

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

MARCH 2025

A 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 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. Between 2019 and 2022, child-focused bilateral aid fell by 57% (compared to 34% overall). Key sectors supporting children saw considerable cuts – 68% in education and 61% for nutrition. This is despite child-focused interventions being highly cost-effective, offering significant impact on poverty reduction and excellent returns on spending.

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

The disproportionate cut to child-focused aid in 2021 reveal that children have not been considered or prioritised in decision making. The absence of a child-focused team, strategy or capabilities in FCDO is clear. Without effort to rectify this, there is a significant risk of this happening again – the impact of which would be catastrophic.

UNICEF UK RECOMMENDS THE UK GOVERNMENT

1. **Maintain the UK ODA budget at 0.5% of GNI in 2025 and 2026**, ensuring delivery of existing commitments to the International Development Association (IDA) and Green Climate Fund as well as upcoming commitments to the Gavi Vaccine Alliance, nutrition and education global funds.
2. **Commit to spending 25% of ODA on children**, matching that spent in 2016, to protect critical programmes including health, nutrition, education, Water, Sanitation & Hygiene (WASH), climate and social protection.
3. **Phase out completely the use of ODA for in-donor refugee costs within the next year**. At 0.3% of GNI, it will be even more pressing that the ODA budget is focused on its primary purpose of eliminating global poverty.
4. **Ensure that child-focused programmes are not cut disproportionately again**, in part by conducting and publishing child impact assessments and drawing on

expertise that can assess impact on children. Establish an evidence-driven, needs-based and participatory process for deciding ODA budget priorities, including consultation with civil society.

5. **Outline a clear pathway to returning the aid budget to 0.7% of GNI**, to ensure the UK Government delivers on its legal and manifesto commitments.

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

- 8 million more children in the world survive to see their fifth birthday than in 1990 — a 60% 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% since 2000.
- Over 68 million child marriages have been averted in the last 25 years, giving girls their childhoods back.
- In the early 1950s, half of all primary school-aged children were out of school. Now it's less than 10%.
- 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 (333 million) live in extreme poverty and one billion children lack access to life's essentials: food, sanitation, shelter, healthcare, and education.¹
- One in four children live in severe food poverty 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 in 1960.⁴
- In 2022, 4.9 million children died before their fifth birthday, almost half from malnutrition.
- In 2023, 14.5 million children did not receive any vaccinations, with children in fragile and conflict-affected states most likely to miss out.

CASE STUDIES - HOW CUTS TO AID HAVE AFFECTED CHILDREN

Nutrition

In 2021 pauses and reductions to earmarked contributions by FCDO negatively impacted UNICEF programming at the local, regional and global level, including a global programme to prevent, detect and treat child wasting which was on track to deliver essential nutrition support for at least 6 million children in 9 countries with high levels of child wasting and periodic exposure to climate shocks. In 2021, UNICEF's office in Syria was informed that the

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

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>

UK had no plans to fund its programme 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.

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 cut to £73 million impacting 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 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 programme had been cut by over half (to £295 million), stopping millions of women and children accessing life changing support.

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 are out of learning due to the conflict. UNICEF with local partners has established over 1,000 safe learning spaces reaching 1.9 million children. The Learning Passport, an innovative e-learning platform, provides crisis-affected children with education.

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

CONTACT

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