

Improve Data & Accountability for Girls and Women

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OVERVIEW

Achieving progress for girls and women is dependent upon accurate, disaggregated data to guide interventions and hold governments accountable. Armed with this information, national authorities and development actors can make informed decisions about policies and programs and monitor their implementation. This brief explores the crucial nature of global data and accountability, as well as mechanisms and initiatives that have been established to drive progress for women and children at the country level.

SECTION 1: FRAMING THE ISSUE

Robust and participatory monitoring and accountability mechanisms — including those that provide a clear picture of progress for girls and women — can contribute to the effectiveness of the Sustainable Development agenda.¹ Accountability — a process that allows governmental and other stakeholders to assess progress, identify problems, and take corrective action where necessary^{2,3} — ensures that these same actors are held responsible for the commitments they have made to the post-2015 agenda.

Reliable, timely data are a cornerstone of accountability. Governments need accurate and consistent data to make informed decisions about policies and programs and to monitor their implementation.⁴ Data also provide critical information about the efficient allocation and use of resources. However, high-quality data are often lacking. Many countries do not have functioning or robust national information systems to collect or track critical statistics, including the number of births and deaths or progress in education. In addition, these data are rarely gender-disaggregated to assess inequities — such as access to social services — or to identify underserved communities.⁵ Disaggregated data are rare for adolescents, especially data related to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services aimed at young and unmarried adolescents; this information gap makes it more difficult to provide the necessary services.⁶

When national data are not disaggregated, it masks differences among various groups, making it challenging to identify the needs of marginalized populations. For example, there is a paucity of data on issues that are particularly relevant to women, such as gender-disaggregated data on property ownership, economic empowerment, and gender-based violence. Only slightly more than half of all countries report data on intimate partner violence, and the quality of these data are often inaccurate and mismanaged.⁷

A number of global accountability mechanisms and initiatives have been established to drive progress on women's and children's health at the country level.⁸ Included among them are the *UN System Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality* (UN-SWAP) and *Countdown to 2015*.

Launched in 2012, *UN-SWAP on Gender Equality* is an accountability framework to mainstream gender equality and empower women.⁹ Spearheaded by UN Women, *UN-SWAP* assigns common performance standards for the gender-related work of all UN entities, ensuring greater coherence and accountability.¹⁰ UN Women has a leading role in supporting the implementation of the plan, which uses a framework with 15 performance indicators based on intergovernmental mandates.¹¹ *UN-SWAP* establishes a common understanding of gender equality and women's empowerment, a common method to move towards this goal, and a progressive sliding scale of performance standards against which to monitor progress and set aspirational goals.¹² This innovative approach has triggered shifts in how the UN system approaches work related to gender equality and women's empowerment.¹³ Consequently, it has served as an inspiration for other theme areas, including the *UN Youth SWAP* and the *Inter-Agency Support Group for Indigenous Issues SWAP*.¹⁴



Meeting the demand to improve data & accountability to achieve progress for girls and women is linked to the achievement of several of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and targets, including:

SDG Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere

- **1.b** Create sound policy frameworks at the national, regional, and international levels, based on pro-poor and gender-sensitive development strategies, to support accelerated investment in poverty eradication actions

SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

- **5.5** Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life
- **5.c** Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels

SDG 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries

- **10.2** By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status
- **10.3** Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard
- **10.4** Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage, and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this technical paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of all partnering organizations.



Countdown to 2015, a global, multi-disciplinary, multi-institutional collaboration of academics, governments, international agencies, healthcare professional associations, donors, and civil society organizations (CSOs), has been tracking progress for maternal, newborn, and child survival for over a decade. It focuses on monitoring and reporting of coverage levels of effective interventions and health system functionality, as well as health policies, financing, and equity. Using country report cards, Countdown has tracked progress in the 75 countries where the vast majority of maternal, newborn, and child deaths occur. Its reports provide a mechanism to promote accountability from governments and development partners, highlight evidence and knowledge gaps, share evidence-based interventions, and propose actions to reduce child mortality and improve maternal health.¹⁵

SECTION 2: SOLUTIONS AND INTERVENTIONS

A number of civil society-led strategies have proven effective in holding governments accountable to commitments they have made at global, regional, and national levels. As “watchdogs” of society, a knowledgeable and empowered civil society can hold governments accountable to keep their promises to girls and women.¹⁶ Civil society groups can play a critical role in accountability; they are the link between the public and government policies. Their independence from government allows them to represent communities and amplify the voices of citizens, families, and communities and ensure that policies and budgets reflect community needs.

