

ODA AT THE CROSSROADS

Why putting children
at the heart will
create a brighter
future for all





Acknowledgements

This report uses data and economic analysis of OECD/DAC database undertaken by EY-Parthenon, combined with publicly available information about aid cuts in a number of major donors to make new projections about the lost return on investment from reduced overseas development assistance.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every child deserves the chance to grow, learn and thrive. Yet in 2025, that promise is slipping further from reach. Millions of children are caught in the crossfire of crises they did not create—from climate shocks and conflict to deepening inequality and collapsing safety nets. As donor governments retreat from global responsibility, children are paying the highest price.

Despite evidence that investing in children delivers up to \$10 in sustainable benefits for every \$1 spent, Official Development Assistance (ODA) directed toward children is shrinking. In 2023, only 11.5% of total ODA was child-related, down from 13% the year before—an alarming trend as the global community faces numerous escalating crises.

This paltry sum runs contrary to the fact that children account for nearly half of the population in low-income countries receiving aid.¹ Children are projected to make up a larger proportion of the population in least

developed countries,² while the percentage of ODA targeting them continues to shrink. The consequences are profound: 333 million children live in extreme poverty,³ nearly 1 in 6 are affected by conflict,⁴ and natural disasters continue to threaten their health, safety and future.

Investing in children through ODA is both a strategic necessity and a high-impact approach with lasting global benefits. Supporting children's health, nutrition, protection and education creates a ripple effect that strengthens families, stabilises communities, and fosters resilient economies. These gains don't stop at national borders; they advance donor countries' strategic interests in global stability, economic growth, and national security. Educating girls alone delivers outsized impact - each additional year of schooling can increase a girl's future earnings by up to 20%,⁵ while every dollar invested in girls' education can return \$2.80 and significantly reduce child mortality and malnutrition.⁶ Beyond economics, child-focused aid lays the groundwork for peaceful, resilient societies, reducing the drivers of conflict and crises before they take root.

Child related ODA is in sharp decline - and the future forecast is bleak

Despite clear evidence of the return on investment from spending ODA on children, **child-focused ODA dropped from 15% of total ODA in 2022 to 11.5% in 2023**, with both multilateral and bilateral donors reducing their allocations. ODA is increasingly directed away from child-related sectors. New analysis for this report finds that if current trends continue, **child-related ODA could fall to just 7% by 2030—nearly halving from 2019 levels.** However, given that many major donors have



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announced major ODA cuts in 2025, the forecast is likely to be even worse. Our analysis suggests a \$51 billion reduction in ODA overall between 2025 and 2030. Combined with long-term decreases in the proportion of ODA spent on children, this could equate to **a \$163 billion lost return on investment in children between 2023 and 2030.**

Donors must invest in children

ODA remains a vital tool to break cycles of poverty, especially for children. Prioritising

children is an investment in a more peaceful, just and prosperous world. In the face of compounding global crises and growing inequality, the global community must act decisively.

This report is a call to action: to protect and prioritise ODA for children - not just because it's right, but because it's one of the smartest, most transformative investments we can make for a more stable, equitable world. Protecting and expanding investment in children is both the right and the smart thing to do.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Ring-fence funding for child-related programming

Donors should ringfence child-related ODA from cuts and commit to increasing child-related ODA by at least 10% annually, to reach a target of 25%. Before funding in other sectors is approved, there must be a clear assessment of the impact on children's rights, safety, health, and well-being to ensure that ODA promotes children's wellbeing, or at the very least does not harm them. Improved ODA tracking should also include age disaggregation.



Invest in the whole child

Adopt cross-sectoral approaches addressing education, nutrition, health and protection together, with a focus on critical development windows like early childhood and adolescence.



Leverage ODA for locally-led systemic change

Shifting decision-making and funding to local actors—who are rooted in their communities and best placed to lead effective, context-specific responses—builds resilience, improves efficiency, and promotes equity by addressing power imbalances in the aid system. Meaningfully including local organisations, including those led by children, and young people, strengthens accountability, enhances the impact of development efforts, and lays the foundation for sustainable, community-driven change.



