



# NATIONAL SDG 4 BENCHMARKS

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS FORWARD

---

FEBRUARY 2024

**2024** CONFERENCE ON  
**EDUCATION DATA  
AND STATISTICS**

## INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the UN Secretary-General synthesis report on the follow-up and review of the SDGs called on Member States to ‘embrace a culture of shared responsibility, one based on ... benchmarking for progress’. The education community acted on this advice in 2015, when the Education 2030 Framework for Action (§28) called on countries to establish ‘appropriate intermediate benchmarks’ for SDG 4 indicators, seeing them as ‘indispensable for addressing the accountability deficit associated with longer-term targets’.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report, which are mandated by the Education 2030 Framework for Action to jointly monitor progress towards SDG 4, took the lead in supporting countries to set their national SDG 4 benchmarks, in other words, national targets for the years 2025 and 2030 for selected SDG 4 indicators. This paper presents the progress achieved so far, before identifying remaining challenges and the key points of discussion for an agenda forward.

## PROGRESS ACHIEVED

Three reports have documented the SDG 4 benchmarking process and provide the necessary background for this paper:

- National SDG 4 benchmarks: fulfilling our neglected commitments ([UIS and GEM Report, 2021](#)), which describes the rationale for the benchmarks and the steps taken to set these national targets.
- Setting commitments: National SDG 4 benchmarks to transform education ([UIS and GEM Report, 2022](#)), which was launched on the occasion of the 2022 High-level Political Forum and the Transforming Education Summit (TES) and provides examples of how countries set benchmarks.
- SDG 4 Scorecard: Progress report on national benchmarks ([UIS and GEM Report, 2023](#)), which is the first publication that evaluates countries’ likelihood of achieving their 2025 targets.

### National SDG 4 benchmarking process

The benchmarking process began shortly after the adoption of the SDG 4 monitoring framework by the UN General Assembly in 2017. Here are the key milestones in the process (**Figure 1**):

- In August 2019, the Technical Cooperation Group on SDG 4 Indicators endorsed seven SDG 4 indicators (Table 1). Indicators were deemed suitable for benchmarking if they met three conditions: data were available for most countries; the indicator followed a clear historical trend (from 0 to 100%) or a clear target (e.g. gender parity, minimum public expenditure) was associated with it; and the indicator was policy-relevant.
- In August 2021, building on the October 2020 Global Education Meeting declaration, which requested UNESCO to ‘propose relevant and realistic benchmarks of key SDG indicators’, an invitation was sent to countries along with supporting documentation to submit national benchmark values by 1 October 2021 for 2025 and 2030.
- In February 2022, countries that had not taken part in the process in 2021 were invited to submit national benchmark values by 31 May 2022, while countries that had already submitted benchmarks in 2021 were offered the opportunity to revise them.
- In September 2022, the UN Secretary-General recognized in his vision statement at the Transforming Education Summit the importance of the benchmarking process for monitoring both SDG 4 and the Summit’s new commitments. In 2023, an eighth benchmark indicator on school Internet connectivity was added to capture the priority assigned to digital transformation, while work is underway on benchmark indicators on greening education and youth participation.

**Figure 1: Timeline of the SDG 4 benchmarking process**



**Table 1: SDG 4 benchmark indicators**

Basic education	4.1.1 Minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics
	4.1.2 Completion rate
	4.1.4 Out-of-school rate
Early childhood	4.2.2 Participation in organized learning a year before primary education
Equity	Gender gap in upper secondary completion rate
Digital transformation	4.a.1 Proportion of schools with access to internet for pedagogical purposes
Quality	4.c.1 Teachers with minimum required qualifications
Finance	1.a.2 Public education expenditure as share of GDP
	FFA Public education expenditure as share of total government expenditure

## Coverage

National SDG 4 benchmark values have been compiled from three sources (**Figure 2**):

- Benchmarks submitted directly by countries (64%): Of those, some were previously set in national education sector plans and others were set in response to UNESCO's invitation.
- Benchmarks submitted in coordination with two regional organizations' education agendas (10%): the Caribbean Community and the European Union have regional targets for selected indicators, which overlap fully (Caribbean) or partly (Europe) with the SDG 4 benchmark

indicators. Some member states chose to submit national targets, while others preferred to commit to the regional targets.

- Benchmarks extracted from national sector plans and related documents (14%): Given that the objective of the national SDG 4 benchmarking process is not to request countries to set new targets but to compile existing targets, some gaps were filled by consulting national documents.

The benchmark indicator for which most countries have set a target is the early childhood education participation rate (149 countries, or 72%). The benchmark indicator with the lowest coverage is the gender gap of the upper secondary school completion rate (48 countries, or 23%), despite the fact that the upper secondary school completion rate has the second highest coverage rate (136 countries, or 65%). All countries are supposed to have agreed minimum targets for the public expenditure indicators in the Education 2030 Framework for Action (15% of total public expenditure and 4% of GDP).

**Figure 2: Participation in national benchmarking process**



For every submission, values were checked in terms of:

- Consistency between the 2015 baseline and the latest value (including consistency between different indicators, e.g. out-of-school and completion rates, but also within indicators across levels).
- Data source (e.g. whether learning benchmarks were set based on values derived from comparable cross-national assessments).
- Methodology (which affected mostly the early childhood participation rate, the out-of-school rate and the completion rate).

