



ACCELERATING HOPE: Transformative Investments for Children facing the Polycrisis

Executive summary

Children are the least responsible for the global polycrisis we are witnessing, yet they bear its heaviest consequences. The polycrisis refers to the convergence of multiple, interconnected global shocks, such as armed conflict, climate-related disasters, economic instability, and health emergencies, that have increasingly overlapped over the past decade. These compounded crises have disproportionately affected children, especially those in low- and middle-income countries, by disrupting essential services and deepening existing vulnerabilities. Children remain disproportionately affected, representing over half of the global population living on less than \$3.00 per day, even though they account for only 30 percent of the total population. Globally, about 412 million children, over 19 percent of the child population, lived on less than \$3.00 per day in 2024. (World Bank, 2025).

To prevent and mitigate risks (affecting children), this brief presents evidence-based solutions that demonstrate the power of integrated service delivery, where health, nutrition, education, child protection, and social protection systems work together. It draws on evidence of 'development accelerators,' which show how integrated interventions can deliver multi-dimensional impacts for children and simultaneously improve multiple Sustainable Development Goals. It builds on five years of research led by the Accelerate Hub, based across the University of Oxford and the University of Cape Town, and recent analyses led by World Vision in seven country contexts.



Development accelerators are services, provisions or policies that lead to progress across multiple SDGs targets and dimensions of development. Unlike single-focus interventions, accelerators create positive spillover effects that improve outcomes across sectors, such as health, education, nutrition, and protection. For example:

- **Cash-plus programmes** combining regular cash assistance with additional child focused services can reduce poverty, enhance child nutrition, and increase school attendance.
- **Early childhood development services** can simultaneously improve learning, health, and long-term economic opportunities.
- **Essential Nutrition Actions (ENAs)**, a comprehensive package of services for mothers and young children that includes growth monitoring and promotion, exclusive breastfeeding and appropriate complementary feeding, wasting prevention, early detection and treatment, promotion of healthy diets, nutrition support for women during pregnancy, and micronutrient deficiency prevention. ENAs are key for early childhood development and can be integrated with other essential health and child protection services to maximise impact on children's survival, growth, and development.

Accelerators are particularly powerful in resource-constrained settings, offering a **high return on investment** by addressing interlinked barriers to child well-being.

Despite clear evidence of what works, global investment in children continues to fall far short of what is needed. Less than five per cent of official development assistance is directed to child-focused programmes (World Vision, 2024), while governments facing competing priorities are largely focusing on short-term responses. As a result, millions of children remain without access to essential services, and progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals is stalling.

What is required now is a decisive shift from fragmented interventions to coordinated, system-wide responses. Governments, donors, and development and humanitarian actors must place children at the centre of policies, financing, and crisis strategies, treating investment in children not only as a moral imperative but also as an urgent economic priority.



Key Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Delivering sustainable impact for children amidst the current global polycrisis requires moving beyond fragmented responses toward integrated, well-financed, and adaptive systems. The following three interlinked priorities form the foundation for achieving scalable and lasting progress for children.

1. Integrate: Build stronger connections across systems and services so children receive holistic, coordinated support rather than fragmented interventions.

Governments and partners should align policies, planning, and service delivery across health, nutrition, education, child protection, and social protection to ensure coherence and continuity. Integrated and coordinated interventions, delivered with and through national and local actors, can improve multi-dimensional outcomes for the most vulnerable children and embed systemic resilience to future shocks. A package of integrated and accelerator services should be accessible to the most vulnerable children, maximising impact across sectors and strengthening overall system resilience. This requires building on existing service delivery mechanisms to increase efficiency, maintain quality, and expand accessibility, particularly for children most at risk. Social protection and cash transfer programmes offer a strong entry point to reach these children, and impact can be multiplied when additional services are tailored to context-specific needs, such as nutrition, education, or parenting support.

2. Invest: Commit sustainable and equitable financing for integrated child-sensitive services that reach the most vulnerable and leave no child behind.

Stronger investment is needed to bridge growing financing gaps in child well-being, particularly as governments face fiscal constraints and competing priorities. Increased allocations to child-centred and

child-sensitive interventions, including cash-plus and other integrated delivery models, are essential to prevent and mitigate the impacts of the polycrisis. Development and humanitarian actors must work together to sustain funding, strengthen social protection systems, and prioritise high-impact services for marginalised populations such as displaced children, those living in poverty, children with disabilities, and adolescent mothers. Predictable, long-term financing will allow governments to scale integrated service delivery, enhance local capacity, and ensure equitable access to essential and accelerator services.