Use ODA to complement other development financing flows

ODA is a crucial source of financing; however, it is not enough on its own to fill the gap for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and global climate goals. Donors must combine ambitious ODA budgets with wider efforts to mobilise additional resources and increase fiscal space in lower income countries. This will require reforms to improve global tax and debt systems, de-risk private investment and maximise investment from international financial institutions (IFIs).



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THE CASE FOR PROTECTING ODA - AND PRIORITISING CHILDREN

Investment in children matters

The future - for both people and our planet - relies on investing in children. It makes both economic and moral sense. Children worldwide need, and have the right to, accessible healthcare, quality education, nutritious food and a safe home. Yet too many children worldwide - especially in some of the poorest countries, challenging contexts, and most marginalised communities - are deprived of these necessary components for life.

The world as we know it is at a crossroads. After years of progress, the numbers of people living in extreme poverty have now stalled,⁷ with 333 million children living on less than \$2.15 a day. The proportion of the world caught up in conflict has grown by 65% in the past three years,⁸ with 473 million children - or 1 in 6 globally - affected by war.⁹ The climate crisis puts children's rights to a safe home, healthy environment, healthcare, food and learning at imminent risk, with increased risks of heatwaves, drought, flooding and wildfires.¹⁰

It is essential for donors to invest in children:



For sustainable development:

Investing in children's health, nutrition, education and protection ensures stronger, more resilient societies and economies in the long term. For example, investment in education has contributed to half of global economic growth since 1980, 70% of income gains among the world's poorest quintile and 40% of extreme poverty reduction.¹¹



To break the cycle of poverty and inequality:

Supporting children's rights helps lift families and communities out of poverty by improving life chances and reducing disparities. For example, every \$1 spent on girls' education and rights can yield a return of up to \$2.80 - while also lowering child mortality and improving nutrition. Missed education opportunities for girls are estimated to cost the global economy between \$15 and \$30 trillion in lost lifetime productivity and earnings. Failure to prevent violence against children can cost countries up to 11% of their GDP.¹²



To promote peace and stability:

Protecting and empowering children—especially in fragile and conflict-affected contexts - reduces the risk of future violence and social unrest. A 2024 report by the Institute for Economics & Peace and the Global Partnership for Education found a consistent correlation between better education outcomes and more peaceful societies. Countries with higher primary and secondary school completion rates tend to be more peaceful.¹³



To deliver high returns on investment:

Early childhood interventions have proven to yield significant economic and social benefits over a lifetime, making them among the most cost-effective investments. For example, every \$1 invested in tackling child undernutrition yields a \$23 return, while the cost of inaction may exceed \$41 trillion over the next decade.¹⁴

ODA is declining - putting children's lives at risk

Amidst the triple crises of climate, conflict and COVID-19's economic aftermath, ODA remains an essential pillar of global cooperation, poverty reduction and sustainable development. Despite economic growth in some regions and rising private investment, ODA plays a unique and irreplaceable role - especially for low- and middle-income countries facing structural challenges, fragile institutions and limited access to financing.

However, recent years have seen a troubling decline in both the volume and ambition of ODA. Donor contributions remain well below the United Nations' target of 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI), with only a handful

of countries - such as Norway, Sweden and Luxembourg - consistently meeting this benchmark. In real terms, aid budgets are stagnating or shrinking, particularly when adjusted for inflation.¹⁵ Amidst growing humanitarian needs and increased domestic refugee pressures, ODAs being redirected, instead of increased to cover both long-term development goals and emergency responses.¹⁶

This failure to invest in development has profound consequences for children - the group most vulnerable to crises and inequality, yet also the most promising investment for the future.



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How declining ODA harms children

Childhood is a critical period for development, and exposure to violence, disruptions to education, healthcare and nutrition during these years can cause irreparable long-term physical and cognitive damage. Given more than one in six children lives in extreme poverty, 250 million children are out of school and 45 million children are experiencing malnutrition, ODA cuts to these sectors have devastating impacts on children.¹⁷

Cuts to health-related ODA mean fewer childhood vaccinations, weaker health systems, and increased child mortality. Education programmes - including school feeding, teacher training, and infrastructure development - face funding shortfalls, threatening learning outcomes and forcing many marginalised children, especially girls, out of school and into early marriage or child labour.