Civil society groups around the world have employed the following approaches to ensure that governments and other stakeholders fulfill their commitments:

- **Social accountability**, which engages citizens — including girls, women, communities, and the media — to use their voices to hold public officials and service providers accountable during the development process, as well as to improve the quality and accessibility of public health services.¹⁷
- **Budget advocacy**, which monitors financial allocations, ensures that resources are spent efficiently and supports transparency of financial reporting at the national and/or sub-national levels.¹⁸
- **Rights-based approaches to gender accountability**, which seek to analyze inequalities, address discriminatory and unjust practices, and redistribute power, all of which have the potential to hinder and inhibit development, if not addressed.¹⁹ A rights-based approach holds governments accountable to realizing the human rights of their citizens, as enshrined by national legislation or international treaties.²⁰

Social Accountability

Social accountability efforts can focus at the micro-level (for example, by monitoring health services at facilities) or at the macro-level (for example, by supporting civil society participation in policy design, resource allocation, and tracking commitments). Social accountability employs a range of tools and tactics — including community report cards, social audits, citizen charters, and citizen health committees — to help communities monitor and provide feedback on government health services and spending.²¹ Citizen report cards, for example, provide a mechanism for users/clients to provide information on the type of care they received,²² while social audits ensure that community voices and perspectives are integrated within the design, monitoring, and evaluation of health services through participatory approaches.^{23,24}

Experiences from countries around the world indicate that social accountability strategies have contributed to improvements in health services and in strengthening accountability at the local level in particular.²⁵

Case Study: Malawi's Community Scorecard

In Malawi's Ntcheu district, the international non-governmental organization (NGO) CARE implemented community scorecards to improve the quality of maternal health services.²⁶ Once health providers and clients identified the main challenges and gaps in health services, this information was presented in a simplified scorecard format.²⁷ Community members and health facility staff discuss the contents of the scorecard and develop an action plan to identify solutions.²⁸ Community members then monitor whether the solutions are being implemented.²⁹ After a specific period of time, a follow-up review assesses progress.³⁰ This collaborative approach in Malawi has opened up opportunities for dialogue between health service providers and patients, supported collective responsibility to address barriers to care, and promoted a “culture of accountability” among health service providers.³¹

Budget Advocacy

How governments choose to spend their money has an enormous impact on citizens' lives. CSOs and NGOs can influence these decisions by engaging their governments on financial resource allocation. Transparency in this process is critical; without it, governments may channel funds inappropriately and there is room for corruption.³² By compiling data on the needs and priorities of the public through their links to citizens and communities and by taking action to help shape how budgets are developed and spent, civil society groups can hold governments accountable across sectors.³³

➔ For more, please reference the brief on building sustainable financing and partnerships for girls and women.



SDG 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels

- **16.3** Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all
- **16.6** Develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels
- **16.10** Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements
- **16.b** Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development

SDG 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

- **17.18** By 2020, enhance capacity-building support to developing countries, including for least developed countries and small island developing States, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely, and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location, and other characteristics relevant in national contexts
- **17.19** By 2030, build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement gross domestic product, and support statistical capacity-building in developing countries



Case Study: Budget Advocacy in South Africa to Ensure Funding for HIV and AIDS Treatment

During the late 1990s, the South African government did not support the introduction of drug-based prevention and HIV/AIDS treatment regimens due to their high costs.³⁴ The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), an advocacy group run by people living with HIV and AIDS, used different strategies to convince the government to change its position. Utilizing a combination of budget advocacy, litigation, and mobilization – sometimes simultaneously – TAC was able to convince the government to introduce a national program to prevent mother to child HIV transmission (PMTCT) through access to a short course of AZT (an antiretroviral drug). TAC subsequently worked with scientists and researchers to develop plans and policy proposals for a national anti-retroviral (ARV) program. In 2003, a national ARV program was approved by the cabinet, and in 2007 the government committed to spending US\$6 billion on HIV and AIDS prevention and treatment between 2007 and 2012. This plan allowed for 1.6 million people to receive ARV treatment by 2011.³⁵

Rights-Based Approaches to Gender Accountability

Human rights are essential entitlements due to all people and recognized by governments in national legislation and in international agreements and declarations. A rights-based approach involves integrating human rights norms and frameworks within policies and programs – from conceptualization to evaluation.³⁶ The rights-based approach builds upon existing international human rights declarations, prioritizes the health and wellbeing of individuals, and acknowledges the central role of gender equity.³⁷

A range of international agreements, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of the Child, and regional agreements such as the Maputo Protocol (Africa) specifically address rights related to girls and women. By signing onto these agreements and declarations, countries commit to respecting, protecting, and fulfilling these rights.

