

LEAVE NO CHILD BEHIND: ANALYSING THE CUTS TO UK CHILD-FOCUSED ODA

UNITED KINGDOM

unicef 

for every child

In February 2025, the UK Government announced that the Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget would be cut further – from 0.5% to 0.3% of GNI. The Government has since confirmed that cuts will begin in 2025. Five years before the deadline for the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UK Government is turning its back on children, for whom critical outcomes, such as reducing under-five mortality and ending malnutrition, are already off track.

We urge the UK Government to reverse its decision, maintain the ODA budget at 0.5% until 2027, and ensure that programmes for children are protected from cuts.

Analysis published by UNICEF UK in November 2024 found that cuts to aid in 2021 disproportionately impacted children. By 2023, child-focused bilateral aid had fallen by 57% since 2019, compared to 42% for bilateral aid overall. Key sectors supporting children saw considerable cuts – bilateral aid for education fell by 58% and nutrition by 73%. Moreover, child-focused aid has been declining as a proportion of bilateral aid since 2016.

It is evident that children have not been adequately considered or prioritised in the UK's approach to international development for a long time.

If the UK Government maintains this approach while cutting the aid budget to 0.3%, child-focused bilateral aid could fall by more than £500 million by 2027 – the equivalent of cutting all bilateral aid focused on nutrition in 2023. This would leave total bilateral spending on children at £600 million, less than a quarter of that in 2019.

Children must not once again bear the brunt of decisions on cutting the UK's ODA budget. Rising levels of climate change, conflict and extreme poverty are harming the health and wellbeing of children like never before, so further reductions to ODA will put the lives of more children at risk, at a time when they need support the most. The UK Government must ensure that critical programmes for children are protected.

Recommendations for the UK Government

1. **Commit to spending 25% of ODA on children, matching that spent in 2016**, to protect critical programmes, including health services, education, nutrition, water and sanitation, climate, and social protection.
2. **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.
3. **Maintain the UK ODA Budget at 0.5% of GNI in 2025 and 2026**, including delivering existing commitments to the International Development Association and Green Climate Fund as well as upcoming commitments to the Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, the Child Nutrition Fund, and education global funds.
4. **Phase out completely the use of ODA for in-donor refugee costs (IDRCs) within the next year**, ensuring all savings are returned to the ODA budget.
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.

March 2025

The impact of UK aid cuts on children so far

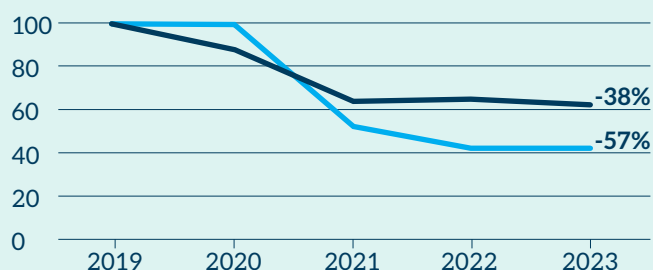
The pressure on UK ODA since 2020 from budget cuts and the impact of IDRCs has resulted in direct and severe cuts to programmes that support children.

Child-focused bilateral aid fell by 57% from 2019 to 2023. Child-focused multilateral contribution also fell by 48% from 2019 to 2022 (partly due to delayed disbursements). Even with these disbursements being delivered in 2023, the percentage of total UK aid focused on children was only 19% in 2023 (excluding IDRCs), down from an average of 25% in the previous decade. Coupled with the total drop in UK aid, this meant **£1.4 billion less was spent in support of the poorest children around the world.**

But child-focused aid spending has declined more steeply than other UK aid spending, and began declining much earlier than 2019.

Child-focused bilateral aid fell by 57% from 2019 to 2023, while non-child-focused bilateral aid fell by 38% (see Figure 1). Whereas other bilateral aid had steadily increased between 2016 and 2019, child-focused aid was stagnant over this period. This means that, while the decline in absolute terms began after the cuts, child-focused aid has been falling as a share of the UK's bilateral aid since 2016 (see Figure 2). **It is clear this decline was caused not just by aid cuts, but also by shifting priorities.**

Figure 1: UK bilateral aid (excluding IDRCs) as a percentage of 2019 values
Index 2019 = 100 (current GBP)



— Child-focused
— Other

Source: OECD DAC CRS

Figure 2: UK aid (excluding IDRCs) since 2016 in GBP billions, current prices



■ Child-focused ODA (excluding IDRCs)
■ Total ODA (excluding IDRCs)

