulation and education, as well as nutrition and health, generally have positive results on children’s cognitive development (Rao et al., 2014). While comprehensive programmes might make it difficult to disentangle the observed effects, the complementarity of policies and interventions is what seems to make them successful. So far, this section has discussed evidence on how meso- and macro-level factors can affect children. However, it would be an oversimplification to present the flow of influence under an ecological, child-
centred perspective as unidirectional. Sociologists and child psychologists have long recognized the importance of child effects and agency. Child effects are commonly defined as “reactions of parents or adults to child characteristics” (Bell and Chapman, 1986, p. 595) or as the influence that children have on parents (Russel and Russel, 1992). “Attitudes, behaviours and relationships are part of an ongoing process” (Lytton, 1990). On the one hand, this perspective recognizes a child as an individual with his or her own preferences, expectations and interests within the family unit. On the other hand, it acknowledges the child’s dependence on parents’ behaviour, resources and actions. Underscoring children’s agency is critical for a child-centred SDG framework – particularly in the context of Goal 17 – as it entails the recognition of children’s and young people’s active participation and voices in the community and civic action.

3. OPERATIONALIZATION OF A CHILD-CENTRED APPROACH TO THE SDGS USING THE SEM

3.1 Framework and its assumptions

The presented operationalization of a child-centred approach to the SDGs is based on a few underlying assumptions that are important for any further policy discussion or model application. These are:

- Progress on any SDG targets must meet the standards and provisions of UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in advancing towards realizing children's rights with measurable outcomes for child well-being; this can be seen as the overarching objective of sustainable development for children.

- Change can happen at different stages of child development. While the importance of early childhood is recognized, there are other ‘windows of opportunity’, such as adolescence, where policy intervention can make a lasting difference;

- Policy action can affect children directly and indirectly through family welfare, social relationships, as well as the institutional and regulatory framework;

According to the socio-ecological model, there are four nested, hierarchical levels in the child-centred SDG framework: individual (child outcomes); family resources and interpersonal relationships; community and neighbourhood; and the enabling environment. In line with earlier SDG-related documents (UNICEF, 2015; UNICEF, 2016b), we make an explicit assumption that all 17 goals and 168 targets can, at different levels, contribute to child well-being and ‘becoming’ in the society. Without any attempt to be a comprehensive matrix of all adopted targets and indicators, Figure 2 offers a conceptual sample of a ‘child-centred SDG wheel’ using the socio-ecological model. Numbers within this SDG wheel represent a selected but not exhaustive list of SDG targets, such as Target 1.3 or 1.2 under Goal 1: No Poverty. These are further discussed as examples in the section following the figure. It should also be recognized that this mapping might not capture the full extent of the cross-cutting nature of some SDGs and their targets. We attempt to touch upon this issue using the example of gender analysis in Section 2.3.
Child-centred SDG Level
Description

Level I.
Individual:
Child outcomes

This level relates to individual characteristics and, importantly, agency. Change is achieved in and influenced by individual characteristics, including physical characteristics (e.g. malnutrition, stunting), psychological condition (e.g. mental health), prior knowledge, attitudes, gender, age, racial/ethnic identity, etc. This level can include SDG targets that explicitly aim at achieving progress in child and adolescents’ outcomes and behaviours.
The most direct links here are with Goals 2, 3 and 4 (nutrition, health and education) – although individual targets within these goals can be related to systems and institutions and, in other words, may be relevant for other levels of the model. Reaching these outcome targets is a litmus test for high-income countries’ progress on child well-being and human development in general.

**Level II. Family conditions, resources and interpersonal relations**

The family is the most important micro-system of child development throughout childhood and adolescence. Family (broadly defined beyond the nuclear unit) is a child’s immediate supportive environment with its own system of interpersonal relationships. This level also reflects formal and informal social networks, including peer and other relationships within school and care institutions (including gender as social relations).

