No dataset left behind? Reporting on SDG4 and the politics of data integration

With the advent of SDG4, the production of globally-comparable learning data has become an institutional priority for the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). Half of the SDG4 targets relate to learning outcomes and skills, and require the development of internationally-comparable measures of learning. The transition into the SDGs era represents therefore a critical moment for the UIS. This is so since learning metrics exhibit some specificities that set them apart from the rest of indicators produced by the UIS. Specifically, the production of global learning metrics relies necessarily on data suppliers other than statistical offices and national governments – most notably, producers of cross-national assessments, whose rapport with the UIS is much less institutionalized. In addition, the UIS has not approached the production of global learning metrics as a solo endeavour – but has sought the collaboration of a wide range of organizations and experts as a means to maximize both the technical validity and the legitimacy of this measurement exercise.

The quantification needs brought about by the new agenda have thus tended to reinforce relations of political and technical interdependence among a variety of stakeholders involved in the production and harmonization of learning data. This paper enquires into such dynamics through a case study on the production of the global indicator corresponding to Target 4.1, relative to the proportion of children achieving a minimum proficiency level in reading and mathematics. The research aims at gaining insight into the mechanics of global quantification, and specifically to understand the transformative impact of an inherently collaborative project on the agendas and relationships of the partaking organizations. To this end, the study builds on a combination of documentary analysis and 41 semi-structured interviews, and reconstructs the process through which this indicator has been coupled to specific data suppliers, statistical routines and reporting standards over the course of the 2015-2019 period.

The results of investigation indicate that the growing centrality of assessment data has been seized by producers of cross-national assessments as an opportunity to consolidate and expand their outreach – a process that inevitably creates issues of rivalry and overlap, sometimes exacerbating decade-long conflicts. The collective nature of this measurement process has also laid bare the fact that multiple (and contradictory) expectations are placed on assessment data. While in-built comparability and technical sophistication are properties of paramount importance to some actors, others emphasize the principle of country ownership and data actionability as the principles that should be orienting the production of SDG4 metrics. And although the UIS has managed to strike a balance between these competing priorities by promoting the merits of ‘fit-for-purpose’ data, the viability and costs of such a heterodox approach remains to be seen.

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