Source: OECD DAC CRS, UK Statistics On International Development

While many FCDO teams work on issues related to children, there is no central team within the FCDO ensuring a child focus, although there is for gender. Children appear as beneficiaries, particularly in sectors like health and education, but there is no strategy or coherent narrative for the UK's work in this area. **The UK must invest in child rights expertise and capacity within the FCDO to prevent further disproportionate cuts to child-focused ODA.**

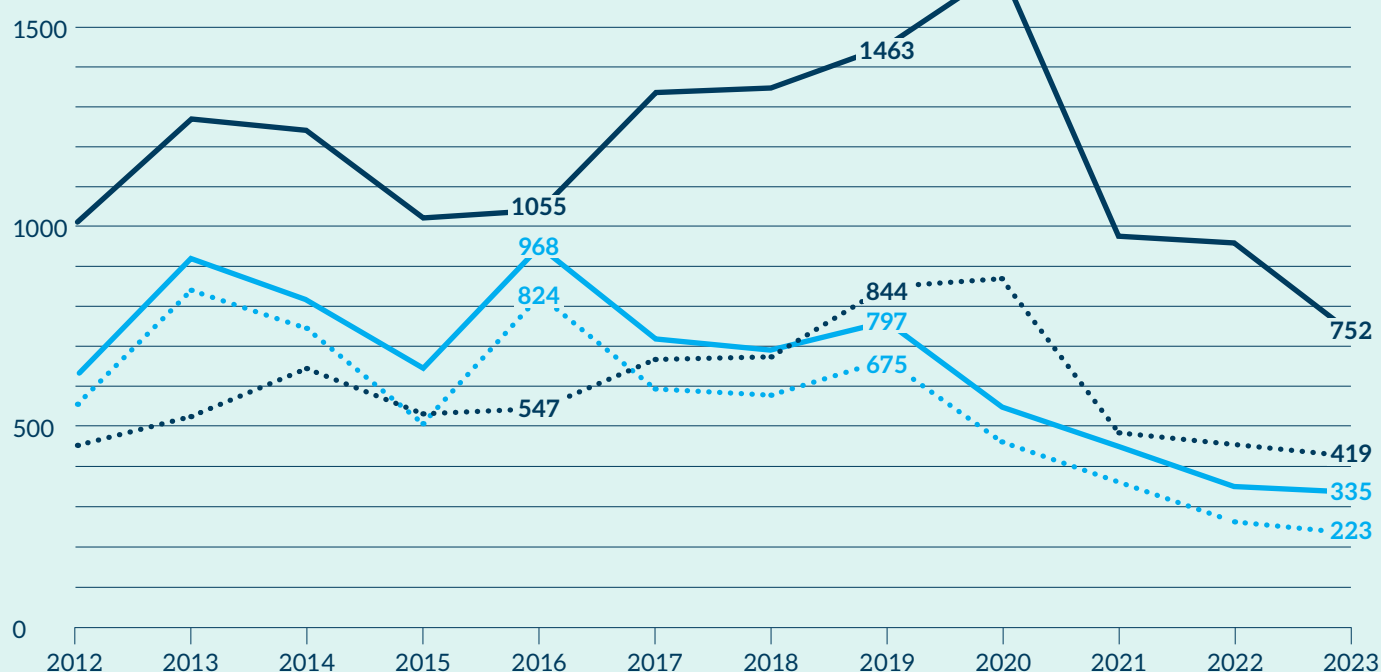
The impact of UK aid cuts by sector

Education

A large share of the decline in child-focused aid can be explained by a shift away from funding global education. Education spending fell nearly every year from 2016 to 2023. Consequently, education fell from 11% of bilateral UK aid spending in 2016 to 3% in 2023, a decline from £968 million to £335 million in absolute terms. This is despite the prioritisation of education in both the 2022 International Development Strategy and 2023 White Paper.

Primary education was particularly hard hit, having fallen by 83% over this period, and total spending was only £71 million in 2023. At the same time, learning outcomes have regressed: the latest World Bank simulations estimate 70% of children in low- or middle-income countries (LMICs) are now 'learning poor'.¹

Figure 3: Total bilateral aid to key sectors, including with a child focus in GBP millions, current prices



- Education: total
- ... Education: child-focused
- Health: total
- ... Health: child-focused

Source: OECD DAC CRS

Health

UK bilateral aid for health has been falling since 2021, despite the continuing impact of the COVID-19 crisis. It now sits at just £750 million in 2023, the lowest level in over a decade. Within this picture, the share of spending that was child focused fell from 57.6% in 2019 to 45% in 2022. Although a larger share overall, in 2023, bilateral health spending for children fell again to £419 million. Types of health expenditure more likely to be directly child-focused have also declined in importance. Aid for reproductive health, for instance, dropped from £265 million to £85 million between 2014 and 2023, a fall of 68%.