In humanitarian settings, where 140 million people are due to be displaced by the end of 2025¹⁸, needs are most acute. Declining aid means many children are now eating just one meal a day,¹⁹ and a total lack of investment in other critical services like protection from violence, psychosocial support and access to safe spaces. In conflict zones, refugee camps and areas affected by climate disasters, children are at increased risk of all forms of violence as families struggle to find food to eat. Increased food insecurity and the chaos of abrupt ration cuts have also led to heightened risks of trafficking and mental health impacts.²⁰

A shifting global ODA landscape

The decline in ODA reflects a broader weakening of multilateralism and global solidarity. In 2025, several major donor countries enacted sweeping aid cuts, reshaping the development landscape:

- The UK slashed its aid budget from 0.5% to 0.3% of GNI, redirecting funds to defence, in a move that ignores the root causes of insecurity — poverty, inequality, and injustice – and overlooks the foundational link between sustainable development and global stability. The United States froze foreign assistance programmes for 90 days, proposed an 83% reduction in funding for the Department of State and USAID and implemented major cuts to multilateral agencies such as the WHO.²¹
- France reduced its aid budget by €800 million—an 18% drop—while Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Finland, and Switzerland followed with cuts of 20–30%.²²

These reductions are expected to shrink G7 ODA contributions by as much as 28% between 2024 and 2026,²³ and globally by an estimated \$51 billion from 2025 levels by 2030 according to our analysis.²⁴ The consequences are already being felt in fragile regions like South Sudan, Yemen, Cox's Bazar and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where vital health, education and humanitarian programmes are under threat.

A growing equity gap

As aid recedes, the equity gap between children in high- and low-income countries is widening. Life outcomes are increasingly determined by geography. In better-resourced countries, children benefit from universal healthcare, quality education and robust safety nets. In poorer nations, declining ODA means children face steeper odds of survival, lower levels of education and literacy and high levels of gender inequality and other stigma - perpetuating cycles of poverty and underdevelopment.

This retreat from international responsibility also risks undoing decades of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those centred on child rights and wellbeing.

Investing in children: a moral and strategic imperative

Children are both the most affected by today's crises and the greatest potential drivers of tomorrow's progress. Every dollar spent on child nutrition, health, education and protection yields significant returns in terms of cognitive development, productivity, and social cohesion.

Protecting and expanding ODA—especially for children—is essential to breaking the cycle of poverty and laying the groundwork for a more sustainable and inclusive global future. A child-centred approach to ODA ensures that development efforts not only alleviate immediate suffering but also build the foundations for long-term resilience and equity. At a time when global challenges - from climate change to conflict - demand greater cooperation, not less, investing in children is one of the clearest paths to a safer, more just world.





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THE CHANGING GLOBAL ODA LANDSCAPE

In this report, new data analysis sheds important light on how ODA is increasingly failing the world's youngest and most vulnerable. The report uses the results of data analysis undertaken by EY-Parthenon, using a unique algorithm which identifies two categories for ODA:

- **Child-specific ODA:** capturing investments that are wholly related to children and specifically target the welfare of children through improved access to child-specific needs and services.
- **Child-benefitting ODA:** capturing broader investments that benefit children indirectly in a significant way by focusing on general improvements in infrastructure and health, education and social services which affect children and other members of their communities.

Next Generation Aid Initiative

In 2024, World Vision published '[Putting Children First for Sustainable Development](#)' which demonstrated the return on investment from child-related ODA. The economic analysis for the report conducted by EY-Parthenon found that while children make up over 40% of the population in poor countries, donors are only allocating 13.6% of total global funding towards girls and boys. The research also found that every \$1USD of child-related ODA directly or indirectly results in a \$10USD return.

This report uses the same methodology and the latest OECD-DAC data to provide an update on ODA spending on children and calculate ROI. Please see [Technical Appendix](#) for more details. Projections in ODA trends are developed by World Vision using this data.

