

A young girl with a joyful expression is holding a large ear of corn. She is wearing a light blue short-sleeved shirt and a patterned skirt. The background is a sunlit cornfield with tall stalks and green leaves.

FUTURES UNDISRUPTED

**Living up to the UK's
commitments to children**

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The livelihoods of families like Naomi in
Zambia are being upended by climate
change

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Syrian refugee girls use water taps installed
by World Vision in Azraq refugee camp

Children in Kampong Chhnang province, Cambodia enjoy learning.



Introduction

There has never been a tougher time to be a child. The triple threats of COVID-19, conflict, and climate change are converging to rob them of their childhoods and, unless we act now, their futures.

Although children are at relatively lower risk of serious infection or death from COVID-19¹, more than 1.5 billion girls and boys are experiencing at least one significant secondary impact of the pandemic - falling into extreme poverty, lost learning, reduced access to vital healthcare, malnutrition, violence, and exploitation - risking their lives and futures.²

For those living in more fragile areas of the world, the primary and secondary impacts of COVID-19 were combined with the devastating impacts of climate change and conflict. Nearly every child in the world is affected in some way by the climate crisis. But according to UNICEF, 1 billion children face an 'extremely high risk' due to drought, flooding, and other climate related impacts.³ And the risks for some children do not stop there. Globally, at least 1.6 billion children are living in a conflict-affected country, with approximately 426 million (one in six children) living in conflict affected areas within those countries.⁴ 50% of the world's refugees are now children.⁵

Taken together, COVID-19, conflict, and climate change threaten the international order, global security, and ability to build community resilience – all priorities identified in the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. They have fundamentally increased the risks children face, driving deepening levels of vulnerability, inequality, displacement, hunger, and poverty. They are dramatically impacting childhoods and girls' and boys' dreams for the future.

Because children make up the majority population of the least developed countries, and their proportion is only growing, investing in children makes sense. They are amongst the most vulnerable and are the most likely to be left behind unless they are put at the heart of development and foreign policy priorities. The UK has made substantial global commitments to vulnerable children overseas, including leadership on the Call to Action to end forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking; ministerial representation on the Board of the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children; and the Strategic Vision for Gender Equality; the cross-government Modern Slavery Strategy; the Disability Inclusion Strategy; and leadership on ambitious targets for girls' education.

The UK has committed to being at the forefront of delivering the Sustainable Development Goals⁶ - which include the commitment to leave no one behind. At the Third International Conference on Financing for Development in 2015, development actors, including the UK, committed to an Action Agenda that specifically recognises that "investing in children and youth is critical to achieving inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development for present and future generations."⁷

Investing in children is however more than a moral and practical imperative to achieve the UK's global commitments – it makes financial sense. A child-sensitive approach to Official Development Assistance (ODA) is cost effective and would strengthen the return on investment of limited funds. Children are not only a barometer of poverty, and face lifelong consequences from it. Focusing on children also brings communities together and can generate huge returns to society.

The UK Government is failing the most vulnerable children, despite the commitments it has made and the logic of investing in them. The dramatic cuts to the UK Aid budget has hit the areas of work and programmes specifically affecting the rights and well-being of children hardest: humanitarian assistance has been cut by 40% as part of the £4billion in cuts to ODA. This has resulted in health funding being cut by 10% - in the midst of a pandemic; funding for nutrition programming being cut by 80%; and, in a year when the UK led the development of a Girls' Education Declaration at the G7 and co-hosted the Global Education Summit, funding for education was cut by 40%. Programmes to prevent violence and exploitation of children have been slashed or, in some cases, have simply disappeared as previous initiatives phase out. Even though children make up a considerable proportion of those most likely to be left behind and although they are critical to sustainable development, there is no FCDO strategy to comprehensively promote their rights and well-being and ensure strong coordination across the Department. Without this, our common future will continue to be disrupted.

Impacts of COVID-19, conflict and climate change on children

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to more children going hungry, missing education, being exposed to violence and experiencing poverty in the UK and around the world.

Globally, the perfect storm created by COVID-19 disruption, climate change and conflict is compounding the vulnerability of children and hindering their futures and dreams. Poverty is exacerbated by disrupted livelihoods and supply chains linked to these perils and further intensifies the challenges facing children.

