

Strategies Supporting the Sustainable Development Goals: A Policy on Health and Environment with its Impact Analysis

SHUCHI MEHRA

*Associate Professor and Incubation In charge, Meerut Institute of Technology
E-mail: shuchi.mehra@mitmeerut.ac.in*

Abstract: From education to working conditions, from income to discrimination, social determinants of health (SDH) shape the majority of health outcomes. Governments are often best positioned to address the major SDH on a population-wide basis. By 2030, governments around the world will be committed for improving all core SDH when all countries have agreed to improve education, work, income, and equal opportunity, among other areas, in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Using data from the WORLD Policy Analysis Center, this article highlights how quantitative policy measures can be used to hold governments accountable for their commitments to the SDGs and thus to improve the SDH. Three areas are examined in detail to illustrate this approach to monitoring policy change: ensuring an adequate income, enhancing equal opportunities at work, enabling children and youth to complete their education.

Keywords: Policy, Social Determinants of Health (SDH), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

BACKGROUND

The SDGs strong commitment to address the social determinants of health, alongside strengthening health care systems, is especially critical because research has shown that the social determinants of health account for up to 60% of variations in health status. Income is especially a strong driver of health, determining whether individuals and families can meet their basic needs.

Government action at scale is one of the most effective ways to make progress on the social determinants of health. Policy decisions shape individual's access to quality education, opportunities to earn a decent income, and the environment in which they live. Policy actions at scale also have the ability to amplify or hinder the efficacy of targeted small-scale programs and interventions. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has highlighted the impact that these decisions have on people's day-to-day lives, health, and economic security.

To accelerate progress on the SDGs, stakeholders at all levels need access to data on which policy approaches countries have taken, in which areas individual countries and the global community as a whole are advancing, where they are falling behind, and which approaches have been feasible in different settings to reduce poverty. By monitoring national action, we can rapidly identify where countries legal frameworks reduce poverty and advance health as well as where they contribute to worsening inequality and increasing disease morbidity and mortality. At the same time, these data provide a powerful tool to identify feasible solutions from countries facing similar circumstances Using advanced statistical methods, national-level policy data can be paired with harmonized household-level outcomes to assess the impact that policies have on income and population health, all while controlling for confounding factors. Together, these tools support more informed investment decisions by government budget offices and

multilateral and philanthropic funds. This evidence can also inform rapid decision making in the context of public health and economic crises. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the urgency for evidence-based approaches as countries around the world are responding to balance public health and the economy by passing a range of temporary policies to protect population health, income, and economic security.

In this article, we demonstrate a method for monitoring progress in the passage of national policies and the enactment of laws to realize SDG commitments. Given the importance of the social determinants of health in shaping health disparities, particularly for income, this article focuses on measuring progress on policies that matter to income, inequality, and health. We focus on the social determinants of health, given the large role that income plays in shaping overall health and given the urgency of addressing income during a time of global economic downturn. A critical first step to monitoring progress is creating a baseline for national action in key areas. This baseline can then be updated over time to evaluate national progress. The creation of quantitatively comparable indicators also enables analysis of the impact that policy changes have on outcomes using harmonized household survey data and quasi-experimental techniques. This article builds on past work demonstrating the value of global mapping of constitutional rights, laws, and policies as one component of progress related to international agreements.

A lack of paid sick leave coverage for workers in precarious and nonstandard employment is also a particular problem globally that exacerbates existing inequalities for workers who often have the fewest financial resources to handle income reductions during illness. Globally, more than two billion workers are engaged in informal employment, which includes self-employment. Yet, only 42% of countries explicitly guarantee paid sick leave benefits to self-employed workers. The problem is particularly acute in low-income countries where only 7% of countries extend explicit benefits compared with 67% of high-income countries. Women constitute some of the

world's poorest workers and are also more likely than men to be working part-time. Only about one-third of countries globally (34%) explicitly guarantee paid sick leave to part-time workers. This gap is an especially critical concern during economic downturns, when underemployment becomes a more common problem as workers' hours are reduced. Youth often have the fewest financial resources to fall back on during times of illness and are also more likely to have worked in jobs for a shorter period of time owing to unemployment or schooling. Thirty-six percent of countries explicitly exclude workers with one month of tenure from paid sick leave benefits. This legal gap creates additional challenges for protecting public health during a time of job insecurity that is likely to have lifelong impacts on youth's future economic opportunities. Research also suggests that policies promoting more gender-equal leave-taking by men, whether by reserving leave specifically for men or providing incentives for men to take leave, can promote more gender equality in care giving. Moreover, paid maternity and paternity leave laws contribute to shifting societal norms about work toward greater gender equality and lead to greater equality in decision making.