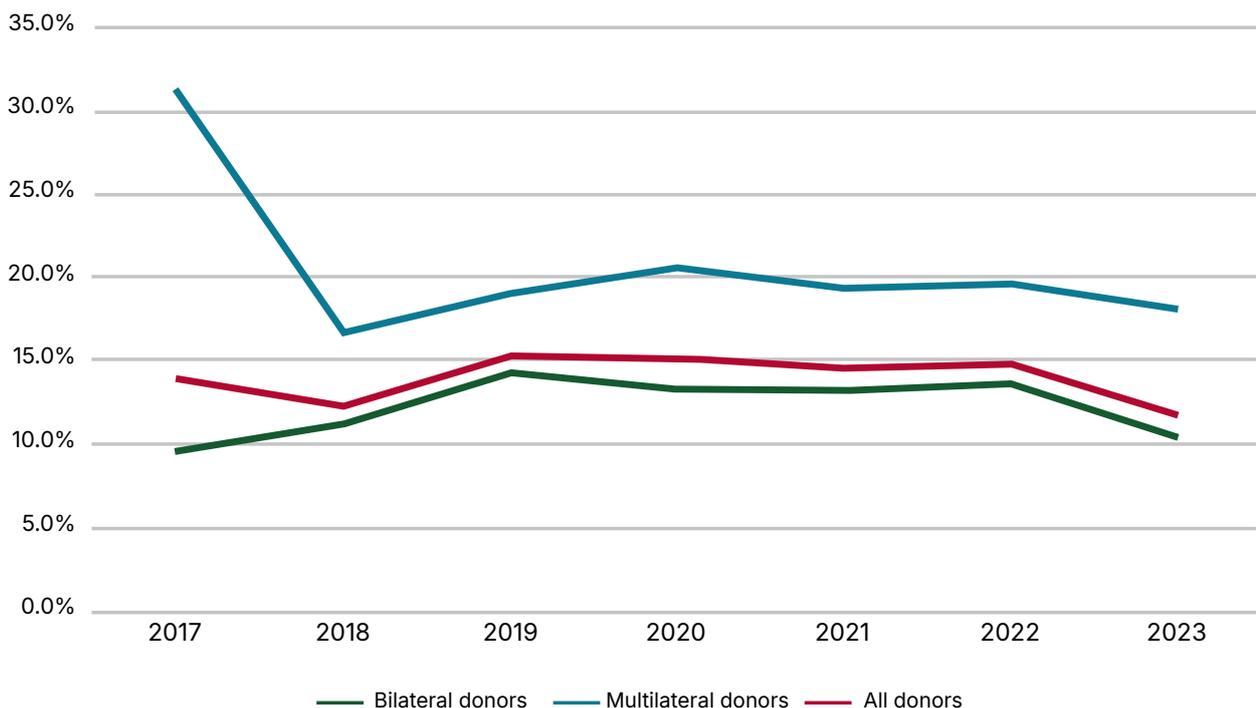
The analysis reveals a worrying decline: **child-related ODA fell from 15% of total ODA in 2022 to just 11.5% in 2023**. This drop - coming amidst escalating global crises, such as conflict, climate shocks, and growing poverty - signals a troubling retreat from child-focused development when it's needed most.

While ODA to children had remained relatively stable in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, this latest drop confirms a broader downward trend since 2019. **Bilateral donor allocations fell even more steeply—from 14% to 10%**. As almost 80% of child related ODA is funded by bilateral donors, this decrease is even more concerning. These numbers

highlight a consistent pattern: as donor priorities shift, investments in children are slipping further down the agenda.

According to the most recent OECD-DAC data from 2023, the United States, the Global Fund and EU Institutions are the top donors spending the most ODA on children. We can also assess ambition by looking at the donors that spend the highest proportion of their ODA budgets on child-related ODA - UNICEF, Global Fund and GAVI spend the highest proportion of their ODA budgets on child-related spending. Other countries have slipped down the rankings; in 2021, the UK was 11th amongst donors, but even before the recent cuts, now ranks just 14th.

Percentage of ODA that is Child-Related



Top donors (absolute spending, US billions)			
Bilateral	1	United States	\$7.3
	2	EU Institutions	\$2.4
	3	Germany	\$2.1
Multilateral	1	Global Fund	\$3.3
	2	International Development Association [IDA]	\$1.8
	3	Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization [GAVI]	\$1.2
Top donors (% of total ODA budget that is child-related)			
Bilateral	1	Portugal	31.8%
	2	Monaco	30.9%
	3	Turkiye	30.2%
Multilateral	1	UNICEF	99.0%
	2	Global Fund	64.0%
	3	Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization [GAVI]	57.2%