It is widely recognized that poverty is a complex phenomenon (Tomlinson and Walker, 2011) that has an effect on child outcomes later in life (Waldfogel, 2013). Child poverty in all its forms and dimensions is the result of economic and social circumstances beyond a child’s control. Material and non-material resources interact with a child’s individual characteristics and relationships to influence the outcomes. Therefore, it is appropriate to place Goal 1 (Targets 1.1 and 1.2) within level II. Other examples include Goal 2, Target 2.1 (food insecurity) as this relates to family resources, as well as Target 5.2 in Goal 5 (intimate partner violence) or Target 16.2 in Goal 16 (experience sexual violence and physical punishment) as these directly reflect a concern about the interpersonal relationship aspect of childhood.

Reducing child poverty is the most critical and transformative SDG target at this level. Achieving progress in income and addressing multidimensional child poverty and deprivation is one of the top priorities for high-income countries under the SDG agenda as it will have the most direct and extensive impact on a range of child outcomes. The relationship aspect of this level is equally important. Violence against children often occurring within a child’s immediate environment is linked to wide-ranging child outcomes in health and well-being. It is increasingly seen as one of the top policy priorities in high-income countries under SDG 5.

**Level III. Community and neighbourhood**

Interactions and relationships with various social actors, groups, institutions and informational networks within a defined boundary (village, community centre, etc.) influence child outcomes and experiences directly (e.g. through youth civic engagement, availability of local jobs, environmental conditions such as the quality of water and air, etc.) and through the family and peers. Examples can include family access to local services, availability of psychosocial support and the safety of the neighbourhood, among others.

Examples of SDG targets that can be placed at this level include Goal 3, Target 3.7 on universal access to sexual and reproductive health care services; Goal 4, Target 4.2 on access to quality childcare; Goal 11, Target 11.2 on access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport for all; and Goal 11, Target 11.6 on reducing the adverse environmental impact of cities such as air pollution.
Level IV.
Enabling environment: Policies and Institutions

Level IV, often referred to as the macro-system, encompasses the setting that does not directly interact with an individual but enables and influences the functioning and behaviours of various societal actors and groups. This level includes local, regional, national and global laws and policies, including those related to the allocation and redistribution of resources for families and children. The latter puts in place an incentive structure for behavioural change (laws on the legal age for alcohol consumption, smoking in public places, conditionality attached to welfare assistance, among others).

Macroeconomic policies of sustainability are often perceived as some of the most ‘transformative’ challenges among SDGs (Osborn, Cutter and Ullah, 2015) for developed countries. Goal 1, Target 1.3 on the implementation of appropriate social protection systems and measures for all and Goal 10, Target 10.7 on facilitating orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people are some of the targets operating at this macro-system level.

This process of ‘populating the SDG wheel’ depends on the task at hand and sectoral or thematic need but, importantly, it reinforces the focus on outcomes related to child (human) well-being as our ultimate policy goal.

3.2 Incorporating the life course

Human development over the life course is a cumulative and continuous process. Each sub-stage of early child development is built upon a chain of progressive milestones. For example, the psychological resilience of adolescent youth might be derived from skills in self-regulation acquired in earlier periods of childhood. Compensating or ‘catching up’ on specific skills, knowledge and conditions is not always a possibility for children and it poses a particular challenge for adults.

Incorporating the life course perspective – a multidisciplinary approach to studying individuals through social context and change (Elder, 1974; 1998) – into the child-centred approach to SDGs can ensure continuity of policy efforts and investments at critical stages of the child life course.

Few SDG targets are formulated with age-specific boundaries (Goal 2, Target 2.2, which is related to stunting among children under five, is one of the exceptions). Yet global indicators to monitor progress provide more specific age points for particular behaviours or outcomes (for example, Goal 4, Target 4.2: childcare attendance between ages 2 and 3 and compulsory school age).