Discrimination at work is a persistent problem globally that impacts individuals' income and resulting health. Callback studies have documented disparities in whether equally qualified individuals are invited for an interview across gender, race, religion, age, and social class. Regression analysis has identified pay gaps across gender, motherhood status, race/ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation that cannot be explained by other factors. Research evidence also demonstrates the benefit of antidiscrimination laws in reducing pay gaps. Educational attainment is foundational to exiting poverty as well as to ensuring better health. Enabling all children and youth to complete a secondary education is therefore a priority not only to achieve but also to improve health, reduce poverty, ensure that people have the education they need to obtain decent work, and reduce gender and other inequalities. Countries to "ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary

education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes". Free education is a critical piece of this target and is especially important during economic crises, given the barriers that tuition fees create for low-income households and girls' education.

Globally, nearly all countries (97%) have made primary education tuition-free through constitutional rights, laws, or policies. However, in many settings, a primary education is not enough to ensure access to jobs that earn a decent wage. While 84% of countries make the beginning of secondary education tuition-free, only 68% of countries make secondary education tuition-free through to completion. An additional 4% of countries have provisions in place to progressively realize free secondary education.

Using World Bank data on government expenditures on education, we can assess whether countries that have not made education tuition-free through to completion are already spending a large portion of their resources on education or whether they might be able to spend more. On average, countries spend 4.5% of their gross domestic product (GDP) on education. Of the 28% of countries that fail to commit to making secondary school tuition-free through to completion, at least 11 countries spend less than 4% of their GDP on education, indicating that these countries can afford to do more to make education tuition-free. However, at least 10 countries are already spending 5% or more of their GDP on education. This finding suggests that international investment may be needed to remove cost barriers to education.

Establishing a legal minimum age of marriage is an important first step to ending child marriage. It may also help shift attitudes toward and experiences of interpersonal violence, protecting women's health and keeping children from being exposed to domestic violence. A study has found that establishing a minimum age of marriage of at least 18 years old was associated with improved attitudes toward violence among both women and men and with a reduced risk of experiencing physical and sexual abuse.

Globally, nearly all countries (90%) set a legal minimum age of marriage of 18 years or older for girls. However, many countries allow for legal

loopholes that undermine these legal protections. Only 84% of countries establish a minimum age of marriage of 18 years or older under religious or customary law. Even more prevalent, just 58% of countries set a legal minimum age of 18 years old for girls to marry with parental consent. As most child marriages occur with parental consent and involvement, this loophole significantly undermines girls' protection from early marriage. Moreover, legal gender equality in the minimum age of marriage with parental consent persists in nearly a quarter of countries (25%), providing girls with less legal protection from early marriage than boys. Gender disparity in law can undermine attempts to advance gender equality in other spheres of life.

As a result, child labor has lifelong impacts on income. Using global cross-sectional data, a study found that setting a minimum age of employment of 15 years or older was associated with 9.5-percentage-point higher net secondary school enrollment rates for girls and 7.8-percentage-point higher rates for boys. Another study used household-level data and difference-in-differences analyses to find increases in school attendance in two of the three studied. Child labor's link to decreased educational attainment is reflected in poorer health outcomes in adulthood, such as chronic disease and mobility issues. Child labor is also detrimental to children's health in the short run. Child labor exposes children to work-related injuries, hazardous chemicals and materials, opportunities for abuse, and chronic sleep deprivation.

