

Early Childhood Developmental Delay in 63 Low- and Middle-Income Countries: Prevalence and Inequalities Estimated from National Health Surveys

Authors : Jesus D. Cortes Gil, Fernanda Ewerling, Leonardo Ferreira, Aluisio J. D. Barros

Abstract : Background: The sustainable development goals call for inclusive, equitable, and quality learning opportunities for all. This is especially important for children, to ensure they all develop to their full potential. We studied the prevalence and inequalities of suspected delay in child development in 63 low- and middle-income countries. Methods and Findings: We used the early child development module from national health surveys, which covers four developmental domains (physical, social-emotional, learning, literacy-numeracy) and provides a combined indicator (early child development index, ECDI) of whether children are on track. We calculated the age-adjusted prevalence of suspected delay at the country level and stratifying by wealth, urban/rural residence, sex of the child, and maternal education. We also calculated measures of absolute and relative inequality. We studied 330.613 children from 63 countries. The prevalence of suspected delay for the ECDI ranged from 3% in Barbados to 67% in Chad. For all countries together, 25% of the children were suspected of developmental delay. At regional level, the prevalence of delay ranged from 10% in Europe and Central Asia to 42% in West and Central Africa. The literacy-numeracy domain was by far the most challenging, with the highest proportions of delay. We observed very large inequalities, and most markedly for the literacy-numeracy domain. Conclusions: To date, our study presents the most comprehensive analysis of child development using an instrument especially developed for national health surveys. With a quarter of the children globally suspected of developmental delay, we face an immense challenge. The multifactorial aspect of early child development and the large gaps we found only add to the challenge of not leaving these children behind.

Keywords : child development, inequalities, global health, equity

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