There are different approaches to categorizing stages of childhood depending on the disciplinary or sectoral affiliation and the policy or programme focus and purpose. For example, child psychologists follow Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, which refers to the sensory-motor stage (0–2); preoperational stage (2–7); concrete operations (7–11); and formal operations (adolescents-adult) (Bergen, 2008). A broader categorization of early years (0–6); middle years (7–10); early adolescence (10–14) and youth (15–18) is often used to describe the stages of development relevant for social integration and relationships (e.g. associated with stages of education). A more granular categorization of adolescence can be applied in programmes that aim at addressing health and social issues relevant to this group of children and young people, for example: (9–12) pre-adolescence, (13–15) early adolescence, (14–17) middle adolescence, (17–19) late adolescence, (19–22) youth, (22–24) young adulthood. But even these are rather approximate categorizations as the developmental stages may vary between boys and girls (Breinbauer and Maddaleno, 2005).
Despite some variation in definitions and measurement, the core idea is that needs, behaviour and participation of children in the community and society are evolving at each critical stage of development. For example, certain periods are particularly important for children and young people to assert agency, gaining confidence in taking action and making decisions on the range and scope of activities they choose to engage in. This changes the relationships in their environment. For example, attachment to parents or primary caregivers is the strongest in the early years of life, so proximal influences will dominate over those in more remote environments (Holmes, 1993). In contrast, interactions with peers and other adults in school and neighbourhood become more frequent and meaningful during adolescent years, implying a decreasing influence of the family environment.

Any age boundaries have to be adopted with some critical assessment of the context including cultural and social norms, traditions and socio-economic constraints. The age at which children start helping around the house or family business can vary by the type of settlement (rural vs. urban) and the level of socio-economic development. In terms of policy implementation, imposing an age categorization is often difficult due to underlying normative assumptions as well as to statutory requirements that such categorization inevitably involves. In terms of policy monitoring, data availability at the child level is another challenge that often leads to a more aggregated life course approach.

3.3 Gender analysis

Sustainable development can produce different outcomes for men and women, and respectively, for boys and girls. Moreover, gender equality achieved for women reinforces equality for girls (UNICEF, 2006). Here we understand gender equality as a social and relationship process, shaped by a cultural context and norms, that leads to a difference in outcome between the two sexes. We recognize that boys can be equally affected by domestic violence or sexual abuse and have higher risk of low academic performance (Bruckauf, 2016; OECD, 2012), school repetition (Eurydice (2010) and suicidal behaviour (WHO, 2014). SDG 5 reflects this broad interpretation of gender (Magar, 2015) underlying a number of critical issues, ranging from intra-family dynamics and distribution of unpaid work to spousal or partner violence against girls and women, violence by caregivers and extended family members, equal opportunities in access to public services, access to economic resources and empowerment. Although Goal 5 is specifically dedicated to this theme, its aspiration is cross-cutting, applied to all areas of child well-being and over the whole span of childhood.

The conceptual flexibility of the socio-ecological perspective has enabled its numerous applications, including those in the study of violence against women and girls (Heise, 1998; Itzin et al., 2010; Maternowska and Potts, 2016). However, its suitability for other areas of gender analysis such as power relations is debated (Locker et al., 2014). Formulated in gender-neutral terms, SEM certainly sees gender as an important child attribute that is associated with a differentiated parental, family or community response and that is, in turn, shaped by societal norms and attitudes. The relationship aspect is enacted through interactions between a child and his/her immediate and community environment. It could be argued that the dynamic nature of the relationship aspect of gender during childhood is mediated by age, economic status and cultural norms. In other words, gender is an important ‘child effect,’ but a particular country context determines the scale and significance of this effect.

In the context of high-income countries, the challenge is to go beyond the measures of access to services (health and education) since these economies already achieve higher levels of equality.
between boys and girls compared to low- and middle-income economies. There are complementary areas in which gender inequality requires further analytical scrutiny. For example, in order to address the burden of unpaid work and care borne by women, we need to understand the timing and dynamics of gender stereotyping taking place in the family, examined through children’s own contribution to household chores. Gender division of roles, responsibilities and resources in application to children could be a proxy of reproduction and reinforcement of societal norms relating to gender equality. This is an example of gender-sensitive analysis at the level of ‘Family Resources and Interpersonal Relationships.’ Another potential area of gender analysis as applied to children in high-income settings is disparity in adolescents’ and youth’s participation in activities outside formal educational settings including civic and community activities. This could be linked to the important SDG target on the NEET rate\(^2\) under Goal 8, which is attributed to the ‘Community and Neighbourhood’ level.