Unless urgent action is taken, the collision of these global threats will continue to have unprecedented cumulative impacts on the world's most vulnerable children and reverse gains made over the last decades.



Displacement

84 million people in the world including more than 33 million children are displaced, driven from their homes by conflict, extreme poverty, droughts, food shortages, famine, or political turmoil. Fear, hunger, uncertainty, and loss are common. They want to go home, to have a 'normal' childhood.



Hunger and malnutrition

Worldwide 41 million people, half of them children, are facing catastrophic levels of food insecurity. They are one step away from starvation. Girls and boys are not just starving but are being starved to death. Those who do not die from starvation face irreversible effects to their physical and mental development and are at increased risk of contracting diseases or dying from other complications.



Not being heard

Children are not responsible for conflict, climate change and COVID-19 disruption, and yet face their greatest burdens as a result. Their futures are at stake. They know best the challenges they face and often have the best ideas for creating a better world. But their opinions are rarely sought regarding crises and their voices are often discounted.



Violence, exploitation and abuse

Violence against children occurs in every country, in every community. Even before COVID-19, it was estimated that 1.7 billion children experience some form of violence every year (including physical violence in the home or at school, sexual abuse, child labour or early forced marriage). Exploitation of children – in hazardous labour, child marriage or for sexual purposes, rises when children and families face severe economic challenges. Risks to children are at their highest in conflict settings, where children are surrounded by and often targeted for violence.



Endangered health

Children require robust, resilient, and inclusive health systems to thrive and survive. COVID-19, climate change and conflict are disrupting access to routine primary healthcare, including vaccinations, treatment for illnesses/conditions such as malaria, pneumonia, diarrhoea, and sepsis. Treatment for mental distress and trauma are also neglected. Adolescent girls often miss out on sexual and reproductive health needs.



Disruption to education

Globally, before COVID-19, 258 million children, including 130 million girls, were not in school. And the education of 40 million children is disrupted every year by climate related disasters.⁸ These are among the 127 million children in humanitarian contexts out of school.⁹ Millions of the most vulnerable children are not able to access education due to socio-economic factors in their families and communities. Pandemics, conflict, and natural disasters close or destroy schools – and children who are displaced face further disruption to learning.

COVID-19 disruptions have prevented repairs to an embankment damaged by Cyclone Amphan in Bangladesh.

The case for investing in children

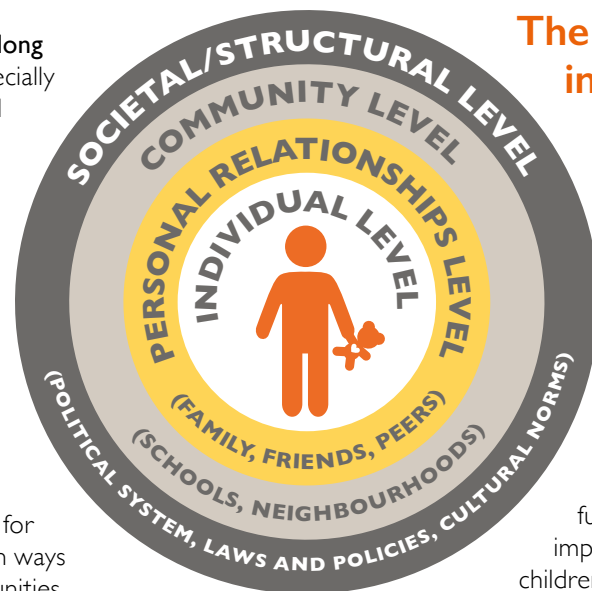
Children are entitled to rights and dignity, but their age can make them dependent on adults to experience these – particularly if they have compounding vulnerabilities such as disability or being a girl. In other words, investing in children is the right thing to do.