3. Innovate: Drive innovation in service delivery and systems design to accelerate impact for children and strengthen resilience across crises.

Innovation is essential to make integrated services more adaptive, equitable, and effective in a rapidly changing context. Building on key impact multipliers (enablers), including multi-level coordination, a well-trained workforce, effective data use, strong referral systems, and sustainable financing, innovation in service delivery and use of data enables governments and partners to anticipate risks, tailor services to local needs, and sustain delivery through shocks. By embedding adaptive and child-specific approaches within national systems, and investing in new delivery models and digital solutions, donors and development banks can help transform essential and accelerator services into efficient, resilient, and inclusive systems that ensure every child not only survives, but thrives.

Three Birds, One Stone: A proposition for integrated, age-sensitive, and shock-responsive services

Conceptualised by the UN Development Programme, 'development accelerators' are defined as policies, programmes, and services that can improve multiple SDG targets simultaneously, offering efficient solutions in resource-constrained environments (Cluver et al., 2019). This makes accelerators particularly powerful and promising in addressing increasing and interlinked global crises in the context of diminishing aid funding. Over the past five years, an academic consortium led by the Universities of Oxford and Cape Town has identified a range of development accelerators for children and adolescents – which can achieve multiple development goals, can be delivered at scale, and prioritise value-for-money investments (Sherr et al., 2022).

In Kenya, Lesotho, Namibia, and Zimbabwe – countries that have been disproportionately impacted by HIV and climate emergencies – research using the Violence Against Children Surveys (VACS) showed that a combination of positive gender norms, food security, and good parenting reduced multiple forms of violence against children, including child marriage and sexual violence (Hertzog et al., 2024).

In Malawi and South Africa, evidence from a longitudinal cohort of adolescent mothers and their children demonstrates that food security, cash grants, and safe communities improved a wide variety of childhood development metrics, including improving stunting by 15.7%, cognitive and learning outcomes by 18% and 28% respectively, and depression symptoms by 10% (Mebrahtu et al., 2022).

Some accelerators also demonstrate promising results on social inclusion. In Zambia, a combination of cash 'plus' education improved food security and learning outcomes for children who have caregivers with disabilities (Chipanta et al., 2022). In Ethiopia, the Health Extension Programme² was found to reduce child marriage and improve household investments into girls' education (W. E. Rudgard et al., 2022). In South Africa, parenting support, safe schools, and cash transfers improved four different SDG goals for adolescents living with HIV (Cluver et al., 2019).

Across over 260 peer-reviewed academic articles, in more than 20 countries, six development accelerators have resulted in consistent improvements across multi-dimensional well-being: Social Protection (specifically cash transfers), nutrition security, parenting support, violence prevention, education, and early childhood development interventions.

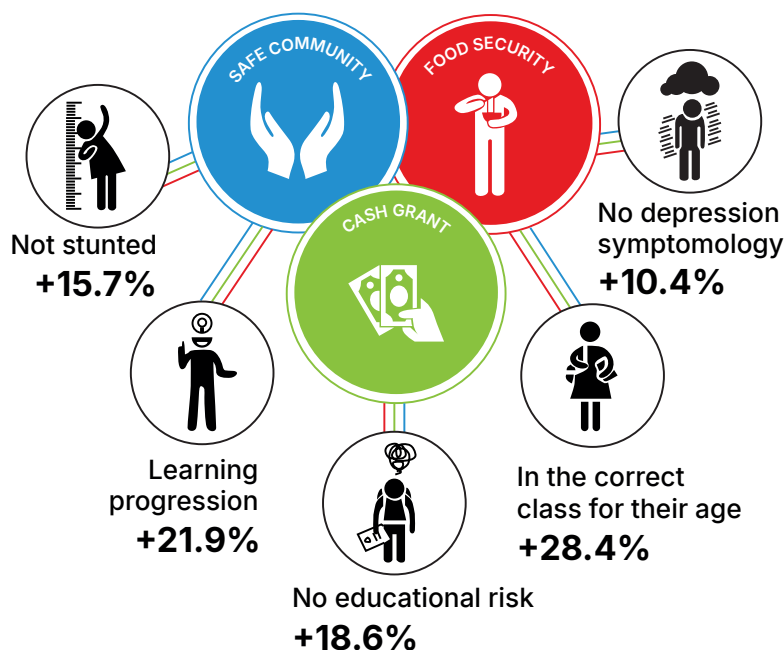


Figure 1: Impact of combinations of accelerator interventions in South Africa and Malawi³

² Through Ethiopia's Health Extension Programme, networks of community health workers deliver a combination of health and sanitation services to households living in their districts.