Overall under the child-centred framework, gender – along with age – is a factor that interacts with each environmental level of influence under the SEM framework. It means that policies addressing macro-environment, community participation or family welfare have to anticipate, mitigate and account for gendered outcomes as well as institutional and individual responses. This requires going beyond collecting gender disaggregated statistics in order to understand the nature and drivers of diverging gender trajectories over the life course.

### 4. APPLICATION OF THE CHILD-CENTRED APPROACH TO POLICY PRACTICE

#### 4.1 Relevance for SDG implementation

Compared to the MDGs, the SDG framework is seen as being more connected through the ‘network’ of targets, allowing better integration in terms of strategies, policies and implementation (Le Blanc, 2015). A child-centred approach based on a socio-ecological framework provides an anchor that serves as a normative checkpoint for policy. Placing a social problem related to children in the institutional context helps to identify drivers and consequences of policy actions. This in turn stimulates the development of a theory of change making it possible to prioritize policy responses to the SDG agenda at a different level of the institutional hierarchy.

*Vertical integration of policy response (within a single SDG target)*

Applying child-centred lenses to a specific social problem targeted by an SDG enables us to think through a policy problem in a structured manner – thereby disentangling the core social issue from factors that contribute to it and the range of outcomes/consequences that could be expected in the status quo. The SEM framework reinforces policy planning by identifying individual, household, community and other macro levels of intervention, defining the role of governments and provisioning linkages with a wide range of actors outside the formal public system (parents and children, volunteer organizations, and business and community leaders, among others). This approach facilitates a more systematic and transparent analysis of the main actors and providers involved in solving a particular social problem.

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2. NEET stands for young people not in education, employment or training.
To take a specific example, we examine Target 2.2, under Goal 2 ‘Reduce Hunger’. The target aims to “By 2030 end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving by 2025 the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under five years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women, and older persons.” In high-income countries, obesity is becoming an alarming and highly relevant issue. It reflects children’s and young people’s malnutrition involving both over- and under-nutrition. The latter is likely to be caused by poor diet quality as well as food insecurity. Obesity is a complex problem that extends beyond a single domain of nutrition or health. Under a child-centred SDG framework, this target can be formulated under Individual level I. Therefore, we analyse provision policies and interventions ‘outwards,’ from micro- to macro-systems. Figure 3 gives non-exhaustive examples of public interventions targeted/delivered at each level of SEM, linking them to the governance structure and potential partners (stakeholders), including children.

Figure 2: Child-centred approach to SDGs, based on a socio-ecological model through the life course

- Individual child level: providing children and adolescents with comprehensive information on benefits of healthy eating/risks of unhealthy eating habits, sugar content of food, etc.; providing training in on-road cycling;

- Family level: building parental/carer awareness of healthy/unhealthy diets through home visits; promotion of breastfeeding;

- Community level: providing infrastructure for active leisure and physical activities (sport and leisure facilities, green spaces for active play and sport); stipulating requirements for the providers of school meals on food content; and

- Policy/Institutional level: applying standards for the nutritional value of school meals, regulations on monitoring sugar content in soft drinks and regulations in the context of school curricula in respect to physical education, science, food technology; guiding choice through incentives (promoting cycling, walking to school and other initiatives).

Responsibilities related to performing a policy function can be distributed among different levels of government. Generally, the decision about which level of government should be the service provider is guided by the criteria of subsidiarity, the existence of negative or positive externalities,
type of function (e.g. redistribution), the economies of scale (efficiency) and administrative capacity. In addition, one can take into account cultural values, country size and diversity (Morse and Struyk, 2006). In our case of policy interventions to prevent obesity, the regulatory role of setting up curricula (for instance, to make adjustments in physical education and/or science subjects) is likely to remain at the national/federal level. Yet, it will depend on the degree of decentralization in the educational system, the size of the private/volunteer sector and the institutional capacity of schools. For example, private companies can be contracted to supply school meals and volunteer or non-profit organizations can become involved in the provision of sport equipment and extra curricula sport activities on school premises or provide support to parents through counselling, information sharing, etc.