Globally, more than three-quarters of countries legally protect children from hazardous work, which is classified as one of the worst forms of child labor. However, once exceptions to the minimum age of hazardous work are considered, such as work with family members or in specific industries, only 60% of countries legally protect children from hazardous work. Moreover, nearly one-quarter of countries legally allow children aged 15 or younger to do hazardous work in certain circumstances.

Countries are similarly far behind in legally ending child labor in all its forms by establishing a minimum age for admission to employment that protects children. In Convention 138, the

International Labour Organization establishes that the minimum age for work should be at least 15 years old and not below the age for finishing compulsory schooling. Yet, only 76% of countries establish a minimum age for admission to employment of 15 years or older. Once exceptions to minimum age laws are considered, only 56% of countries legally establish a minimum age of 15 years or older for admission to employment. In nearly one-quarter of countries, these exceptions legally allow children to work without any minimum age protections.

CONCLUSIONS

This article uses globally comparative indicators to highlight an approach to accelerating progress for achieving the SDGs in general, and those goals that matter to income and health in particular, by identifying progress and gaps in laws and policies that matter to achieving these goals. It focuses on policies that matter to ensuring an adequate income, including those at the intersection of work and health (paid sick leave and paid parental leave), policies that ensure equal opportunities at work by prohibiting discrimination and sexual harassment, and policies that help ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity at jobs that earn a decent income by enabling children and youth to complete their education (tuition-free education, legal minimum age of marriage, and protection from child labor). Attention to these policies is particularly timely as countries around the world continue to grapple with how to respond to the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including balancing economic activity with reducing disease spread, supporting equal opportunities at work during a time of significant job loss (including for parents balancing work and caregiving responsibilities), and ensuring continued access to education for all children amid school closures and economic hardship.

These legal gaps have contributed to stalling progress on achieving the SDGs, and they have also left countries around the world unprepared for the public health and economic threats of the COVID-19 pandemic. Without strong policy frameworks in place that cover all workers, public health advice to stay home when sick has been

at odds with the economic reality facing many workers. Countries without paid leave from the first day of illness were among the hardest hit early on in the pandemic. During a time of job insecurity, workers around the world are left without protections from discriminatory action at work. Similarly, the economic fallout from the crisis is expected to exacerbate tough choices that poor households face regarding whether to send children to school. Without adequate protections in place, the opportunities of millions of children are at risk with lifelong impacts on economic opportunities and health.

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the tremendously important role that laws and policies play in protecting public health, economic security, and equal opportunities. This article has demonstrated the power of quantitatively comparable indicators on laws and policies to highlight progress and gaps in legal protections. By mapping country approaches, we can also rapidly identify peers or models for countries seeking to strengthen legal protections. This monitoring and research can be a powerful complement to existing efforts by the United Nations to ensure better outcome data collection, particularly for the most marginalized groups.

Accelerating progress on the SDGs will require working across silos and recognizing that improving health also critically depends on ensuring that progress is made toward eliminating poverty, expanding access to quality education, ensuring access to decent work, and eradicating inequality. Throughout, this article has highlighted research evidence that uses these quantitatively comparable indicators paired with harmonized household survey data to answer questions about which policies have been effective at improving outcomes, under which conditions, and for which groups. This type of research is critical for advancing evidence-based decision making by providing stakeholders with more information on short- and long-term benefits of policy changes to weigh against the cost of financing policies. Further research is needed to expand the evidence base on the impact that policies have on outcomes, particularly during times of global

crisis. Emphasis should be placed on ensuring that the benefits of these policies reach the most marginalized groups. Expanding the evidence could also play a critical role in ensuring that temporary policy expansions enacted to respond to COVID-19 become permanent to provide lasting protection for public health and to ensure that countries are prepared for the next global threat.

COVID-19 has highlighted the immense human tragedy of individuals and groups being left behind from progress on strengthening public health and economic security. While COVID-19 is the most severe public health and economic crisis to be faced in a generation, it is unlikely to be the last. Climate change will likely fuel more crises. Countries need to respond not just to support their populations during the current pandemic, but also to ensure that legal frameworks are in place that reduce health and economic disparities and increase resiliency for the next crisis. By quantitatively mapping progress and gaps on laws and policies that matter to achieving the SDGs, we can identify areas where action is urgently needed.

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