From an international development perspective, investing in children also makes sense because¹⁰:

- **Children are a barometer of poverty.** Children are the most vulnerable in any society and poverty impacts them most profoundly, while at the same time they lack legal and economic status in society. The well-being of children reflects the overall situation of the family, community, and society in which they live.
- **Childhood poverty can have lifelong consequences.** Children are especially vulnerable to shocks, trauma and poverty. Household education and empowerment levels, conflict and climate crises and inequality increase the likelihood that poverty will be passed from one generation to the next. Breaking this cycle of intergenerational poverty requires putting the child at its heart.
- **Focusing on children brings communities together.** Concern for children can unite communities in ways that other issues cannot. Communities working for the most vulnerable children sustain their actions over longer periods of time than those connecting over economic or social concerns.¹¹
- **Investment in children at an early age can generate huge returns to society.** It leads to greater educational outcomes, higher lifetime income levels, reduction in expenditure on welfare services, and improved governance.¹² Investing in children and families is the best way to foster sustained change for individuals, communities and nations. In humanitarian contexts, the imperative is even greater.
- **Children are critical agents of change in their communities now.** Children themselves are taking action to build peace, combat climate change and raise awareness of COVID-19 prevention.

The ecology of a child

A child's well-being depends on their relationships with others and the physical, social, and political context in which they live - the ecology of the child.¹³ The different relationships, institutions, systems, and structures around a child are key factors in whether a child can develop to his or her fullest potential.



The return on investment

In addition to being the moral and logical thing to do, using ODA to invest in children is good value for money.¹⁴ The return-on-investment evidence has so far mostly been sector-specific (education, protection, health, etc), as donors' investment is tracked according to sectoral silos and distinct government priorities. The limitations of tracking and sectoral focus of funding runs contrary to what implementing organisations know: that children do not live in these silos and so neither should the approach to their well-being.

Impacts of sectoral investment in children

The economic value of investing in children's education, protection, health and nutrition are clear:

Education: Extreme poverty could be halved with the achievement of universal primary and secondary education.¹⁵ Each year of education adds 10% to an individual's income.¹⁶ For girls' the impact is even greater - a year of secondary education can mean an increase of 25% in a girls' lifetime income and an increase of 1% in the number of girls in education can increase a country's GDP by 0.3%.¹⁷ In contrast, the World Bank has predicted an economic loss of up to \$10 trillion due to COVID-19 educational losses.¹⁸ Educating girls also decreases child marriage; for each year of secondary school, a girl is 5% less likely to marry under 18.¹⁹

Protection: The cost of violence, exploitation and abuse of children could be \$7 trillion globally, with the worst forms of child labour's impacts costing \$97 billion every year.²⁰ Investing in programmes that strengthen protection systems and change social norms related to violence against girls and boys cost significantly less. Eliminating child marriage could save governments at least 5% of their education budget.²¹ Despite this, a review of global ODA spending by all donors in 2018 showed that less than 1% was allocated to ending violence against children, with the UK ranking 7th overall with a 1.8% spend.²²

Health and nutrition: Every dollar invested in childhood immunisation returns \$4835 and nutrition returns \$17 per dollar spent.²³ Health system strengthening investments can return nine times the value in economic and social benefits with a spend of just \$5 per person per year.²⁴

Investing in the whole child

World Vision sees first-hand that investing in one sector unilaterally limits the impact it can have. Children are impacted by everything around them – in their families, communities and nations. Their educational achievement, safety, health and nutrition are all interdependent.

A child-sensitive approach to Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) is cost effective and would strengthen the return on investment of limited funds, maximising human capital and unlocking the long-term economic potential of low and middle-income contexts with growing populations of young people.²⁵

Unless children are at the heart of development and diplomatic policy, COVID-19, conflict, and climate change will continue to disrupt the childhoods of billions of children and create a bleak future of endless cycles of aid dependency. Children will have a place in school but be too ill to attend or disappear into child marriage or hazardous labour. Or they will be safe from violence but continue to die of preventable diseases. Or they will be healthy and well-nourished but have no future without education.

Humanitarian emergencies clearly demonstrate the need to address the needs of the whole child. But even then, sectors of funding most exclusively targeted at children (child protection and education) are the least funded of all sectors. What message does this send to children about their value and their future?

IMPROVING THE LIVES OF THE MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN IN ETHIOPIA

Recent projects in World Vision's Yilma Densa, Banja and Libo Kem Kem Area Programmes in the Amhara District of Ethiopia (2007-2021) focused on quality of and access to education. World Vision's approach included education system strengthening, improving literacy as well as income generation for economical poor families and strengthening community child protection systems. This comprehensive approach has been crucial to enabling the poorest children also to benefit from improvements to education. The livelihood component enabled children from economically poor families to attend school.