In the same way that functions can be distributed between different levels of government, they can also apply to different private and non-governmental actors. Political and practical considerations often drive the distribution of roles between different stakeholders. Typically, the government retains full regulatory responsibility, but can contract out certain functions related to delivery, maintenance, administration or evaluation of the service. For example, ‘Call to Action on Obesity’ launched by the UK government in 2011 charged local areas with developing strategies and commissioning services but also strongly supported partnerships with the private sector and community groups with the overall shift towards more locally led actions and greater co-production with partners such as food marketing or social advertising (Jebb et al., 2013). In the context of the child-centred approach, it is imperative to treat children, adolescents and youth as active participants of this process. They can be consulted at all stages of evidence collection and policy implementation with sufficient consideration given to their views on the social problem in question.

Another example could be an outcome, which is formulated at the community and neighbourhood level. Target 4.5 under Goal 4 calls for: “By 2030, 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.” The target is highly relevant for the context of high-income countries, particularly regarding the most vulnerable groups of children and youth. Educational interventions rarely work in isolation from system-wide reforms. For example, in 2010, the Estonian government passed an amendment to the Pre-school Act of 2000 which obliged local governments to provide childcare services where there is a shortage of places in municipal care (legal entitlements to childcare services). To ensure wider access for children with a disadvantaged background, the cost to the family was capped at 20 per cent of the minimum wage (OECD, 2016b). These regulatory efforts were reinforced by local (school level) provisions for children with special educational needs: All children attending preschool childcare institutions in Estonia received guaranteed access to a speech therapist and special education teachers. These services are provided by regional counselling centres (non-profit organizations) which receive state financial support (Republic of Estonia, Ministry of Education and Research, 2014).

The framework can also be applied to the SDG targets, which we earlier ‘mapped’ to the level of policies and institutions, such as Target 10.7 under Goal 7: “Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies.” This target addresses the need for the regulatory framework – an enabling environment – to facilitate the integration of migrant children and their families within the host country. In designing policy alternatives for this target we have to think ‘inward’ – from the macro outcomes to the needs of an individual child. Policies that are aligned with this goal might be inefficient if they do not support and facilitate the integration of immigrant children, young
people and their families in the community and neighbourhood through fair access to educational, health, legal and other services. The regulatory framework can also be supported by targeted social assistance to the family and young people themselves, including cash transfers, psychological support, language support and other individual and family-level interventions. Each of these policy actions would require a separate detailed analysis of appropriate roles and responsibilities for the government, its partners and other interested parties.

**Horizontal integration of services and provisions**

Social interventions become increasingly more complex and integrated across sectors. Interventions that link cash transfers with service provision – known as ‘cash plus’ mechanisms – have gained wide support in LMICs (Roelen et al., 2017) and are on the rise in developed economies (Richardson and Patana, 2012). Evidence from industrialized countries indicates that such cross-cutting strategies can be effective in addressing multiple and overlapping needs of the most disadvantaged children and adolescents. However, their implementation is challenged by existing administrative and institutional divisions and entrenched sectoral practices (OECD, 2015). For example, integration of care and early education services was found to be associated with high quality provision, which in turn leads to a significant and continued positive effect on child outcomes and progress (Sylva et al., 2004). Studies also showed that integrated early childhood settings may be particularly beneficial for children with multiple risk factors (Penn et al., 2004). Evidence from developing countries indicates that complementing cash transfers with services can strengthen the positive effects of transfers on a whole range of individual outcomes (Bastagli et al., 2016). Some global linkages between SDGs have already been noted in the literature (Vladimirova and Le Blanc, 2015; Le Blanc, 2015). However, their integration in policy practice will likely depend on the political will to adopt an integrated approach, existing institutional structures relevant for a particular policy problem, as well as the administrative capacity for implementing closer coordination and collaboration with partners. A child-centred approach can arguably facilitate analytical efforts to find synergies, complementarities and trade-offs between different policy targets and outcomes linking SDG targets to specific policy contexts.

We can draw on our first example of preventing obesity discussed in the context of ‘vertical integration’. Analysing this policy problem from the point of horizontal interconnectedness enables us to discuss drivers and consequences of this complex problem. Figure 4 shows the relationship of this issue to other goals.

