

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

The UK Committee for UNICEF (UNICEF UK) – 26 November 2024

New research, published by The UK Committee for UNICEF, reveals dramatic and disproportionate cuts to international development spending for children.

Analysis of UK Official Development Assistance (ODA) finds child-focused* international aid declined significantly and disproportionately in the last decade.

KEY FINDINGS:

- UK aid spending on **child-focused bilateral ODA fell by 56% between 2016 and 2022.**
- Despite years of publicly championing education, just **4% of UK bilateral aid was spent on education in 2022, down from 11% in 2016.**
- UK **bilateral ODA spending on water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) fell by 75% between 2018 and 2022.**
- **The proportion of bilateral climate aid that was child-focused fell from 31% in 2019 to 13% in 2022.**
- Child-focused aid became a smaller proportion of the UK's overall aid spending – **the share of bilateral aid that was child-focused fell from 30% to 18% from 2016 to 2022.**

Figure 1: The UK's child-focused ODA spending, from 2013-2022

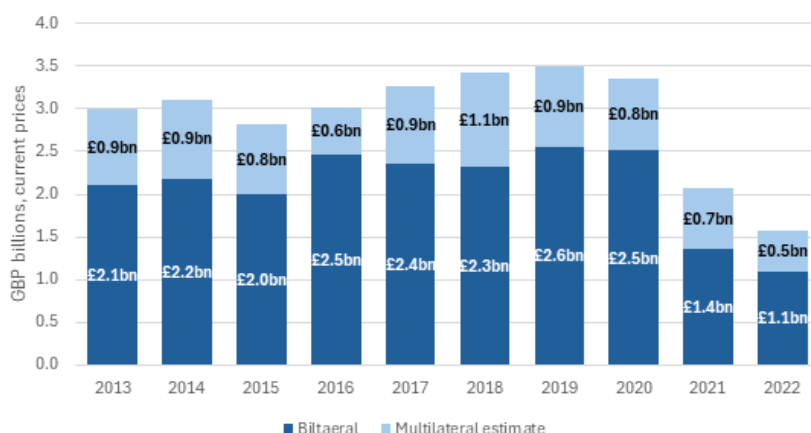
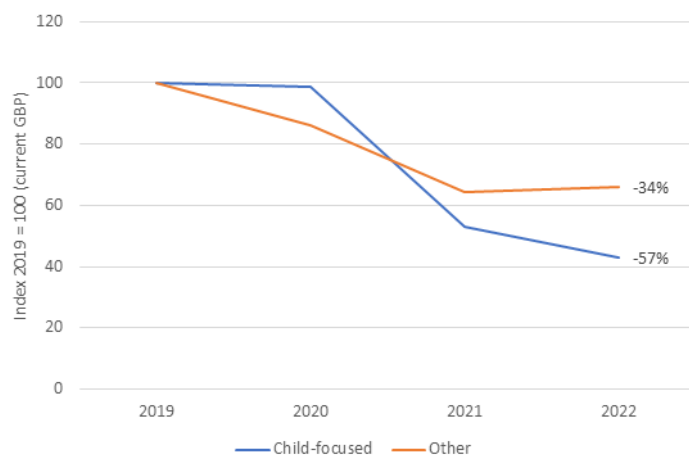


Figure 2: Overall ODA cuts vs child-focused ODA cuts, UK bilateral aid (excluding in-donor refugee costs) as a percentage of 2019 values



* Aid is considered 'child-focused' if delivered by child-focused organisations or in sectors that disproportionately benefit children, such as: education; child, maternal and reproductive healthcare; basic water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH); prevention and demobilisation of child soldiers.

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WHY THIS MATTERS FOR CHILDREN

This worrying trend risks leaving the world's most vulnerable children behind and undermining UK commitments to support the Global Sustainable Development Goals.

Climate change and environmental degradation, public health emergencies, and heightened levels of conflict and humanitarian crises are making the world less safe for children. **Globally, one in six children live in extreme poverty.** Millions die every year before their fifth birthday from preventable diseases and malnutrition. Many more cannot access education they need to thrive.

Children now make up half of the population of low- and middle-income countries. Development policy must recognise that gains for children are gains for their wider societies and for sustainable global development goals overall.

CASE STUDY – WASH PROGRAMME CUT BY MORE THAN 70%

The FCDO-funded [Climate Resilient WASH in Africa and Asia](#) programme began in 2017. It was designed to improve the resilience of water and sanitation services in some of the world's poorest and most climate vulnerable counties, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and Nepal. It included a focus on responding to pressing climate-related changes in the incidence of water and sanitation related diseases.

At the start of the programme the budget was set at £27 million. By the time the programme closed in 2022 the budget had been cut to £7.6 million. The project's [2022 annual review](#) pointed out that the budget reduction had a "significant impact on the programme", affecting the number of people with access to vital WASH services.

HOW THE UK GOVERNMENT CAN MAKE POSITIVE CHANGE FOR CHILDREN

Despite budget constraints, a lot can be done. For instance, even if ODA spend was set at 0.55% of Gross National Income (GNI) for the next four years, returning the share of bilateral funding going to sectors that benefit children (health, education, nutrition) to 2016-levels would increase child-focused bilateral ODA by £7.1 billion over that period.

Now is the time to reset the course of UK international development policy by:

- 1. Re-prioritising children in UK spending on overseas development assistance.**
- 2. Dedicating 25% of UK ODA to child-focused spending and returning the overall ODA budget to 0.7% of GNI.**
- 3. Ensuring the rights and needs of children are always core considerations in international development policymaking.**

THE CASE FOR INVESTING IN CHILDREN

Failing to invest in children puts all our futures at risk. Good health and education are critical for children to survive and thrive, and underpin broader community development. Investing in the world's children is not a favour, but a practical and essential step towards a secure and sustainable future for everyone. **Every \$1 invested in: vaccination returns up to \$26¹; nutrition returns up to \$16²; education returns up to \$10³; climate adaption returns up to \$10⁴.**

To learn more about this report and how you can be a champion for child rights, please contact Isabelle Taylor, Senior Political Affairs Adviser (isabellet@unicef.org.uk) to arrange a meeting. The [full report](#) is available on the UNICEF UK website.

¹ United Nations Children's Fund, 2023. *The State of the World's Children 2023: For every child, vaccination.*

² International Food Policy Research Institute, 2015. *Global Nutrition Report 2015.*

³ World Vision, 2024. *Putting Children First for Sustainable Development.*

⁴ United Nations Children's Fund, 2022. *Protect, Prepare, Prioritize: A call to action on climate and children.*