³ Mebrahtu, H., Skeen, S., Rudgard, W. E., Du Toit, S., Haag, K., Roberts, K. J., ... & Sherr, L. (2022). Can a combination of interventions accelerate outcomes to deliver on the sustainable development goals for young children? Evidence from a longitudinal study in South Africa and Malawi. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 48(3), 474-485.

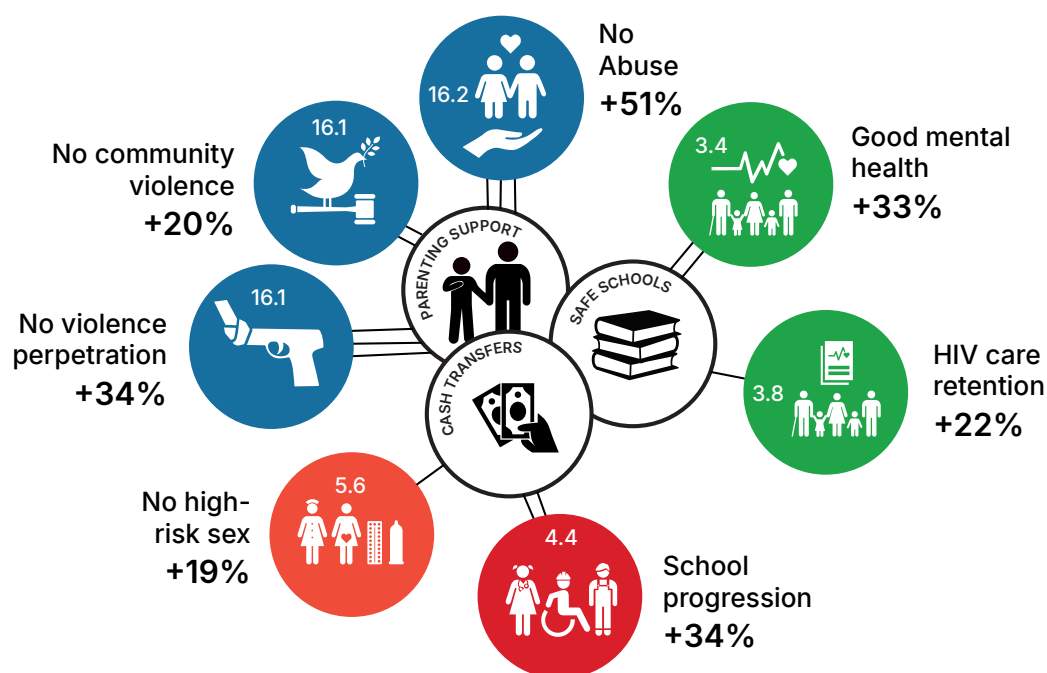


Figure 2: Impact of Accelerator Combination on adolescents in South Africa⁴

Are cash 'plus' programmes a gamechanger?

The growing interest in social protection programmes presents a critical opportunity to improve multi-dimensional childhood well-being.

Recent UNICEF reports detail the effective adaptation of social protection programmes to the polycrisis: Kenya's Hunger Safety Net Programme introduced drought-related triggers to increase cash coverage to mitigate the effects of poor agricultural yields; Malawi's National Social Support Programme has included commitments to cover 'seasonal needs' associated with epidemic and climate shocks; in Nepal, the national government increased cash, capacity, and banking support to local government offices in flood-prone areas (UNICEF, 2019). However, despite the promising effects and adaptability of cash programming, it is often delivered in isolation from other government services, such as violence prevention, parenting support and immunisation, which could be combined to achieve multidimensional benefits.

Cash 'plus' interventions consistently improve multiple well-being targets, including improved

education, health, nutrition and safety outcomes. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis, for example, concluded cash 'plus' food transfers demonstrated higher levels of impact compared to cash alone, with particularly high levels of impact on acute malnutrition in crisis contexts (Little et al., 2023).

Government-delivered social protection provides opportunities for integrated childhood services. Aid and development actors can consider leveraging existing social protection programmes to magnify the impact and benefits for children, identifying possible synergies with childhood services.

Despite significant progress in identifying and delivering age-sensitive interventions, there is still a critical evidence gap on children living in humanitarian contexts, as well as a widespread lack of evidence on marginalised children. The dynamic nature of crises necessitates continuous learning and adaptation which makes it crucial to invest in policies, programmes and research that address the evolving needs of children affected by crisis (Backhaus et al., 2024).