- **Goal 1:** Poverty and related food insecurity (SDG 2) are factors associated with child malnutrition. We can hypothesize that low income negatively affects access to quantities and quality of food provision in the household. Meanwhile, low levels of parental education (associated with low SES) can contribute to unhealthy eating habits through a lack of awareness of the nutritional value of food items and the importance of a diverse diet. Moreover, food insecure households are likely to be budget conscious (low-quality meals cost less) and engage in coping strategies that substitute regular meals with low nutritional value but high calory food items.

- **Goal 3:** Child obesity is a health issue as it is a factor exacerbating other health problems during childhood and later in life. Therefore, the health system has a preventive as well as treatment functions in respect to this issue. Poor information, public health services or a lack of early diagnostics in the community or educational institutions can fail children and young people at early stages of malnutrition. Equally, the consequences of not addressing obesity
among children and young people might be the future cost of treatments. As such, the influence (an arrow in the graph) goes in both directions.

- **Goal 4:** Education is one of the key mechanisms and access points for many interventions in this area; it has a very direct link to the obesity target.

- **Goal 11:** Sustainable cities. Availability, quality and accessibility of green spaces, leisure and sport facilities could be a precondition for preventing obesity among children. The provision of infrastructure supporting an active lifestyle ensures sustainability of intended outcomes.

In summary, integration of provision between health (Goal 3) and educational (Goal 4) sectors would be the most obvious first step in managing obesity in children and young people. Yet without addressing the community level, structural conditions that deal with availability of green spaces, leisure, sport and outdoor play facilities (Goal 11), the progress may be limited. Linking socio-economic data on poverty and social exclusion with evidence on health outcomes such as obesity is vital for the design of more targeted interventions or wider support networks.

**Figure 4: Example of vertical and integration of policy action**

Successful application of a child-centred approach to implementation practice depends on effective utilization of data and evidence to understand and account for the pathways that link specific child outcomes to environmental and contextual factors. This enables the evaluation of policy actions on SDG targets through a systematic examination of direct as well as indirect pathways from SDGs to child outcomes, thus providing a rationale and motivation to advocate for the further integration of policy actions across the SDGs and their targets.

### 4.2 Measuring progress: Choosing indicators

Challenges related to the monitoring of global, thematic, regional and national SDG indicators have been widely discussed within the global community and relevant UN agencies (UN Statistical Division, 2016). A recent UNICEF report (2017) also highlighted critical gaps in the availability of child-
related data and indicators. Yet, the development of a shared measurement framework as well as the adaptation of the proposed indicators to national needs and contexts is still a work in progress. To make a child-centred approach to SDGs useful for policy it has to be translated into a rigorous system of measurable indicators that are collected and reviewed on a regular basis. This process can be presented as a five-step progression:

■ **Step one:** Preliminary selection of child-specific but also child-relevant indicators. The former are measured at the child level (neonatal mortality, the proportion of adolescents reporting regular drinking, NEET rates, etc.). The latter implies indicators related to all three levels of environmental influence – family, community and the enabling environment – and may be measured at those levels. Examples include child poverty rates (family level), or air pollution weighted for the child population living in urban areas (community).

■ **Step two:** At the next stage, it is important to understand and agree on the level of governance covered by the monitoring framework: global, regional, national, subnational or a combination of these. Though whatever the governance level, the value of the SDG framework lies in its global accountability and the opportunity for national governments to compare their performance to that of their neighbours, regional or economic partner countries or other selected groups. Therefore, in the next step, we focus on the process of selecting child-centred SDG indicators for comparative analysis. The main principles still apply if taken within a national or subnational context.

■ **Step three:** Choosing evaluation criteria. Criteria are the measurable dimensions of SDG targets. Some SDG targets are defined broadly, include multiple components and could aim at global as well as national efforts. Different targets within a goal and even different components of a single target can potentially be presented as complementary policy actions that may compete for public funds. A government might consider whether to prioritize the implementation of sub-target ‘A’ over sub-target ‘B’ or consider that both are equally important. For example, Target 3.5 under Goal 3 addresses substance use, which includes narcotic drug abuse as well as the harmful use of alcohol. Although the prevention measures at the population level might be similar (information campaigns on the harmful health effects), these two issues are likely to require a different set of policy measures aimed at overlapping but not identical groups of young people. Thus, an indicator cannot combine these two issues into one aggregate measure. We need an objective way to compare and make decisions on the final selection of appropriate indicators linking those decisions to policy priorities and availability of funds. By setting rules for comparing measurable policy options (indicators), evaluation criteria help to narrow down the scope and clarify the objective.