Community Care Coalitions (CCCs) set up by World Vision initially to respond to children and families made vulnerable by the AIDS crisis have been strengthened over the programme lifetime and have played a part in multiple areas of child well-being in particular child protection. The CCCs are critical for ongoing sustainability of programme activities in the future and have increased reporting of child labour and access to safety nets and other services referral.

Child marriage was one child protection issue that CCCs and child rights clubs were empowered to address. Although it is a crime, it is difficult for law enforcement to trace as most agreements made between parents of the bride and groom remain unknown until the wedding day. Deep rooted beliefs are handed down through generations that the role of women is to procreate, and girls consider it a source of shame and dishonour if not chosen quickly by potential grooms. To address this problem, girls were empowered through awareness raising and encouraged to report when they heard about such arrangements. Teachers and CCC leaders were trained to handle and respond to reported cases quickly. In the Banja programme alone, the intervention helped 18 girls to escape from an arranged marriage to an older man.

WORLD VISION: MAKING A DIFFERENCE



Inspired by our Christian faith, World Vision has been committed to the most vulnerable children for over 70 years, working alongside them and their communities to address the impacts of COVID-19, conflict and climate change. We aspire to a world in which every child can live fullness of life, achieve all of their hopes and dreams, and create the world they want to see.



In 2020, World Vision UK supported **3.6 million people** including **2 million children** in **174 projects** across **36 countries**. We responded to humanitarian emergencies in **24 countries**, reaching more than **1 million people** – over half of them children.

World Vision UK is a member of the World Vision Partnership of almost 100 offices worldwide.



Together we've impacted the lives of over **200 million vulnerable children** by tackling the root causes of poverty.



Over the last five years, **89%** of the severely malnourished children we treated made a full recovery.



We reach one new person with clean water every 10 seconds and three more schools every day with clean water.



World Vision UK AID funded programming.

World Vision's programming cuts across the various challenges children and communities face. UK Aid funded programmes include:

- **Preventing COVID-19** - working with health workers, faith leaders and the media in the DRC to raise awareness of COVID-19 prevention measures, and establish surveillance systems to refer cases for treatment (funded by FCDO and UNILEVER, the project has reached more than 800,000 people directly and over 6 million with preventative media messages).
- **Improving Girls' Access through Transforming Education (IGATE)** – increasing girls' school attendance and learning outcomes in Zimbabwean schools by identifying and dismantling the greatest barriers to education at community, institutional, and personal levels (funded through the Girls Education Challenge fund, this project has reached over 100,000 girls and boys in 2021).
- **Partnership Against Child Exploitation (PACE)** - combating the exploitation of children in the worst forms of child labour by reducing children's vulnerability and supporting governments and the private sector to keep children out of supply chains in Ethiopia, DRC and the Central African Republic (funded through AidConnect, the programme has reached 76,000 people in 2021).
- **Faith leader action in support of survivors of sexual violence** – increasing public support from faith leaders in DRC and South Sudan to foster unity between survivors of sexual violence and their communities and promote justice for survivors (Funded through the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative).
- **DFID SHARP - Tadooud** - reducing food insecurity and chronic malnutrition and increasing resilience in 5 States in Darfur, Sudan, targeting returnee and conflict vulnerable populations. This project reached nearly 400,000 people in 2021.



In Zimbabwe, Muchengeti 17, left school to take care of his siblings when they were orphaned in 2017.

“When there is peace in the family and in the community, I feel happy and safe.”

Okech, South Sudan

“The coronavirus affects me a lot because I cannot go out to play like before. I miss my friends and classmates.”

Christopher, Nicaragua

“Despite the fact that isolation will help protect us from the virus, this will bring starvation that can still kill us too.”