The future of aid for children: a bleak forecast

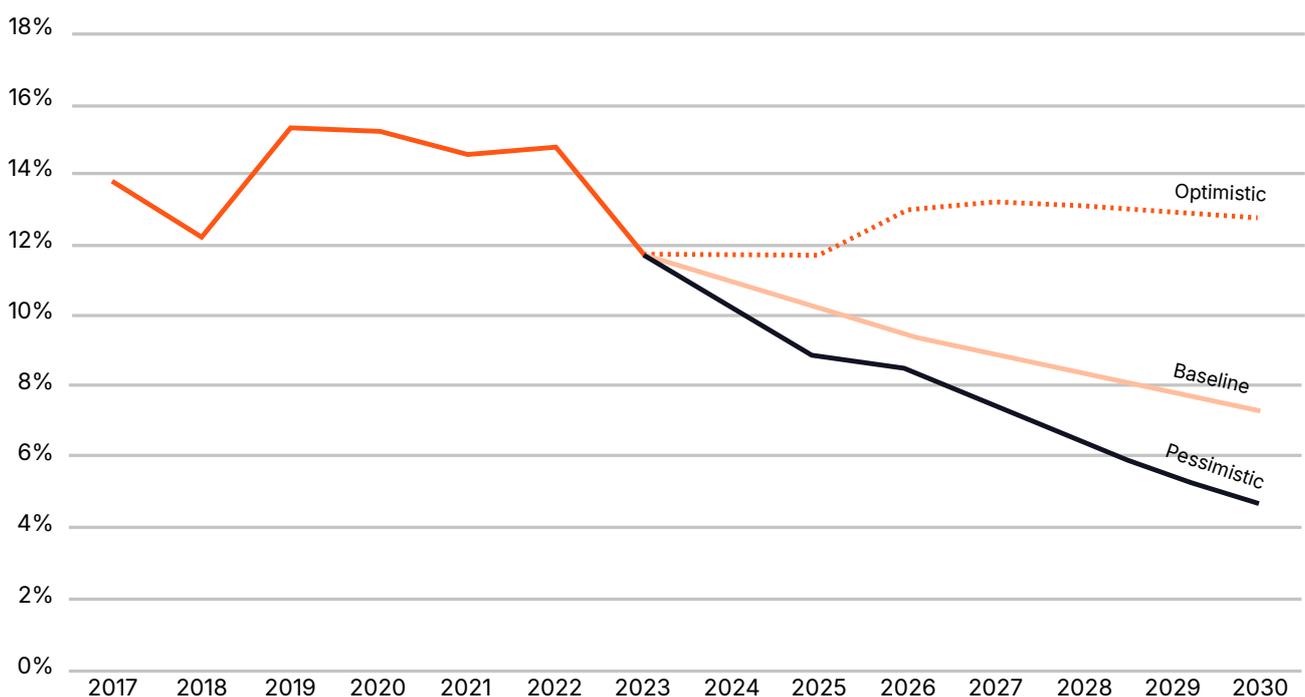
Looking ahead, the forecast is deeply concerning. The percentage of ODA spent on child-related sectors has been declining in recent years from 15% in 2019 to 11.5% in 2023.

If current trends persist, child-related ODA

could drop to just 7% of total aid by 2030²⁵.