These cuts come at a time when global health outcomes for children at risk. The under-five mortality has more than halved since 1990, but globally 4.8 million children still died before their fifth birthday in 2023.² Around 21 million children were unvaccinated or under-vaccinated in 2023.³

Nutrition

Bilateral aid with a significant nutrition focus has fallen by 60%, from £1.3 billion to just over £500 million between 2019 and 2023. Aid with a principal nutrition focus fell from £630 million to just £15 million. Together, nutrition comprised only 5.2% of total bilateral aid in 2023.

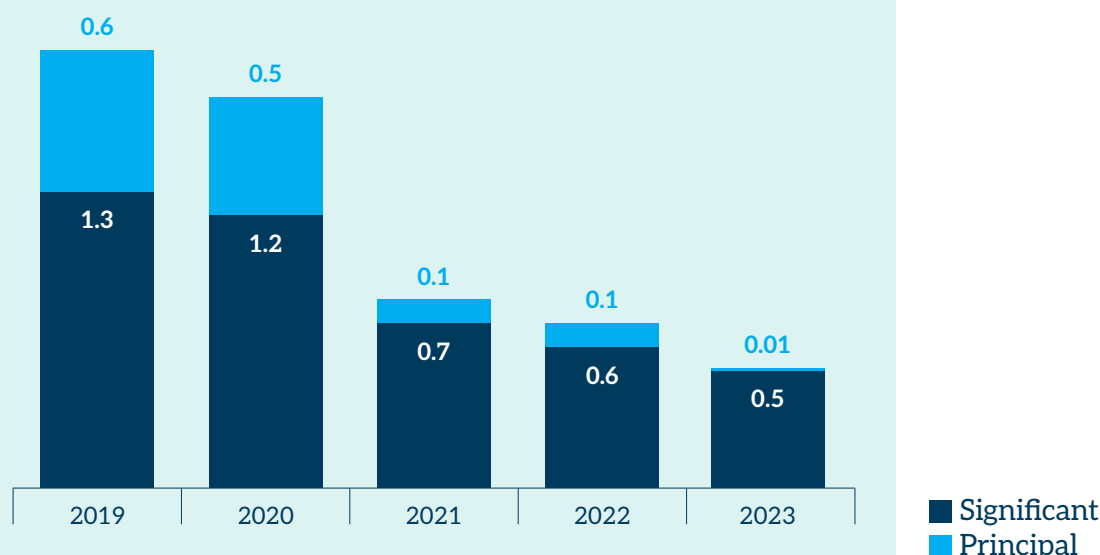
Meanwhile, significant challenges remain to meet the nutrition outcomes in the SDGs. Progress on stunting (low height-for-age) has stagnated in the past decades with 148 million children still affected.⁴ Similarly, wasting (low weight-for-height) affected more than 45 million children in 2022.⁵

Climate and nature

UK climate ODA (Rio-marked) that is identifiably child-focused has fallen significantly in recent years, dropping from 31% in 2019 to 13% in 2022. This is partly explained by a decline in social protection spending, a key sector for child wellbeing. Between 2016 and 2022, climate-marked social protection spending fell from £240 million to £28 million.

One billion children live in the 33 countries classed as 'extremely high risk' by UNICEF's Children's Climate Risk Index.⁶ As detailed in an upcoming report by UNICEF UK, children must be central to how the UK is spending is climate finance.

Figure 4: Total bilateral aid with a nutrition focus in GBP billions, current prices



The road ahead: estimating the impact of further UK aid cuts on children

Without conscious effort to prioritise children in the UK’s approach to international development, child-focused aid is at high risk of being further cut, just when children need our support the most. Using OBR projections for GNI, Scenario 1 shows the danger of maintaining the status quo, considering the impact of IDRCs remaining at a constant share of the ODA budget and at an absolute constant. Scenario 2 demonstrates how the impact of cuts could be mitigated for children.