⁴ Cluver, L. D., Orkin, F. M., Campeau, L., Toska, E., Webb, D., Carlqvist, A., & Sherr, L. (2019). Improving lives by accelerating progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals for adolescents living with HIV: a prospective cohort study. *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, 3(4), 245-254.

The Time to Act: Investing in children must be a priority

Children today face an unparalleled crisis. The co-occurrence of armed conflict, climate emergencies and epidemics has created a perfect storm which threatens their fundamental rights, safety, and well-being (World Vision, 2023). With one-third of the global population aged under 18, investing in children is as much a commitment to the present as it is to the future.



One in six children lives in extreme poverty. (World Bank & UNICEF, 2023)



Globally, preventable malnutrition costs \$761 billion USD per year (Jain et al., 2024)



14.5 million children are 'zero-dose' – i.e., received no vaccination (WHO, 2024)



7 million students at risk of dropping out of school due to income shocks after the pandemic (World Bank, 2023)
Unmet education needs could cost the global economy over \$10 trillion USD by 2030 (World Bank et al., 2021).



Violence against children is estimated to cost the global economy \$7 trillion USD every year, equivalent to 8% of global GDP (World Vision, 2024).

The current picture is stark, multi-dimensional poverty affects over 880 million children in low- and middle-income countries – including experiencing deprivation across their nutrition, health, education, and living conditions (Child Poverty Coalition, 2025).

Simultaneously, the multiple overlapping crises – or polycrisis – is reversing decades of progress toward the above mentioned Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and others. If current trends continue, by 2030, only 25% of children will grow up in countries that meet basic SDG targets (UNICEF, 2023). These figures highlight not just a humanitarian crisis, but a severe and imminent economic threat. Yet, global investments into children remain critically inadequate.

Less than 5% of global aid funding targets children (World Vision, 2024). In countries that

are most affected by the polycrisis, competing priorities often result in children being overlooked in humanitarian and development programmes. For instance, African governments have spent an average of 6.5% of their social spending budgets on children under five, a modest figure compared with the 28% allocated by G20 countries to the same age group (UNICEF, 2024a). Additionally, global efforts to address multidimensional child poverty have lagged significantly behind investments aimed at reducing monetary poverty (Child Poverty Coalition, 2025)

While these crises affect all children, their impact is disproportionately severe on the most vulnerable childhood groups – including children living in extreme poverty, those who have lost caregivers, displaced children, out-of-school children, adolescent mothers and their children. To accelerate progress towards global goals and ensure that no child is left behind, planning and response must focus on the critical and evolving needs of children across contexts, fostering a more inclusive and adaptive approach to safeguarding their futures.



The World's Promise to Its Children

Recent global commitments by governments, bilateral, and multilateral agencies are increasingly prioritising child well-being—recognising it as foundational to sustainable development, peace, and equity:

- The **Paris Peace Forum (2023)** advocated for the recognition of child well-being as a pillar of peacebuilding, emphasising the long-term dividends of investing in early childhood development (Paris Peace Forum, 2023).
- The **Summit of the Future (2024)**, convened by the UN Secretary-General, culminated in the *Pact for the Future*, in which commitment #34 reaffirmed the global resolve to invest in the socioeconomic development of children and reimagine multilateral cooperation with children at its heart (United Nations, 2024).
- The **1st Interministerial Conference to End Violence Against Children (2024)** generated more than 120 pledges from governments and development partners to place children at the centre of national and global strategies to end violence (End Violence Partnership, 2024).
- The **Nutrition for Growth Summit (2025)** reaffirmed global resolve to tackle child

malnutrition amidst growing crises.

The summit signaled a shift from siloed nutrition efforts to integrated approaches embedded in health, education, social protection, and climate systems (Nutrition for Growth Secretariat, 2025). A central outcome was the launch of the Global Compact on Nutrition Integration, calling on governments to embed nutrition across national development strategies.

- The **Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (2025)** called for bold restructuring of global financing to ensure that future generations—especially children—benefit from sustainable investments. Key proposals included expanding fiscal space for child-focused services, leveraging debt relief for child outcomes, and increasing donor support for integrated systems (UNDESA, 2025).

While these milestones represent essential strides toward realising child rights, their success depends on sustained political will, coordinated implementation, and integrated financing. Future action must prioritise **joined-up service delivery**—ensuring that investments in child health, education, protection, and nutrition reinforce one another to achieve transformative, lasting change for children.