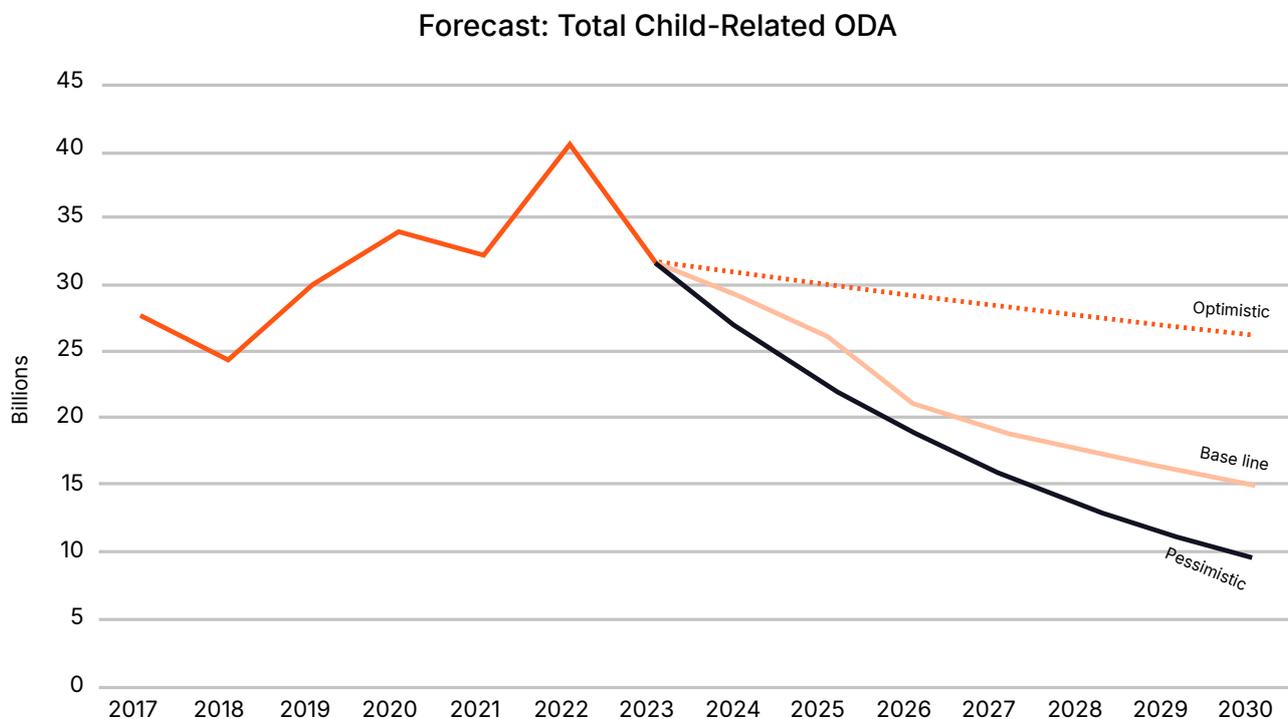
This would represent a near halving of its share compared to 2019 levels, even as global needs among children are rising sharply.

Forecast: Percent of Total ODA Spending that is Child-Related



Furthermore, given recently announced ODA cuts by major donors - such as the US, UK and France - our forecast suggests that the total value of child-related ODA will fall alongside shrinking total ODA budgets. **If the overall**

ODA cuts from 2022 to 2023 become a trend, we can expect to see the total amount of ODA directed towards children to be cut approximately in half, from almost \$32 billion in 2023 to just \$15 billion in 2030.²⁶



The situation is exacerbated by sweeping **ODA cuts announced by key donors**, including the United States, United Kingdom and France. In fact, we know that just the cuts to the US aid budget alone will have a dramatic effect on child-related ODA. Our analysis finds that the US was the single largest donor for child-related ODA every year from 2017-2023 by quite some margin, providing more than double the funding of the second biggest bilateral donor in 2023. It is unclear at this stage exactly what the extent of the cuts will be, but some estimates suggest an approximate \$10 billion reduction in 2026 compared to 2025.²⁷ This could translate to **\$1.3 billion in direct cuts to child-focused programming** affecting everything from childhood immunisation rates to girls' education and child nutrition.

Crucially, these cuts do not occur in isolation. **Other major donors like the UK, France, Belgium and the Netherlands have also**

slashed their ODA budgets. Given our estimations that every ODA dollar invested in child-related sectors yields \$10 in economic and social benefits, this equates to a potential **\$163 billion in lost economic and social benefits for the world.²⁸** As the cumulative effects of these reductions set in, they threaten to **unravel decades of development progress**, particularly those gains related to child survival, learning and protection.

The data show a clear path forward: investing in children is both morally justifiable and developmentally optimal, offering compounding benefits across the life cycle and generations. ODA is not a silver bullet, but it plays an indispensable catalytic role, especially in the poorest and most fragile contexts. Without a course correction, the decline in child-related aid could entrench global inequalities, stunt future human capital and destabilise regions where youthful populations are growing fastest.



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RECOMMENDATIONS: WHY AND HOW SHOULD DONORS INVEST ODA IN CHILDREN?

Investing ODA in children is not a cost—it is a multiplier. It accelerates progress across every dimension of the SDGs, supports peace and prosperity, and builds the resilience of future generations.

