



AFRICA HUMAN CAPITAL HEADS OF STATE SUMMIT

Africa Human Capital Technical Briefs Series

No More Wandering in the Dark: Building Data Systems for Human Capital Development

July 2023

Robust and transparent data and measurement systems are foundational to building, strengthening, and safeguarding Human Capital (HC). Data on critical HC outcomes can help identify gaps and build a shared understanding among diverse actors. Through this process, effective measurement can facilitate political consensus based on facts and muster support for reforms. Measurement also enables policymakers to target support to those who are most in need, which is often where interventions yield the highest payoffs. As policy implementation moves forward, measurement can track progress and provide feedback to guide course corrections.

While measurement is important to HC policy in ordinary times, its importance is multiplied during a crisis. Governments that can access and use relevant data in real time are better able to act in a coordinated way on multiple fronts. The necessity of quality, high-frequency data was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when governments needed to monitor the evolution of disease transmission and continuously update control strategies, while also responding to the immediate and long-term effects of the pandemic on households and communities. In times of crisis, measuring how well children are growing, whether they are learning, and how financial stress and insecurity are affecting their development is not a luxury, but a necessity with long-term consequences. At a time when demand for government spending is surging, and fiscal space is limited, data and its transparent communication are vital to ensure accountability for how scarce resources are used.

At a country level, robust national statistical systems are at the core of generating quality data that are consistently measured with reasonable frequency to inform the policymaking process. They are also indispensable to

tracking progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The World Bank's Statistical Performance Index (SPI) measure the capacity and maturity of national statistical systems by assessing the use of data, the quality of services, the coverage of topics, the sources of information, and the infrastructure and availability of resources ([Dang et al. 2023](#)). Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) scores lowest on the SPI, with an average score of 54 out of 100 (Figure 1).¹

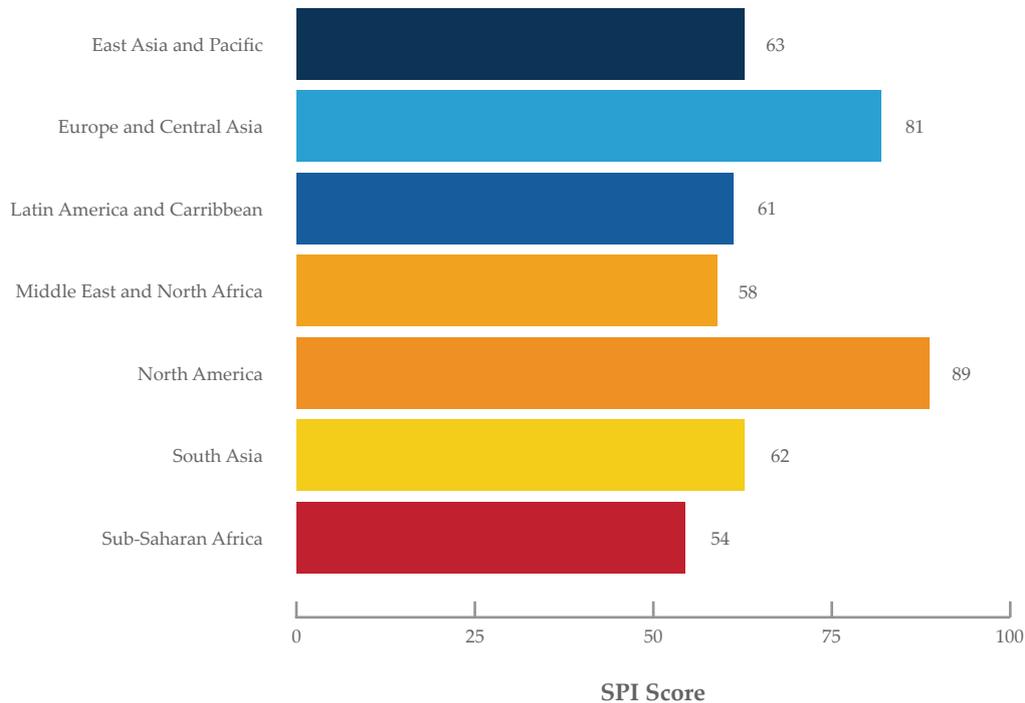
Data on HC are particularly lacking. The Human Capital Index (HCI) incorporates five HC outcomes that are easily recognizable, consistently measured across the world, and salient to policymakers. While there are multiple aspects of HC that can be measured in sophisticated ways, it is worth noting that even the fundamental components included in the HCI suffer from significant data gaps and quality issues.

The components of child and adult survival used to compute the HCI are based on data on birth and death rates by age group. These data are primarily sourced from national vital registries that are mandated to record the occurrences and characteristics of vital events like births and deaths. Vital statistics are essential to the measurement of demographic indicators like life expectancy and to identifying health priorities for the population. Vital statistics can also help target health interventions and monitor their progress.

However, the coverage of vital registries varies widely across the world. As of April 2023, only 73% of countries register at least 90% of births that have occurred; and only 68% of countries cover at least 90% of deaths (see panels A and B). In SSA, only 12 countries have coverage of 80% or more for under-5 birth registration.

¹ North America is the region with the strongest average SPI (89), which is followed by Europe and Central Asia (82), East Asia and the Pacific (63), South Asia (62), Latin America and the Caribbean (61), Middle East and North Africa (58), and Sub-Saharan Africa (54).

Figure 1: Statistical Performance Index, by World Bank region



Source: [Dang, et al. \(2023\)](#).

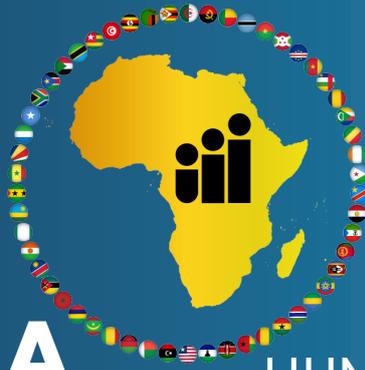
Stunting serves as an indicator for the prenatal, infant, and early childhood health environments. The JME database collates and reports global stunting data reports data for 43 SSA countries, and 18 countries have data that are more than five years old. In 9 countries, the most recent survey is over 10 years old.

Gaps also remain in education data. The expected years of schooling (EYS) measure is based on enrollment data that national governments provide to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). While administrative data on enrollment – a basic metric for education policy – are usually recorded annually, 21 of the 174 countries that were part of the HCI 2020 sample had data over 5 years old, of which 11 were located in SSA. Since primary enrollment data are typically the most consistently reported, the issue of data freshness is of even greater concern for other levels of school. There

are also significant gaps in time series data on enrollment rates.

Finally, the latest update to the Global Dataset on Education Quality that produces the harmonized test scores covers 98.7% of the school-age population. However, of the 174 countries that have an HCI, 14 rely for test score data on Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRAs) that are not representative at the national level. A total of 65 countries (roughly 37% of the sample) rely on test score data that are from 2015 or earlier. Over half of these countries with old student assessment data – 37 countries – are in SSA.

The credible and consistent measurement of human capital outcomes is essential to identifying priority areas for policy intervention, informing the design of those policies, and tracking their effectiveness over time.



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