Research shows that despite the diversity of crises, their impact on children follows strikingly similar patterns (World Bank & UNICEF, 2023). For example, the polycrisis consistently increases levels of malnutrition, school dropout, orphanhood, and violence against children. These shared risk pathways, while devastating, also offer a chance to act.

Shock-responsive measures can mitigate multiple harmful risk pathways simultaneously – shielding children from the worst effects of the polycrisis. Effective strategies can include direct household-level support – such as nutrition, violence prevention, household-level cash – as well as strengthening essential institutions like schools, community centres, and hospitals.

Strategic investments into the five core pillars of child wellbeing, health, nutrition, education, violence prevention, and participation – offer a

proven framework for strengthening children's rights and the institutions that protect them. These investments simultaneously yield longer-term benefits for resilient societies and economies. As UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell warns, *"The only way to get back on track towards meeting the 2030 goals is by putting children at the heart of our collective efforts to achieve the SDGs, by prioritising their rights and well-being as we strengthen social service systems"*¹.

Global efforts have advanced child rights over the past two decades, with increasing recognition of the scale and urgency of children's needs. Yet, investments remain fragmented, underfunded, and inadequate to address the escalating challenges children face today. Relying on reactive solutions is costly, ineffective, and unsustainable. Instead, we must invest in integrated, resilient, and inclusive systems to protect children before polycrisis escalate.

¹ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-executive-director-catherine-russells-opening-remarks-annual-session-unicef-0>

The Case for Investment: High returns from integrated services

Global analyses consistently highlight the strong economic case for investing in children. A recent World Vision analysis on bilateral investments into Official Development Assistance (ODA), demonstrates that every \$1 USD of ODA invested in children results in a \$10 USD benefit (World Vision, 2024) – with particularly high returns across key development areas:

- **Early childhood education programmes** yield returns of \$7-\$12 per dollar invested through improved learning outcomes and future earnings.
- **School feeding programmes** generate \$3-\$10 USD in economic returns through enhanced health, education, and productivity.
- **Child protection interventions** show returns of \$5-\$10 USD through reduced violence-related costs and improved social outcomes.
- **Maternal and child health programmes** deliver \$4-\$7 USD in returns through reduced mortality and improved lifetime health outcomes.
- **Nutrition investments** yield one of the highest returns in development, with every \$1 invested in reducing undernutrition generating an estimated \$23 in economic returns through improved human capital, higher productivity, and sustained long-term development gains (World Bank, 2023).

Regional analyses further confirm these benefits. Research from the University of Oxford and University of Cape Town found that targeted investments, into age-friendly health services, cash transfers, and parenting programmes, can yield an economic return of \$6.24 to \$8.04 USD in Africa. Accessing these economic benefits depends on a fundamental shift toward building childhood resilience through comprehensively and effectively integrated programming.

Every \$1 spent on

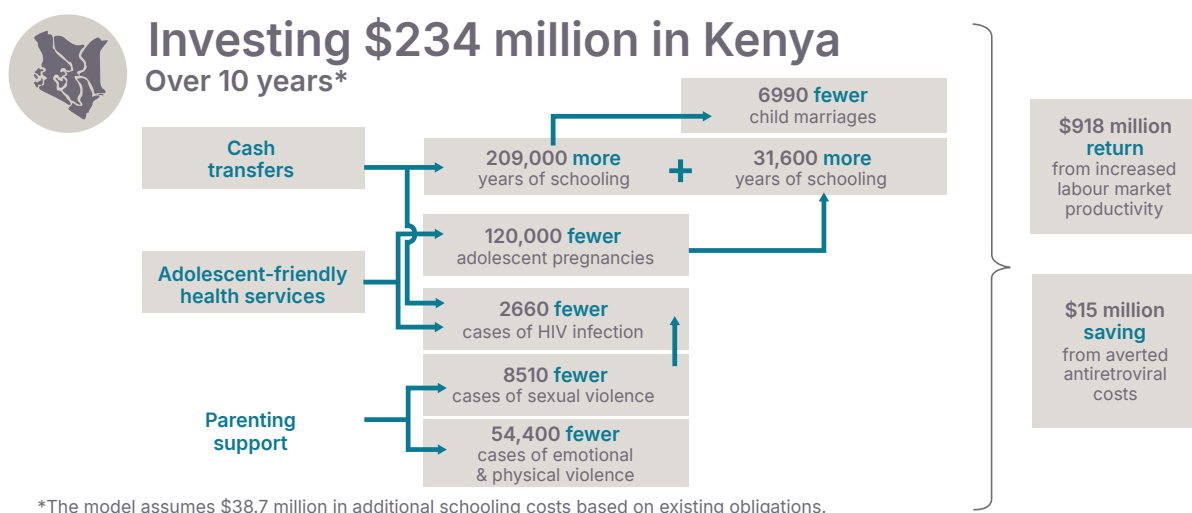
- Age-friendly health services
- Cash transfers
- Parenting programmes