In the most general terms, criteria might reflect not only the national and regional policy relevance but also the administrative and technical feasibility of data collection and monitoring. Many technical and research reports produced to date by UN agencies and independent organizations have used a range of evaluation criteria. For example, UNESCO (Technical Assessment Group) proposed five criteria: *relevance* (the most critical issue of any policy agenda); *alignment* (with targets); *feasibility* (availability of data on a regular basis); *communicability* (should be easily understood and should lend themselves to a clear narrative about the progress); *interpretability* (values and how these change over time must be easily understood). Osborn et al (2015) proposed criteria that include *applicability*
(relevance and suitability for the developed country context), implementability (can it be done if reasonable resources are allocated) and transformational impact (it matters and requires a significant increase in the level of political and societal ambition and policy action).

A range of criteria could be adapted from those mentioned above to meet the focus on children and young people. Examples might include but are not limited to:

**Relevance:** Does the indicator directly concern child well-being in high-income countries? This could be reflected in high prevalence and/or a negative trend. How problematic is it if this target is not reached in the developed countries in terms of child well-being (wide-ranging negative impact)? The issue of obesity vs. stunting discussed above could be an example of the higher relevance of one target over another for high-income countries. Equally, equity in access to preschool programmes may be a more relevant concern for high-income countries than universal access to primary or secondary schooling.

**Data availability and quality:** Is high quality data with adequate coverage available? Does it meet necessary standards regarding representativeness, comparability, accuracy and frequency of collection (enabling regular monitoring)? While some issues of child well-being might be evaluated highly under the ‘relevance’ criterium, they may fail the test against ‘data availability’ in either the national or cross-national context. This might, for example, be the case for Goal 5, Target 5.2 (sexual and physical violence against girls) or Goal 3, Target 3.3 (promoting mental health).

**Communicability:** Is the indicator itself easily explained and conceptually clear to policymakers and the general public? Is its interpretation meaningful for policy action? Do the reported figures clearly convey the extent of progress in the country on a given target? Some SDG targets introduce concepts that are complex and might be measured in a myriad of ways. Examples include ‘ensuring equal opportunities’ under Goal 10, Target 10.3. Unpacking the concept would require an indicator that would rule out misinterpretations, but also offer a clear policy message. In this case, ‘reducing the impact of family income or wealth on school achievement will improve the educational outcomes for young people’.

**Policy attainability:** This criterion implies responsiveness to policy intervention: Is progress on the indicator realistic within the time frame of the SDGs? Can the indicator be easily translated into action at the national level? This might depend on the political climate and the structure of governance. For example, tackling violence against children (Goal 16, Target 16.2) might require a coherent policy intervention at the family level but also a consistent long-term effort in changing cultural norms and attitudes towards disciplining children.

**Alignment with global targets and indicators:** Is the indicator a good match for the proposed global target or indicator? Does it reflect the spirit and intent of the corresponding SDG and target? Global indicators were proposed to ensure global accountability of all countries. Yet, a lot of SDG groundwork will happen at the national or subnational levels. While adaptation is unavoidable and even desirable in specific contexts, it is important that national indicators retain the spirit of the SDGs. For example, Target 1.2 under Goal 1 calls for a reduction by at least one half in the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions. To measure multidimensional deprivation at the regional (e.g. EU) or international level would be a deviation from the original SDG target of devolving the measure to the national level. However, while not in full alignment, it would still be in the spirit of this target.
Although criteria are typically assigned an equal weight, trade-offs are inevitable. While some indicators can emerge as leaders early on by scoring high on all chosen criteria, others could be highly relevant but associated with poor availability of data. The child-centred approach based on SEM can help prioritize criteria through consultations and policy debate. For example, if an indicator is at the individual level (e.g. neonatal mortality, school achievement), relevance, non-discrimination and equity might be given higher consideration. At the family level (e.g. reducing multidimensional poverty), communicability might be of greater concern. At the community and neighbourhood level (e.g. air pollution) or enabling environment (e.g. well-managed migration), the considerations of political feasibility and policy attainability might be assigned higher priority.

