

[< All FSI News](#)

July 23, 2018

A better way to measure progress toward the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Beth Duff-Brown

A new calculation that combines health and economic well-being at the population level could help to better measure progress toward the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals and illuminate major disparities in health and living standards across countries, and between men and women, according to a new study by Stanford and Harvard researchers.

In a study released this month in *The Lancet Global Health*, **Joshua Salomon**, a professor of medicine and core faculty member at Stanford Health Policy, finds there are startling differences between countries in the number of years people can expect to survive free from poverty, much greater than the differences observed in life expectancy alone, and that women surrender more years of life to poverty than men in much of the world.

At the U.N. Sustainable Development Summit in 2015, world leaders adopted the **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs) as the embodiment of the global agenda for development through 2030. One of the 17 goals calls for universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, which highlights the explicit link between economic and health development policies.

“Despite this link, and despite the multitude of targets and indicators established through the SDGs and other global initiatives, most monitoring and benchmarking efforts rely on metrics that are highly specific to a single dimension of interest,” Salomon and his colleagues from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health wrote in **the Lancet study**.

Such an approach misses opportunities to understand the broader impact of development policies as they affect the well-being of populations in multiple ways.

So, the researchers developed a population-level measure of poverty-free life expectancy (PFLE) and computed the measurements for 90 countries with available data. They used **Sullivan's method** to incorporate the prevalence of poverty by age and sex from household economic surveys into demographic life tables based on mortality rates that are routinely estimated for all countries. Poverty-free life expectancy for each country is the average number of years people could expect to survive with adequate income to meet their basic needs, given current mortality rates and poverty prevalence in that country.

The authors found that PFLE varies widely between countries, ranging from less than 10 years in Malawi to more than 80 years in countries such as Iceland. In 67 of 90 countries, the difference between life expectancy and PFLE was greater for females than for males, indicating that women generally surrender more years of life to poverty than men do.

In some African countries, people can expect to live more than half of the total lifespan in poverty.

“This new indicator can aid in monitoring progress toward the linked global agendas of health improvement and poverty elimination and can strengthen accountability for development policies,” the authors wrote.

Despite general improvements in survival in most regions of the world in the past decades, the focus in the Sustainable Development Goals era on ending poverty “brings into sharp relief the importance of ensuring that years of added life are lived with at least a minimum standard of economic well-being.”

Salomon said the researchers hope the development of a new, simple measure that summarizes overall health and economic welfare in a single number can do two things.

“One is to help encourage leaders to be transparent and accountable to the populations they serve through regular tracking and reporting on overall progress toward longer and better lives,” he said. “The other is to bring measurement out of the silos of individual sectors, to highlight both the need for multisectoral action to improve health and welfare and the connections between health and economic consequences of public policy.”

Topics: [Health and Medicine](#) | [International Development](#) | [Society](#)[Share this News](#)

Recent News

[APARC Alumni Gather in Beijing and Tokyo, Reflect on Stanford Experience](#)[Paul Edwards Delivers Keynote at Global Weather Conference Oct. 12](#)[The Sanctions Effect in North Korea: Observations from Rason](#)[Break Through: Women in Silicon Valley, Womenomics in Japan Conference Final Report](#)[Indonesian Foreign Policy: Between Two Reefs Again?](#)[Facing the Demographic Tidal Wave: Collaborative Solutions for an Aging World](#)[David M. Lampton Appointed the Oksenberg-Rohlen Fellow at FSI](#)[Video: Karen Eggleston on China's Health System](#)

All FSI News

OUR ADDRESS

Stanford | Freeman Spogli Institute
for International StudiesEncina Hall
616 Serra St C100
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305-6055

NAVIGATE

[Research](#)
[Education](#)
[People](#)
[Centers](#)
[News](#)
[Events](#)
[About](#)

FOLLOW US

[General inquiries](#)
650-723-4581

SUPPORT US

Learn more about how your support makes a difference or make a gift now

[MAKE A GIFT](#)