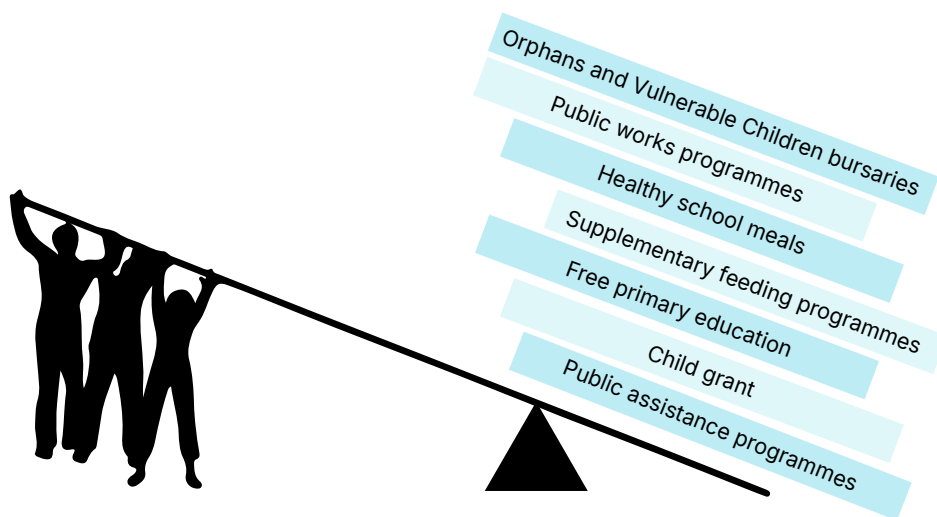
is expected to yield a return of

\$3.99-\$4.50 globally

\$6.24-8.09 Africa
\$3.21 Asia
\$3.17 Latin America and the Caribbean

Country-specific research reinforces these trends. In Kenya, an annual investment of \$23.4 million USD into a combination of cash 'plus' age-friendly health services, and parenting support has delivered substantial gains in education, health and violence prevention. This investment is projected to generate a four-fold return of investment in labour market productivity within only 10 years (Rudgard et al., 2024) as demonstrated below.





Operationalising Development Accelerators: Amplifying the impact of integrated childhood services

While development accelerators have demonstrated significant impacts on multiple child outcomes, there are untapped opportunities to further amplify their benefits through strategic operational improvements. The successful delivery of these interventions offers a powerful platform that can be leveraged to reach more children, integrate additional services, and deepen impact – particularly for the most vulnerable.

To explore these opportunities, World Vision International conducted detailed analyses across seven countries affected by various forms of the polycrisis. Analysis revealed promising pathways to enhance the reach and effectiveness of development accelerators – including through strengthened inter- and intra-governmental coordination, improved workforce capacity, and robust monitoring systems. The country analysis showcase concrete opportunities to maximise the impact of evidence-based development accelerators, transforming them from promising interventions into comprehensive support systems for vulnerable children.



Country Policy Briefs available [here](#)



The success of integrated services and development accelerators depends not only on what is delivered, but also on how it is implemented. The analysis and consultations conducted across seven countries highlighted the importance of several ‘impact multipliers’ that determine whether interventions reach their full potential. These include strong coordination between national, local, and frontline actors; accurate registration and targeting of the most vulnerable; well-functioning referral systems; and sustainable, predictable financing. They also emphasised the need for a trained and supported workforce, high-quality and gender-sensitive services, and integrated service points that allow families to access multiple forms of support in one place.