**Step four:** Evaluation of indicators against chosen criteria. Assessment of all proposed indicators against the set of relevant criteria involves a consultative process with all key stakeholders. The evaluation process requires certain judgment involving the interaction of values and social philosophy (Bardach, 2000) with practical considerations of narrowing the policy focus. The process should be based on consultation and cross-checking by experts to minimize potential bias. Budgetary plans, often linked to political agenda and time frames, can have their own bearing on the criteria selection process. Each SDG and target can have more specific criteria matching the sector context such as education or environment. Keeping this in mind, the set of criteria discussed above are not ‘set in stone’ standards but rather appropriate general considerations when one takes a child-centred view of the SDGs.

**Step five:** Assessment of all risks and potential unintended consequences resulting from the focus on a set of chosen indicators. The most obvious risk is that we lose sight of other important objectives and issues that do not receive enough scores to be selected under the chosen criteria; for example, if there are currently no available data on violence against children and we cannot include it in the list of indicators. This does not make it less critical for child well-being. In this case, we would need to suggest actions that would provide a continuing public discussion and support governments’ efforts on data collection.

Selection of child-centred indicators is an important process, which is interlinked with policy implementation and the discussion of policy priorities. The aspiration should be to make this process as objective as possible to avoid political dismissal and lack of stakeholder support. The significant public investments that are required to support data collection and analysis are another reason for giving this process sufficient consideration.
5. CONCLUSION

The sustainable development agenda is a vision and shared commitment to building a prosperous and fair future for all. The child-centred framework proposed by this paper facilitates a more inclusive and, arguably, more direct way of measuring a country’s performance against this vision. The contribution of this paper is to offer an analytical tool that facilitates the monitoring of sustainable development progress for children and supports efforts in adaptation of the global targets to national contexts based on the principles of equity and rights. The value of the child-centred approach can be summarized as follows:

- **Conceptual coherence with a focus on child well-being.** A child-centred framework keeps a continuous focus on child outcomes, behaviours and needs. It shows that governments can put children’s interests and their rights at the core of the national policy agenda without undermining, but rather reinforcing, broader social, environmental and economic objectives of the SDG agenda. By integrating ecological and the life course perspectives, the framework supports continuity of policy process and public investments over different stages of child development.

- **Towards a theory of change.** By mapping SDG targets onto the nested structure of environmental influences, we work towards a theory of change with a clear social objective. Understanding the hierarchy of influence and the interdependence of each level is essential for realistic and evidenced-based monitoring of public policies that are focused on children. A child-centred approach to SDGs fosters further investigation on the links between policies, practices and child outcomes, the mechanisms through which ‘ecology’ works and how the change happens in a specific context.

- **Integrated view on policy process.** The framework facilitates an integrated view on policy development, thereby translating the multidimensionality of child well-being into policy practice. Policies under the SDG framework will not work in isolation. Any child-specific or child-relevant problem has to be considered in the context of other policy actions designed and implemented in individual, household, community and wider institutional contexts. The child-centred approach can facilitate this analytical process.

- **Flexibility.** Thanks to the adaptability of the socio-ecological model, a child-centred approach shows flexibility in adapting to a variety of national, sectoral or thematic contexts and needs. It is an analytical tool that complements rather than substitutes the rigorous data collection and child-focused evidence generation required for effective SDG monitoring.

This paper has suggested a roadmap for navigating through numerous SDG targets with an overarching focus on making the SDGs relevant for domestic policy agendas through a child lens. The child-centred approach is not a magic bullet. However, it may make it easier to advocate for policy change with a strong focus on the rights and interests of children and young people. As an analytical device rooted in ecological and life course perspectives, this approach helps to operationalize a broad range of SDG targets, linking them to social problems that directly or indirectly affect children and young people. This may help to ensure that public investments inspired by the SDGs bring tangible results for children up to 2030 and beyond.
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