Yet, as this report demonstrates, children remain significantly under-prioritised in the allocation of ODA. Investing ODA in children is one of the most strategic decisions donors can make—because children are not only the most vulnerable in times of crisis, but they are also the most powerful drivers of long-term change. From health and education to protection and nutrition, child-focused investments generate some of the highest returns in development. Yet too often, children are overlooked in policy and budgeting decisions.

ODA is not a silver bullet - systemic changes to the global debt and tax structures alongside reform to the international financial institutions (IFIs) will be needed to raise sufficient investment in children. But ODA is still essential, and as the global community grapples with compounding crises—from conflict and climate shocks to widening inequality and fiscal pressures—focusing ODA on children is not just morally right, it is financially smart and politically sound.

Donors have both a responsibility and an opportunity to act. By ring-fencing funding for child-focused sectors, investing in the whole child, supporting local leadership, and leveraging broader financing, donors can transform not only individual lives—but entire societies. Now is the time to put children at the heart of ODA.

Ring-Fence child related ODA

Donors must allocate at least 10% more ODA annually, with a goal of reaching 25% to child-focused sectors like education, health, and protection, including targeting most vulnerable children in situations of conflict and displacement. This ensures consistent funding for essential services such as immunisation and early childhood development. Ring-fencing ODA safeguards children, even during budget cuts, and demonstrates commitment to

children's rights and sustainable development. Establishing child rights impact assessments (CRIAs) for all projects will prevent harm, ensure compliance and protect children's well-being. Additionally, adopting a "child-related aid" marker will track and improve funding transparency for child-focused outcomes.

Invest in the whole child

A child-related approach to ODA is cost effective and strengthens the return on investment of limited funds, maximising human capital and long-term sustainable growth. Proven child-focused programs—such as immunisation, nutrition and early childhood education—offer some of the highest returns per dollar spent in ODA. Investing early also helps prevent costly problems down the line, such as poor health, school dropout, violence and poverty cycles that require more expensive interventions later.

Our 2024 report, *'Putting Children First for Sustainable Development'*, found a total return on investment of \$10 for every \$1 invested in children through ODA. The total of \$10 return includes direct benefits of more than \$7 as well as a 'social multiplier' benefit of nearly \$3 - the additional value of indirect benefits delivered through programming that supports and empowers children, their families, friends and wider communities.²⁹





We know that early investments in children's health, nutrition, education and protection yield significant returns through improved productivity, earnings and reduced social costs later in life. We also know that children do not operate in silos, and therefore there needs to be a greater cross-sectoral approach to ODA investments.

Leverage ODA for locally-led systemic change

Centring local communities and incorporating their leadership in decision-making not only empowers local actors but also builds resilience by ensuring that solutions are rooted in local knowledge, culture, and context. As the development sector recalibrates in response to global challenges such as climate change, conflict, the cost-of-living crisis and the legacy of COVID-19, it is essential that decision-making and funding shift to local actors who are best placed to identify and implement effective solutions. Localisation strengthens community-led responses, reduces dependency on external actors, and enhances the sustainability and long-term impact of development efforts.

Local organisations, as first responders, are better positioned to deliver timely, adaptive responses during crises and emergencies.³⁰ Therefore, localisation promotes equity by addressing systemic imbalances in the aid system, shifting power closer to the communities affected and amplifying the voices of those traditionally underrepresented. Investing in local organisations can improve efficiency and accountability, as these partners often deliver aid with lower overhead costs and greater transparency, ensuring resources reach those who need them most.³¹

Children and young people play a critical role in this process. By investing in them and elevating their voices within their communities and regions, development efforts gain additional social multipliers that contribute to inclusive community structures and broader systemic change. Supporting their participation not only strengthens accountability and engagement with the state but also improves the impact and the resilience of local systems such as health, education and child protection. Ultimately, meaningful inclusion of children and community leaders fosters sustainable,

community-driven change and reinforces the foundations for long-term development success. Making child and youth consultation a cornerstone of ODA-contributing country development policies and promoting their participation in global development dialogues will have the most sustainable impact on our future.