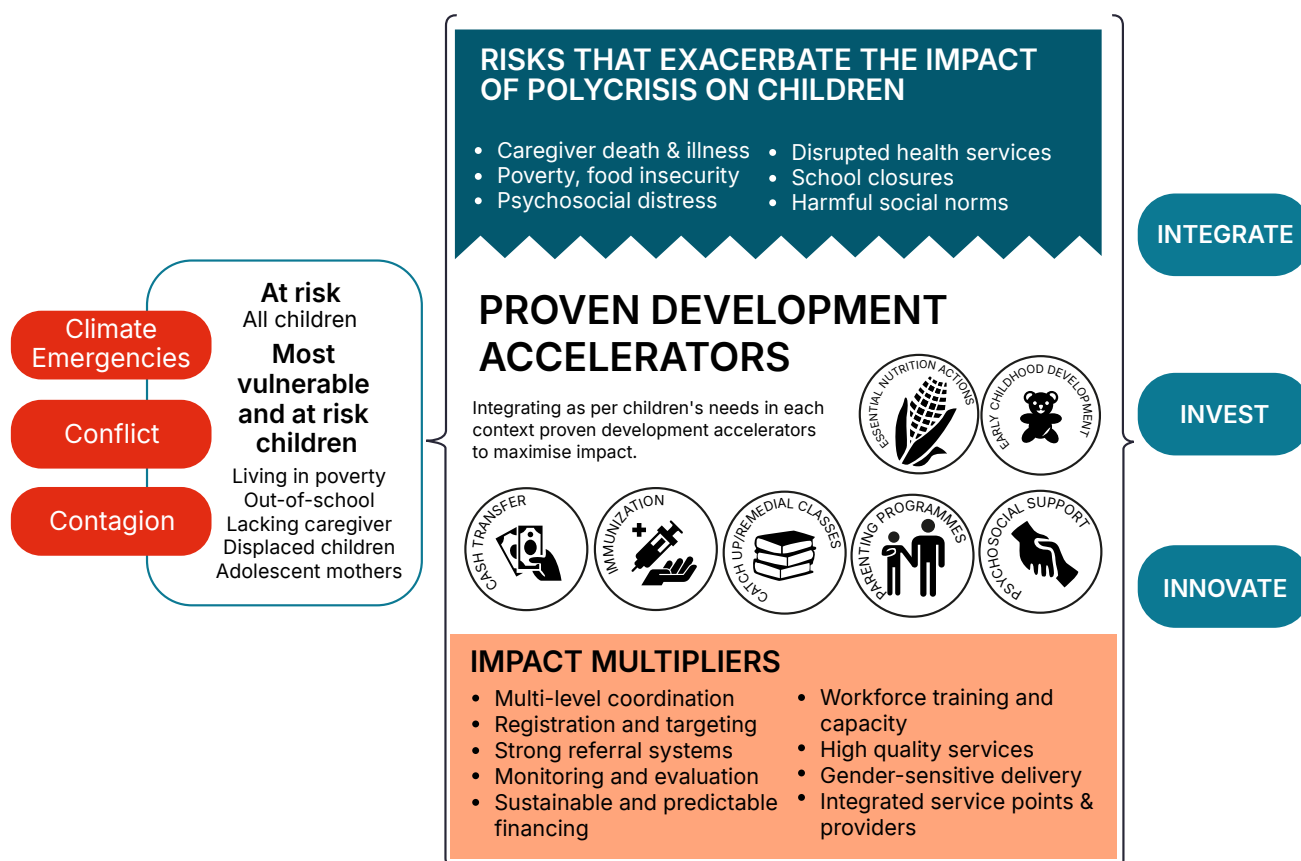
Effective multi-level coordination requires institutionalised mechanisms linking planning, budgeting, and monitoring processes. Embedding these structures within national systems, especially before fiscal ceilings are set—helps align objectives, minimise duplication, and ensure cross-sectoral accountability

The country examples underline this. In Mozambique and Ghana, school feeding programmes served as effective entry points

for both nutrition and education, showing how integrated service points can multiply impact. In Lebanon, social workers within Social Development Centres proved critical in linking families to health and protection services, but limited training and high turnover highlighted the need for sustained investment in workforce capacity. In Mali, unpredictable funding flows hindered the expansion of cash transfers and school meals, demonstrating why sustainable financing is essential for scaling impact.

A key learning from this analysis is that, given limited government and donor resources, it is vital to identify the strongest service delivery providers and build on existing structures. Consultations at community level, including with children in several countries, also highlighted that simple approaches, such as ensuring families know where and how to access services, or building on the databases of existing cash transfer programmes to provide integrated service packages at scale, can yield high impact when they draw on trusted local systems and workforce capacity.

Together, these multipliers ensure that interventions do not operate in isolation but reinforce one another, embedding resilience within child-focused systems and communities.