Anita, DRC



Armenian teenager Roman dreams of becoming a boxer and doesn't let his inability to see get in his way.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Investing in children is critical to achieving sustainable development and achieving the UK Government's Integrated Review priorities. It is morally right, logically sensible, and cost-effective. To invest in the whole child, the UK must:

Put a child lens on all UK diplomatic and development policy and strategies

The FCDO must see children as among those most likely to be left behind, rather than seeing them as just another classification of people, a 'special interest group' being promoted by civil society. A child lens can be achieved by:

1 Developing a cross-FCDO child rights strategy to ensure their rights and well-being are embedded across everything the department does to ensure their specific needs and rights cut across all priorities (from education to open societies) will have the most sustainable impact.

2 Recognising that COVID-19, conflict and climate change have created a perfect storm for child rights, create clear internal coordination processes to ensure they are not left behind.

3 Making child rights training mandatory for all FCDO staff, in the UK and overseas, and working with UK NGOs to develop and deliver this.

Be accountable to children

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been accepted by nearly every country in the world, children have a right to participate in decisions affecting them. They also have a unique perspective and innovative ideas on how to address the global challenges of the day. To be a 'Force for Good' in the world, the UK should be a leading advocate for children to be heard by:

1 Speaking to children. The FCDO should lead the way in child consultation when developing policies which will most affect their lives, ensuring that children's voices and inputs are heard at every level of the UK political system. For example, embedding a requirement for consultation with children into the proposed child well-being impact assessments and lead by example in consulting with children in the UK and overseas to gain their insight as policies are developed and reviewed.

2 Supporting children's participation in national and global arenas. For example, children's voices must be heard at climate change talks such as COP26 and at local and national level climate discussions. Children must not only be heard but they must be listened to, and their opinions taken into account.

"We, as children and young people, have an important role in ensuring good climate policies. It is very crucial that we can gain climate-related knowledge and equip ourselves with the skills to raise our voices to hold to account our leaders. Children can also come up with innovative solutions considering the climate crisis and environmental sustainability."

Dola, Bangladesh



Jesús, 5, from a Venezuelan migrant family, plays with other children at an outdoor community soccer court in Ecuador.

Ensure ODA embeds child well-being and rights at its core

Funding cuts have made meeting UK global development commitments more difficult. More funding is needed and the ODA funding that is currently available must be used in the most effective way possible. Demonstrating the positive impact ODA will continue to have to keep children safe, happy, healthy, and learning can counteract some of the negative response to drastic cuts made this year. Investing in children to achieve the most sustainable results must:

1 Return ODA to 0.7% of GNI, in line with the UK's Development Act and the Conservative Government's manifesto commitment. To adequately address the threats that children face and ensure long-term sustainable solutions, UK Aid must be restored to 0.7% of GNI. UK Aid has been well-respected and effective at tackling issues of poverty and injustice, but must be restored to previous levels to truly be a force for good in the world.

2 Focus on those most likely to be left behind by ensuring adequate funding is available to meet the urgent needs of children in humanitarian responses. In particular, the UK should lead by example in increasing funding to education and child protection in emergencies. Implementation of

the government's Strategic Vision for Women and Girls and Disability Strategy must also ensure that no child is left behind.

3 Ensure equivalent pledges across child rights-focused funds. The £430 million pledged to the Global Partnership for Education this summer was a positive step in supporting the achievement of children's well-being globally. However, education funding commitments (and particularly girls' education) will not achieve their aims without addressing the barriers that keep children out of education or learning. Violence against children is a significant barrier to school access and so an equivalent pledge must be made at the Together to #ENDviolence Solutions Summit Leader's Event in 2022.

4 Include child rights impact assessments (CRIAs) as a requirement for FCDO funding. In the same vein as gender equality impact assessments, CRIAs would require consideration be given to the impact any project would have on the well-being and rights of children. They are powerful tools that can help prevent potential harm, minimise the risks of costly policy failures and mistakes, while serving the best interests of the child and enhancing compliance with commitments to child rights. They should be included as a component of funding applications as well as of project impact reporting.

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Syrian refugee Shaima enjoys playing football with friends after finishing her schoolwork in Jordan.



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At World Vision, our focus is on helping the most vulnerable children, in the most dangerous places, overcome poverty and injustice. Inspired by our Christian faith, we've worked together with communities, partners, local leaders and governments, for over 70 years, so that children – of all faiths and none – are empowered to experience fullness of life.

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