Use ODA to complement other development financing flows

ODA remains vital, especially in fragile or low-income contexts, and often complements other finance flows, ensuring no child is left behind. For example, in South Sudan or the Sahel - where state capacity is weak and private investment is scarce - ODA often funds essential services like immunisation and schooling.³² Predictable, multi-year ODA also allows governments to develop and implement long-term strategies. In Ethiopia, a decade-long ODA-backed education plan expanded access, trained teachers³³ Furthermore, concessional ODA (grants or low-interest loans) helps countries finance development without deepening debt burdens—especially vital for climate-vulnerable states like Small Island Developing States (SIDS), who face high costs³⁴

However, ODA alone cannot close the \$4.2 trillion annual financing gap needed to achieve the SDGs.³⁵ Donors must implement ambitious ODA budgets as part of a wider approach to mobilising resources for sustainable development. This must include supporting national governments to increase their fiscal space through reform to tax and debt systems, as well as unlocking additional international finance through the private sector and IFIs.

Donors must unlock additional development finance flows by

- Supporting national governments to increase their fiscal space and build robust public finance systems (e.g. through tax reform and budget transparency at the national level, and reform to global tax and debt systems).
- Strengthen national planning and enable domestic resource mobilisation for child services.
- De-risk private sector investments in child-related sectors through blended finance or guarantees.
- Incentivise national budgets and development banks to prioritise child rights outcomes.³⁶



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ANNEX: METHODOLOGICAL NOTE: FORECASTING CHILD-RELATED ODA TO 2030

This forecast models the future share and volume of child-related Official Development Assistance (ODA) using a scenario-based approach and trend analysis. Three scenarios—**optimistic**, **base case**, and **pessimistic**—were developed based on historical spending patterns and publicly available known donor policy directions.

1. Scenario Modelling for Child-Related ODA (2023–2030)

The overall projection for child-related ODA is based on average annual percentage changes in both total ODA spending and the child-related share of that spending from **2017 to 2023**. The model includes three scenarios:

Scenario	Overall ODA spending	Child-related share	Total child-related ODA (\$ value)
Optimistic	Base + 3%	Base + 3%	(overall ODA spending x child-related share)
Base case	Extension of the % change in the past year (2022-2023)	Extension of average % change (2019-2023)	(overall ODA spending x child-related share)
Pessimistic	Base – 10%	Base – 10%	(overall ODA spending x child-related share)

2. ODA Spending Trends and Adjustments

The change in total ODA spending was forecast based on the change from 2022-2023 (by bilateral and multilateral donors). From 2022 to 2023, bilateral donors decreased their ODA budgets by 0.4% and multilaterals decreased by 7.4% - our forecast shows what would happen to ODA flows by 2030 if the trend of the past year continues (it would fall from \$270 billion to \$206 billion).

Manual adjustments were made to reflect announced or proposed budget cuts from major donors (e.g., the UK, US, Netherlands, France, and Belgium), but these should be taken as indicative based on public information we have available as of June 2025 - the final cuts could be drastically different from what is proposed.

3. Estimating Child-Related ODA Share

It was assumed that % of child related ODA per donor will remain the same regardless of the change in ODA per donor. We then assumed that the % of ODA budgets for child-related spending for each donor followed the same trend as the aggregate average rate of change between 2019-2023 (a decrease of 5.6%). If this trend continues, then the % of ODA spending that is child relevant will fall from a peak of 15.3% in 2019 to 7.3% in 2030.

These were used to calculate the total amount spent on child-related ODA from 2024-2030 (i.e. 7.3% of \$206 billion for 2030). This shows that spending will be approximately cut in half from ~\$32 billion in 2023 to ~\$15 billion in 2030. A reduction of \$16.7 billion.

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- ²⁵ See Annex 1 for Methodological Note

²⁶ using baseline estimates. Pessimistic estimates are even more severe, suggesting a drop to just \$9 billion in 2030.

²⁷ <https://donortracker.org/publications/budget-cuts-tracker>

²⁸ Applying the exact figure of \$9.80 in returns for every \$1 spent to a projected \$16,672,222,545 decrease in child specific and child related ODA between 2023 and 2030. This is a baseline forecast that assumes continuation of current trends and no additional sharp cuts to ODA besides those already announced by France, Netherlands, Belgium, the United Kingdom and the United States. It does not include proposed cuts by the German government announced in June 2025, which would cause further lost investment.

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