Experiences across these seven countries demonstrate both the urgent need and concrete opportunities to strengthen development accelerators for children affected by the polycrisis. Three clear imperatives emerge from this analysis:

 **Integrate** services to maximise impact and efficiency through delivering development accelerators *and* putting in place measures to amplify their impacts. The evidence from all 7 contexts demonstrates that when interventions are strategically combined – from cash transfers and nutrition support to education and child protection – their collective impact far exceeds the sum of their parts. Integration not only improves outcomes for children but also strengthens the resilience of delivery systems in the face of future shocks.

 **Invest** in proven development accelerators that can deliver multiple benefits for children. From Mozambique's school feeding

programme to Lebanon's cash assistance initiatives, strategic investments in evidence-based interventions create ripple effects across children's health, education, and protection outcomes. These investments must be sustained and predictable, allowing for long-term planning and adaptive programming.

 **Innovate** through strengthened systems, multi-level and multi-stakeholder coordination and workforce capacity. As shown in Ghana and the Philippines, enhancing monitoring systems, building workforce capabilities, and developing advanced case management approaches can significantly improve programme effectiveness. Innovation in service delivery mechanisms ensures that interventions can adapt to emerging challenges while reaching the most vulnerable children.

Recommendations

Based on the emerging empirical evidence and operational analysis, to achieve **impact at scale**, three interlinked priorities emerge.

Integrate: Build stronger connections across systems and services so children receive holistic, coordinated support rather than fragmented interventions

- **Governments should leverage existing cash transfer and social protection programmes** to deliver integrated packages of health, nutrition, education, and child protection services, ensuring these reach the most vulnerable children while improving efficiency and sustainability.
- **Development and humanitarian partners should collaborate with national governments to design and implement locally led and context appropriate interventions that combine social protection, nutrition security, education, parenting support, and violence prevention.** They should ensure that interventions are adaptable to the evolving needs of children during crises and across humanitarian and development nexus.
- **Governments and partners should strengthen integrated service delivery by linking health, education, and social services through robust referral systems.** By combining interventions, at-risk children can benefit from accelerated impact on wellbeing. Technical and financial support should enable cross-sector coordination, and evidence-based knowledge-sharing should guide replication of high-impact approaches

Invest: Commit sustainable and equitable financing for integrated child-sensitive services that reach the most vulnerable and leave no child behind.

- **Governments should increase financing for child-sensitive integrated services, including cash 'plus' interventions.** Prioritise strategic investments into integrated data systems and service delivery integrating accelerator services with existing cash transfer/social protection programmes to amplify positive impacts for the most vulnerable children and their households.
- **Development and humanitarian actors should invest in strengthening local capacity for adaptive and accountable service delivery.** Strengthen local actors' for integrated service delivery and build workforce capacity for crisis-adaptive service delivery, especially through communities, schools, health centres and social workers. Establish local accountability mechanisms (e.g. community scorecards, feedback loops, grievance redress systems) to monitor service quality, address gaps, and ensure responsiveness to children and caregivers.
- **Donors and development banks should ringfence financing for child-centred investments.** In the context of declining ODA, funding should prioritise integrated interventions that address children's multi-dimensional needs and generate multiple SDG outcomes simultaneously.



Innovate: Drive new approaches in service delivery and practice to respond effectively to emerging challenges and ensure lasting impact for children.

- **Strengthen inter- and intra-departmental coordination across government departments.** Facilitate and systematise national and sub-national collaboration to offer an integrated package of essential and accelerator services. Partnerships between government service providers and civil society can ensure more tailored, cohesive, and well-documented support to affected communities. It is vital to ensure that essential services remain accessible during crises by embedding child-specific contingencies into national development and crisis mitigation strategies.
- **National governments should improve the**

use of data and child-focused indicators for decision-making and service delivery.

Integrate real-time monitoring and disaggregated data collection into programme cycles to track access, quality, and outcomes of services. Use these insights to inform adaptive programming, policy adjustments, and more equitable resource allocation at both central and local levels.

- **Donors and development banks should catalyse innovation in crisis responses and mitigation measures.** Fund research and implementation of innovative, shock-responsive interventions that build resilience in health, nutrition, education, and protection systems for children. Promote the sharing of lessons learned across regions and contexts to maximise investment efficiency.

Approaching the 2030 SDG deadline, putting children at the centre of polycrisis responses is not merely a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for building resilient societies and sustainable economies.

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This policy brief is the result of a global policy initiative led by World Vision International, in collaboration with the Accelerate Hub at the University of Oxford, drawing on evidence and learning from seven countries. It examines the evidence and return on investment of different services, identifies gaps, and proposes the provision of an integrated package of essential and accelerator services to strengthen child well-being in the context of the global polycrisis.

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