

Children in Sabah today: **Where we stand**

The **Sabah Child Wellbeing Index (SCWI)** provides Sabah's first comprehensive baseline of child wellbeing, aligned with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The study examines how children in Sabah are growing, learning, participating and being protected across six key domains of wellbeing.

This index lays the foundation for continuous monitoring and evidence-based policymaking— helping ensure that no child is left behind.

What does it measure?

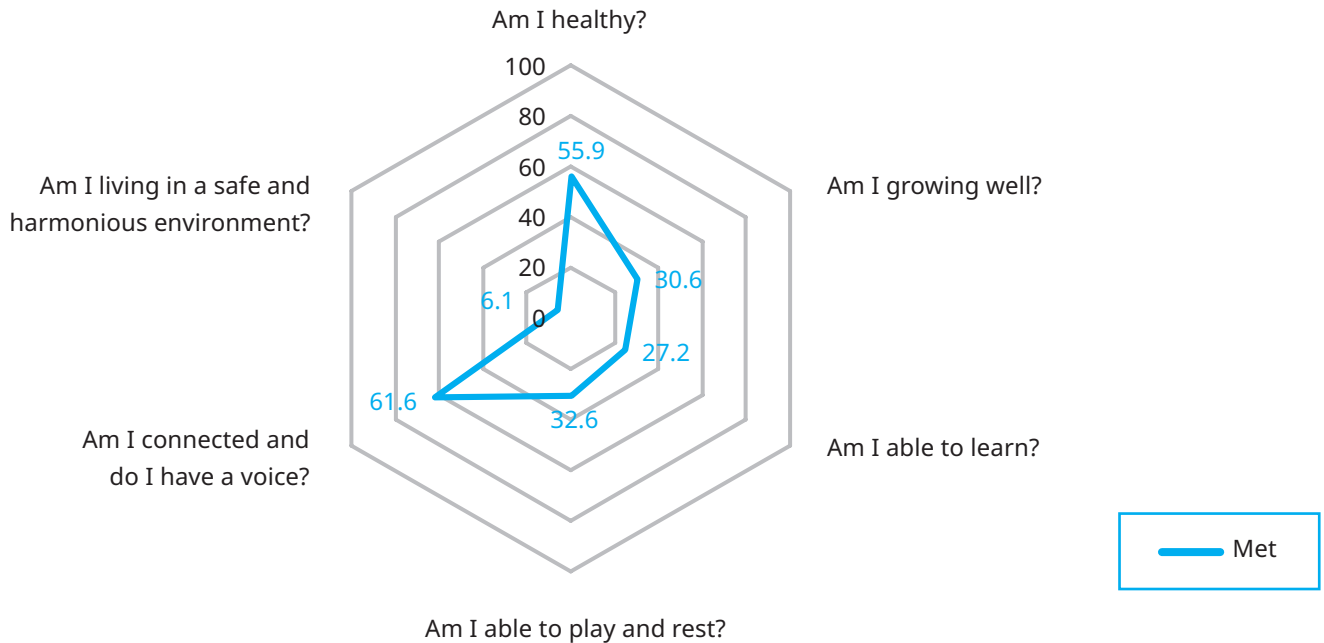
The SCWI measures multi-dimensional wellbeing among **4,441 children aged 0 to 17 in Sabah**, capturing both general and vulnerable populations such as undocumented children, stateless children and children with disabilities. Data was collected through two phases.

Phase 1: Representative sample across all five divisions (urban and rural, all age groups and genders)




Phase 2: Targeted sampling of vulnerable children often excluded from surveys




Summary of key findings across SCWI domains

Figure 1. Child wellbeing by domain



How are children in Sabah doing?

<p>Domain 1</p>  <p>Am I healthy?</p>	<p>Just over half of children in Sabah (55.9%) meet basic health needs, but critical gaps remain.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most children (93%) can access basic healthcare. • Gaps remain in adolescent sexual and reproductive health (31.8%). • Children with disabilities and undocumented children face greater barriers to care.
<p>Domain 2</p>  <p>Am I growing well?</p>	<p>Less than 1 in 3 children in Sabah (30.6%) meet the growth and development thresholds, and many consume limited amounts of fruits and vegetables.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nutrition gaps persist, despite strong performance in some areas — exclusive breastfeeding meets national targets (60.1%) and access to growth monitoring is high (83%). • Only 1 in 3 children meet recommended dietary standards. • Undocumented children are most affected, with just 19.1% meeting growth thresholds.
<p>Domain 3</p>  <p>Am I able to learn?</p>	<p>Only 1 in 4 children meet learning wellbeing standards (27.2%), despite high school attendance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While access to education is high (more than 90% of children aged 6-17 attend schools), only 75.6% complete schooling. • Gaps in learning outcomes point to disparities in support, access and continuity of education.

<p>Domain 4</p>  <p>Am I able to play and rest?</p>	<p>Fewer than half of children in Sabah have adequate opportunities to play and rest, with access shaped by their environments (32.6%).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While satisfaction with play infrastructure is high, only 49.5% of children regularly engage in play. • Limited time, safe spaces and inclusive environments constrain opportunities —especially for children with disabilities. • Unequal access to leisure and child-friendly environments affects children’s ability to rest and recharge (40.2%). • Children in more constrained living conditions face the greatest barriers.
<p>Domain 5</p>  <p>Am I connected and do I have a voice?</p>	<p>More than half of children in Sabah (61.6%) feel connected to their families, schools and communities, but not all are able to fully participate and be heard.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many children feel connected to family, school and community. • However, not all have safe or meaningful opportunities to express their views. • Barriers are greatest for children in vulnerable situations.
<p>Domain 6</p>  <p>Am I living in a safe and harmonious environment?</p>	<p>Only 6.1% of children in Sabah meet the overall safety threshold.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food insecurity affects nearly three-quarters of children. • Significant gaps remain in housing, safety and living conditions. • The greatest disparities are seen for children in vulnerable situations.

Across these domains, many children experience multiple challenges at the same time.



Children’s wellbeing is shaped by interconnected systems — from health and nutrition to education, safety and participation.

Experiencing one deprivation often increases the risk of others.



9 in 10 children in Sabah fall short in at least 2 areas of wellbeing



8 in 10 children in Sabah fall short in at least 3 areas simultaneously



1 in 2 children in Sabah fall short in 4 or more areas at once



What does this mean for Sabah?

“Behind every data point is a child growing up in Sabah — a child who may feel supported by family and community, but who may also face challenges in getting nutritious food, accessing reliable internet, feeling safe or having their voice heard. These findings remind us that support must be shaped around children’s lived realities, with a focus on those facing the greatest barriers.”

Robert Gass, UNICEF Representative to Malaysia and Special Representative to Brunei Darussalam

Our policy recommendations



1. Invest in health across childhood

- Expand immunisation outreach
- Ensure disability-inclusive services
- Provide adolescents with age-appropriate health and reproductive information



2. Guarantee every child’s right to learn

- Strengthen alternative learning pathways
- Close the digital divide
- Ensure no child is excluded due to geography, documentation or disability



3. Build safe, nurturing environments

- Improve housing, water and sanitation
- Expand school meal programmes
- Strengthen positive parenting and community safety systems



4. Listen to children and young people

- Create safe spaces for participation
- Support youth engagement in decision-making



5. Use data to reach every child

- Use SCWI data to plan, budget and track progress
- Prioritise children facing multiple deprivations

Read the full study report on [UNICEF Malaysia’s website](#) now!

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