### Monitoring

The SDG 4 Scorecard report uses two approaches to evaluate progress towards national targets:

- The first approach assesses the probability that a country will reach its benchmarks. Of seven categories envisaged, four capture the speed of progress during the last five years – and its implication for the probability of achieving the benchmark – and three recognize the non-availability of data or benchmarks (**Table 2**).
- As benchmarks vary in their degree of ambition, countries that have set more ambitious national targets may be held to a higher standard than others. The second approach, therefore, monitors countries relative to where they would be expected to be ('feasible' benchmarks), taking into account the historical progress rates of all countries observed between 2000 and 2015.

**Table 2: Country classification of progress relative to national SDG 4 benchmarks**

Category	Description
Fast progress	>75% probability that 2025 national benchmark will be achieved given the latest value (including countries which have already achieved the benchmark or are close to 100%)
Average progress	25–75% probability that 2025 national benchmark will be achieved given the latest value
Slow progress	<25% probability that 2025 national benchmarks will be achieved given the latest value
No progress	Negative progress
No benchmark	
No data for trend	
No data	

For expenditure indicators, countries are classified according to the availability of data and whether they have achieved one, both or none of the minimum benchmark values to which they committed in 2015.

### **Purpose**

The national SDG 4 benchmarking process in education is characterized by the following key elements, which draw on the text of the Education 2030 Framework for Action:

- *Ambition*: Benchmarks should be set at a level that entails progress faster than what would have been achieved without extra effort ('strive for accelerated progress').
- *Fairness*: Benchmarks should be set relative to countries' starting points ('taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development').
- *Ownership*: Benchmarks should build on national and not external processes ('translate global targets into achievable national targets based on ... national ... plans').
- *Learning*: Benchmarks should have a formative purpose, to be achieved through peer learning ('Country-led action will drive change').
- *Accountability*: Benchmarks should lead countries to take responsibility for delivering improved education outcomes ('indispensable for addressing the accountability deficit associated with longer-term targets').

National SDG 4 benchmarks aim to capture the contribution of each country to the global education goal (as Nationally Determined Contributions do in the climate change agenda) and draw attention to the fact that, within a global process, all countries should be evaluated on their progress given their starting point.

## **CHALLENGES**

While the national SDG 4 benchmarking process has been maturing, it still faces challenges.

### **Missing benchmarks**

Although most countries have submitted national targets, many of those countries have only submitted national targets for some and not all benchmark indicators. Likewise, there are many countries that are yet to participate in the national SDG 4 benchmarking process. There are several reasons behind this:

- The process is still new. While there has been technical support to countries, more intensive communication is needed to drive the political process that supports benchmarking.
- Target setting is a political process. Not all countries are accustomed to it. It is particularly novel in an international context, and especially in education.
- A country may not have a target for a particular indicator or may have a target for dates other than 2025 and 2030.
- For some countries, some benchmark indicators are less relevant for policy as they may already have been achieved for all (e.g. universal primary completion in rich countries).

### Quality of benchmarks

In many cases, the quality of submitted benchmarks could be improved. There are several reasons behind this:

- National targets may indicate a level of ambition that is too high or too low (e.g. even below the baseline and/or latest values).
- Countries use a different definition of the benchmark indicator than the official one:
  - The calculation methodology of the indicator used by the country was either not documented or was different from the UIS methodology.
  - The country may not have data that distinguish lower from upper secondary education.
- Countries use a different data source for setting national SDG 4 benchmarks than the source they have used for reporting on the SDG 4 indicator. For example, they may be using:
  - Household survey data instead of administrative data
  - National instead of cross-national learning assessments.
- Countries are unfamiliar with setting targets for some benchmark indicators. They may:
  - Not be measuring the indicator in the first place.



- Be measuring the indicator but not have experience of setting a target for it (e.g. the gender gap).
- Be measuring the indicator but not have a good sense of how fast the indicator progresses (e.g. learning)
- Only public institutions are covered in national plans and targets.
- The requested disaggregation is not available for a benchmark indicator (e.g. it may not be possible to distinguish qualified teachers in lower and upper secondary schools).

### Monitoring progress

The SDG 4 Scorecard provided the first account of progress towards the 2025 national targets. A summary:

- Benchmark setting varies by indicator and is still low for some indicators.
- Benchmark progress reporting depends on data availability, which remains low for some indicators, especially in terms of estimating trends since 2015.
- Data for some benchmark indicators are only available every at least three years.
- Even when regular data exist, data updates are made twice a year and progress reporting takes place once a year, which means results may only be available with a lag.
- Even when data exist, average progress is overall slow and the classification of countries by rate of progress can be highly sensitive to small variabilities in the observed data.
- The methodology for classifying countries has been communicated but is still new to the countries.
- There has been insufficient information communicated to countries.
- No mechanism has been established yet for countries to seek clarifications and contest the assessment of progress toward their national targets.

## AGENDA FORWARD

The challenges described in this paper show that improved coordination and stronger communication are called for. Some solutions will result from progress made during and after the conference, notably with respect to:

- Clarifications on indicator definitions
- Clarifications on data sources
- Improved data availability on the benchmark indicators
- Improved national sector plan target setting.

Other solutions will require progress in areas directly related to the benchmarking process:

- A sustained **communication** campaign to familiarize ministries of education and the general public with national SDG 4 benchmarks as a new way of monitoring progress in education. This campaign will include improvements to the GEO website, which is the official repository for documenting benchmark values and progress.
- The introduction of a **process** giving countries the opportunity to receive transparent updates on the assessment of their progress and to contest, seek clarifications or propose corrections to this assessment.
- The introduction of a **process**, building on the current structure of the SDG 4 Scorecard, that systematically links assessment of progress to the monitoring of laws and policies that help explain slow or fast movement towards the achievement of national targets.