Countries around the world have included human rights language into national laws and policies. South Africa, Kenya, and Ecuador, for example, incorporate the health, rights, and wellbeing of girls and women into their constitutions.³⁸ Countries may also have national human rights institutions that address social issues such as women's and children's health, which can serve as a platform for promoting accountability.³⁹

To ensure that governments are held accountable to guarantee the right to health for all citizens, civil society actors can utilize a range of mechanisms. Non-judicial (e.g. health facility complaint procedures, maternal death reviews, the United Nations' Universal Periodic Reviews), quasi-judicial (health tribunals, optional protocols), and judicial (local courts, civil tribunals) mechanisms can operate at the community, national, regional, or global level.⁴⁰

Case Study: Using the Court System to Address Maternal Mortality and Morbidity in India

In India, civil society advocates successfully used the judicial system to argue that the government was not meeting its human rights obligations. In 2010, advocates cited constitutional and human rights law to show that the government had not fulfilled its responsibility to prevent the pregnancy-related deaths of two women.⁴¹ The Delhi High Court found the government to be negligent in protecting women's basic, fundamental, and human right to life, as stipulated in the Indian Constitution.⁴² The government was required to provide monetary compensation to the families, to identify the failures in the current system that led to these deaths, and to develop strategies for monitoring and improving health services.⁴³

SECTION 3: THE BENEFITS OF INVESTMENT

Dependable statistics portray the reality of everyday lives – including critical information on underserved populations and unmet need. Evidence is the foundation upon which governments and partners may develop effective policies and programs, enabling them to target resources where they are most needed. As such, reliable, disaggregated data are critical to ensuring good governance and accountability, providing the means to manage effective service delivery, track progress, and assess the impact of policies and programs.

Yet those countries that stand to gain the most from disaggregated data are often the least able to gather it.⁴⁴ Many developing countries still lack the ability to produce, analyze, and translate findings and statistics into effective development outcomes.⁴⁵ Consequently, policy may not reflect the needs of the people and governments cannot be held accountable. Particularly in countries where resources are scarce, good statistics are needed to ensure the efficient and effective use of capital for development spending.⁴⁶

Data are crucial in supporting civil society advocacy strategies, pushing for political and social change, and solving complex health problems. Research shows that investing in data collection and processing can add great economic value. While the benefits are often country and context specific, one study does point to the massive potential return of investing in data. In the education sector alone, using open data could enable approximately \$1 trillion in economic value every year.⁴⁷ The McKinsey Global Institute estimates the global value of improved and more open data at up to US\$3 trillion of economic value per year across seven sectors.⁴⁸



International agreements that reference the importance of data and accountability to achieve progress:

- Beijing Platform for Action (1995)
- Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century – PARIS21 (1999)
- ICPD Beyond 2014 Framework of Action (2011)
- Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030)



Investing in data collection reaps significant returns, enabling countries to get the most out of the resources allocated. And adopting a gender perspective to information gathering helps countries accelerate progress toward gender equality through policy change – a goal that cannot be achieved without the backing of sound data, evaluation, and accountability mechanisms. Introducing gender indicators has the added advantage of capturing qualitative changes, such as levels of female empowerment or changes in societal attitudes towards the rights of girls and women.

When women move closer to gender equality, they move closer to realizing their full potential, which boosts their ability to participate within the formal economy, break the cycle of poverty, and improve the wellbeing of their families and communities.

SECTION 4: CALLS TO ACTION

In order to improve data and accountability to measure progress for girls and women, governments need to strengthen civil registration and vital statistics systems as well as establish national accountability mechanisms that are transparent, inclusive, and provide opportunities for review and action.⁴⁹ Civil society actors should play a key role in these national accountability processes and mechanisms. For their part, funders and multilateral organizations need to support the role of civil society by investing in capacity building so that they are better equipped to hold governments accountable, as well as support the collection of disaggregated data by gender, age group, income, and geographic location to support the allocation of resources and services for underserved or hard-to-reach populations.

In order to power progress for all, many different constituents must work together – governments, civil society, academia, media, affected populations, the United Nations, and the private sector – to take the following actions for girls and women:

- Ensure that all policies, plans, data, budgets, and audits related to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and other strategies are publically-available, transparent, and accessible to non-technical audiences.
(Most relevant for: governments, civil society, the United Nations, and the private sector)
- Ensure all data are disaggregated by gender, age, income, and geography in order to strengthen policy making, programming, and accountability for all.
(Most relevant for: civil society, governments, and the private sector)
- Align national censuses and internationally supported surveys to track the status of all of the Sustainable Development Goals and indicators.
(Most relevant for: governments, civil society, the United Nations, and the private sector)
- Facilitate partnerships between governments, multilateral organizations, civil society, and other stakeholders to share experiences around demands for data collection and to support data collection, data management, and accountability efforts.
(Most relevant for: governments, civil society, academia, media, affected populations, the United Nations, and the private sector)
- Monitor progress of policy commitments and budget allocations at national and sub-national levels—advocate for adjustments to these policies and budgets as needed.
(Most relevant for: governments, civil society, academia, media, affected populations, the United Nations, and the private sector)
- Support global and national advocacy and accountability through a thriving civil society, including the women's movement.
(Most relevant for: civil society)

ENDNOTES

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