Scenario 1: Maintain the status quo with children deprioritised

	% of GNI	Total ODA billions	Estimated in- donor refugee costs (IDRCs) billions	Total ODA (bilateral) exc IDRCs billions	Child-focused ODA (bilateral) billions
2025	0.48	13.98	2.83	6.11	1.15
2026	0.34	10.24	2.83	3.72	0.70
2027	0.30	9.38	2.83	3.17	0.60
2028	0.30	9.73	2.83	3.40	0.64

Scenario 1 follows the planned cuts to the ODA budget as set out in the Spring Statement.⁷ It assumes that the share of bilateral aid remains at 2023 levels (64%) and that spending on IDRCs remains at the level for 2024.⁸ The likelihood of IDRCs remaining high is significant. Although IDRCs fell in 2024, the Treasury has admitted that the demand for short-term residential accommodation for migrants is likely to continue, given pressures on housing supply.⁹

With no change in the allocation of ODA to children, child-focused aid could fall by more than £500 million by 2027. This would be equivalent to cutting all bilateral aid focused on nutrition in 2023. This would leave total bilateral spending on children at £600 million, less than a quarter of that in 2019 and only around 6% of the total ODA budget for 2027. This is insufficient to support the needs of children, who comprise more than half of the population of developing countries.

Scenario 2: Delay cuts and increase child focus

	% of GNI	Total ODA billions	Estimated in- donor refugee costs (IDRCs) billions	Total ODA (bilateral) billions	Child-focused ODA (bilateral) billions
2025	0.5	14.57	2.83	9.32	2.70
2026	0.5	15.01	2.83	9.64	2.80
2027	0.3	9.38	2.83	6.00	1.74
2028	0.3	9.74	2.83	6.23	1.81

Scenario 2 outlines how the UK Government could mitigate the impact on children of further cuts to the ODA budget: by sustaining the ODA budget at 0.5% of GNI until 2027 and matching the share of child-focused bilateral aid in 2016 (29%).

This would enable £6 billion more to be spent on children between 2025 and 2028. This could easily be achieved by phasing out the use of ODA for within the next year, given almost £3 billion was spent within the UK in 2024 alone.

The value of investment in child-focused ODA

Child rights are not a marginal issue. Children make up nearly half of the population of low- and middle-income countries and, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the world), they have unique needs in sustainable development. However, analysis by UNICEF found that only one in three of the 48 child-related indicators in the SDGs had been met or were on track to be met.¹⁰

Furthermore, investing in children and their development is one of the best returns for UK ODA. Vaccinated children who are in education, well nourished, and protected from climate shocks, are more likely to grow into productive adults who contribute to society and drive economic growth in their own countries and internationally.

Recent analysis, completed by Ernst & Young for World Vision, found that every \$1 invested in children through ODA returns \$10 in benefits to children and the broader community, through health, education and social value. Similar rates of return have been found for sector-specific investments:

- **\$1 invested in early child development generates \$13 in return**
- **\$1 invested in vaccination returns \$26**
- **\$1 invested in nutrition returns between \$4 and \$35**
- **Each additional year in school generates a 10% increase in annual earnings**

Given the potential returns on investment, and the fact that children represent nearly half the population of developing countries, investing in children is the right thing to do and our best opportunity to achieve the SDGs and ensure the best value for money in UK ODA spending. Critically, it is also an investment in a safer and more secure world for everyone.

Endnotes

- ¹ Learning poverty is defined as the inability to read and comprehend a simple text by the age of 10. World Bank, *The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update*, World Bank, Washington DC, June 2022, p 7.
- ² David Sharrow, Lucia Hug, Yang Liu, Naomi Lindt, Graeme Wilson Fell, Wanli Nie and Danshen You, *Levels and Trends in Child Mortality: Report 2024*, UNICEF, New York, 2025.
- ³ UNICEF ‘Global childhood immunization levels stalled in 2023 leaving many without lifesaving protection’ Press Release 15 July 2024.
- ⁴ UNICEF *Progress on Children’s Well-being: Centring child rights in the 2030 Agenda*, UNICEF, New York, September 2023, p 23.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ UNICEF *The Climate Crisis is a Child’s Rights Crisis: Introducing the Children’s Climate Risk Index*, UNICEF, New York, August 2021, p 13.
- ⁷ Immediate cuts to UK aid budget announced in the Spring Statement – Bond reaction | Bond.
- ⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/announcements/statistics-on-international-development-provisional-uk-oda-spend-2024>
- ⁹ <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/migrants-will-be-put-up-in-hotels-for-years-yet-treasury-admits-990b52kh0>
- ¹⁰ UNICEF *Progress on Children’s Well-being: Centering child rights in the 2030 Agenda*, UNICEF, New York, September 2023, p 1–2.

Acknowledgment

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