

THE UK COMMITTEE FOR UNICEF (UNICEF UK) PARLIAMENTARY BRIEFING – AID CUTS

MARCH 2025

The further cut to the Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget from 0.5% to 0.3% will have a devastating impact on the world's most vulnerable children. It will undoubtedly risk lives and mean millions of children not having access to critical health care, not having enough to eat and missing out on their learning.

This decision risks undoing decades of progress and international co-operation at a time when climate change, conflict and extreme poverty are on the rise. Children cannot be the ones to bear the brunt of difficult decisions. By almost every measure, 2024 was one of the worst years on record for children in conflict. Further reductions will put their lives at risk at a time when they need our support the most.

AID CUTS – THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN'S LIVES

In November 2024, UNICEF UK published [Leave No Child Behind: Analysing the cuts to UK child-focused aid](#), which found that the UK cut child-focused aid in 2021 well beyond the depths of the overall cuts. By 2022, child-focused bilateral aid had fallen by 57% since 2019 (compared to 34% overall). Key sectors supporting children saw considerable cuts – education saw a fall in bilateral aid of 68% and nutrition by 61%. This is despite child-focused international development interventions being highly cost-effective and offering significant impact on poverty reduction and excellent returns on spending. These cuts were made while the government publicly championed child-focused themes, like girls' education.

Children make up half (46%) of the population of low-income countries and have specific development needs. Improving the wellbeing of the world's most vulnerable children is critical to improving their lives, futures, and that of whole communities as well as global stability and security.

The disproportionate impact of the aid cuts on children in 2021 reveal that children have not been adequately considered or prioritised in decision making – the absence of a child-focused team, strategy or capabilities in FCDO is apparent. Without effort to rectify this, we can assume this would happen again if new aid cuts come into effect in April 2027 – the impact of which would be catastrophic.

CASE STUDIES OF HOW CUTS TO AID EFFECTED CHILDREN

Nutrition

In June 2021, UNICEF issued a Press Release to convey that the FCDO pauses and reductions to earmarked contributions were negatively impacting UNICEF programming at the local, regional and global level, including:

- UNICEF's global programme to prevent, detect and treat child wasting which was on track to deliver essential nutrition support for at least 6 million children by 2025 in 9 countries with high levels of child wasting and periodic exposure to climate shocks.

- UNICEF's nutrition response in Syria, enabling nutrition screenings of over 2.7 million children and pregnant women, reaching 1.6 million children and women with micro-nutrients and providing life-saving treatment to 17,768 children with severe acute malnutrition. In 2021, UNICEF's office in Syria was informed that the UK had no plans to fund its programme that year.

Education

'Shule Bora' means 'Quality Education' in Swahili. In 2022 the UK Government announced £215 million for a new 'Shule Bora' Programme in Tanzania, with the aim of helping 4 million children in Tanzania, at least half of them girls, gain a better-quality primary education. The programme set out to improve learning outcomes, as well as support more girls into secondary school and the inclusion of children with disabilities. The project was 'A' rated when it was evaluated. By 2024, Shule Bora's budget had been slashed to £73 million with the programme having to refocus resources with 'new results that are presently being finalised'. Such cuts impact the chances of many children in Tanzania getting a decent primary education along with life changing basic literacy skills.

Reproductive health

In 2019, the UK Government launched their Reproductive Health Supplies programme, stating that, as a global leader in comprehensive sexual and reproductive health, they aimed to help 20 million women a year in 40 of the world's poorest countries. With an initial budget of £600 million, the programme set out to provide life-saving health and reproductive services to reduce maternal deaths and unintended pregnancies, as well as improve newborn and child health. Reviews of the programme stated it was 'excellent value for money'. However, by October 2024, this vital programme had been cut by over half (to £295 million), limiting millions of individuals access to life changing support.

THE VALUE OF AID FOR CHILDREN – WHAT HAS IT ACHIEVED?

- Close to 8 million more children in the world survive to see their fifth birthday than in 1990 — a 60 percent decline in annual under-five child mortality.
- Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, has immunised over 1 billion children and saved 18.8 million lives thanks to its success in distributing affordable vaccines.
- Safe water is available to over 2.1 billion more people compared to 20 years ago.
- The number of children with stunted growth due to malnutrition has declined by 40 percent since 2000.
- Over 68 million child marriages have been averted in the last 25 years, giving girls their childhoods back.
- In the early 1950s, roughly half of all primary school-aged children were out of school. Now it's less than 10 percent.
- An estimated 1.9 million deaths and 4 million HIV infections have been averted among pregnant women and children in the past 25 years.

KEY FACTS ON THE GLOBAL SITUATION FOR CHILDREN

- One in six children are living in extreme poverty and one billion children lack access to life's essentials: food, sanitation, shelter, healthcare, and education.¹

¹ <https://www.unicef.org/innovation/media/18536/file/Executive%20Summary:%20Child-Lens%20Investing%20Framework.pdf>

- 22% of children under five are stunted, with 45 million suffering from wasting.
- Rises in conflicts have disproportionality impacted children with over 14,000 children killed in Gaza² and 3.5 million children displaced in Sudan.³
- Due to the impact of climate change, children born today are seven times more likely to experience devastatingly extreme weather conditions than they were a few decades ago.⁴ 1 in 7 children experienced school disruptions due to climate events in 2024 with three quarters of those being in low- and lower middle-income countries.

UNICEF UK RECOMMENDS THE UK GOVERNMENT

1. **Reverse this decision** before significant damage is done to both the UK's development and humanitarian work and its global reputation.
2. **Ensure life-saving programmes that support the world's most vulnerable children are protected.** Child impact assessments must be conducted in any decision making to avoid children bearing the brunt of aid cuts as they did in 2021.
3. **Stop spending almost a third (28%) of the ODA budget in the UK** and ensure it remains focused on its primary purpose to eliminate global poverty. Reform the methodology for counting in-donor refugee costs (IDRCs), with a goal of phasing out the use of ODA for in-donor refugee costs within the next year.
4. **Outline a clear pathway back to 0.7% of GNI** to ensure the UK Government delivers its legal commitment.

UNICEF'S WORK

UNICEF operates in more than 190 countries around the world, responding to emergencies and building long-term resilience. UNICEF UK raises funds for UNICEF's emergency and development work and advocates for lasting change for children worldwide. Guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), our work is focused on ensuring the rights of all children are protected and fulfilled, wherever they live.

In **Sudan**, over 17 million children and young people are out of learning due to the conflict. UNICEF with local partners has established 1000+ safe learning spaces, reaching 1.9 million children. The Learning Passport, an innovative e-learning platform, is providing crisis-affected children with lifesaving education.

Bangladesh ranks 15th out of 163 countries in UNICEF's children climate risk index. 78% of Bangladeshi youth respondents reported their education being impacted by climate change. UNICEF is therefore working to strengthen national capacity to deliver resilient and climate-smart education.

CONTACT

For more information, please contact Head of Political Affairs, Zoe Palmer on ZoeP@Unicef.org.uk

² <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/children-gaza-need-lifesaving-support#:~:text=Children%20are%20dying%20at%20an,displaced%20%E2%80%93%20half%20of%20them%20children.>

³ <https://www.unicef.org/sudan/sudan-crisis-childrens-crisis-0>

⁴ <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abi7339>