

The State of the World's Children 2025

Ending Child Poverty: Our shared imperative

Foreword

Astride was 12 years old when tuberculosis threatened her family's future.

The disease paralysed her father, leaving him unable to provide for his nine children. With no choice, her mother Fanny took Astride and her siblings to the unregulated copper mines of Lualaba Province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

For up to 12 hours a day, Astride collected and washed copper scraps for as little as US\$2 per day, breathing toxic dust, risking injury and living in constant fear. The work is dangerous – and for girls, even more so. Working in the mines exposes them not only to exploitation but also to the threat of sexual abuse.

Astride's story illustrates how economic shocks can plunge families into poverty and deny children their rights. Her experience is heartbreaking and too common: Nearly 412 million children today live in extreme poverty, while 417 million are severely deprived in at least two of life's essentials – education, health, housing, nutrition, sanitation and clean water. When families face crisis, everyone suffers – and children bear consequences that can last a lifetime.

This edition of *The State of the World's Children* reveals an urgent reality: Progress in reducing child poverty is under threat. Past crises – the 2008 financial collapse, the COVID-19 pandemic – set us back years. Each time, the most vulnerable children are the most affected.

Today, three acute crises are converging to undo decades of improvement while undermining our ability to build the future children deserve.

Conflict is spreading. Armed violence now touches twice as many children as it did 30 years ago. When violence forces children from their homes, poverty follows. Schools are destroyed. Families are displaced. Poverty rates climb.

Climate change is intensifying. One billion children already live in countries at extremely high risk from climate impacts like droughts and floods. The burden falls heaviest on communities already struggling with poverty.

Sudden unprecedented cuts in development aid have devastated services for children and could result in the deaths of at least 4.5 million children under 5 years of age by 2030, according to *The Lancet*. The cuts could also leave 6 million children out of school by next year.

External debt repayments are diverting investment in children, exceeding health and education spending combined in many low-income countries. Countries are forced to choose between servicing debt and ensuring children can survive and thrive.

These crises feed each other – climate disasters trigger displacement, displacement fuels conflict and mounting shocks like aid cuts drive countries deeper into debt.

Young people see this clearly. During a youth foresight workshop for this report, a 20-year-old woman from Ghana wrote: “In an economically just society, no child should trade their future for a dowry. Please remember: Your life is not a bargaining chip.”

Child poverty is not inevitable. As this report shows, when countries make ending child poverty a national priority – with resources and action – childhoods can be transformed.

The strides of the past quarter-century prove this is achievable. Since 2000, the rate of severe deprivation among children has fallen by a third. The number of children living in extreme monetary poverty has dropped from 507 million to 412 million.

But these gains are fragile, and the window for protecting them is closing.

With support, Astride left the mines behind. Social workers identified her family and connected them to a cash transfer programme. Her mother used the funds to start a plant nursery. Astride and her siblings returned to school and training programmes to learn new skills.

But hundreds of millions of other children face similar threats every day. We cannot allow the momentum against child poverty to slip away.



Catherine Russell
UNICEF Executive Director

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Introduction

Poverty poisons childhood.

It claims the lives of children, undermines their health and development, and limits their ability to learn. The consequences are lifelong: Adults who grew up in poverty have weaker job prospects, live shorter lives and are more likely to experience depression and anxiety.

Poverty also poisons societies.

By limiting children's ability to realize their full potential, poverty undermines future economic prosperity. By dividing the haves from the have-nots, it frays the bonds that tie us together. And by depriving communities of hope, it creates conditions in which violence and extremism can thrive.¹

At a time in history when global military spending has reached a record US\$2.72 trillion,² hundreds of millions of children continue to live each day in deprivation, without basics like schooling, clean water and a home.

Why?

The answer is not one of scarcity or resources; it is one of priorities.³

When progress is the priority

While far too many children still live in poverty, the world has made some progress. In low- and middle-income countries, three out of five children lived in severe deprivation in 2000; by 2023, two out of five children did.⁴

As this report shows, the reasons for this progress are not a mystery. Governments, civil society and the international community have taken strategic and decisive action. The gains they have achieved reflect sustained political will, evidence-based policies and a determination to prioritize children's rights.⁵

Countries that achieve progress make ending child poverty a national priority. They embed children's needs into economic planning, insulating their investment in children's futures even in the face of economic shocks and setbacks. They provide cash assistance to families. They expand access to public services that promote learning, health and development – rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. And they promote decent work for parents and caregivers.

The success of these approaches shows that we can make progress – and we can do more starting today.

But what about tomorrow?

The future is now

Regrettably, efforts to reduce poverty are slowing.⁶ If we are to reverse this slowdown and accelerate progress, we need to maintain and extend the approaches that have been shown to work in recent decades.

But we will also need to respond to the new trends and challenges that will shape the lives and well-being of children in the future. As *The State of the World's Children 2024* ([SOWC 2024](#)) demonstrated, megatrends like demographic shifts, climate and environmental crises, and frontier technologies will create a world for children in 2050 that looks very different from today's.

Our response to these trends will partly determine how much we reduce child poverty.

That response cannot wait. As *SOWC 2024* noted, "The future is now, and our responsibilities are clear. Now is the time to shape a better future for every child." As this report shows, societies are already grappling with the impacts on poverty of trends like climate change, rising conflict and economic uncertainty.

Climate change has the potential to drive ever more families into poverty; already, four out of five children face at least one extreme climate hazard, such as flooding and heatwaves, every year.⁷

Conflict meanwhile now touches the lives of growing numbers of children: Almost one in five children lived in a conflict-affected area in 2024, nearly double the rate in the mid-1990s.⁸ As well as the heightened risk of extreme monetary poverty in conflict zones,⁹ disruptions to education can set back economic growth for generations, limiting long-term poverty reduction.¹⁰

And inequalities in digital access – the gap between the digital haves and the digital have-nots – are increasingly shaping children's access to economic opportunity.

Invest in children

Economic forces will play a role too – especially in determining countries' abilities to fund anti-poverty programmes and public services. Here, the outlook is particularly concerning.

As the World Bank has warned, economic growth is slowing in many developing economies,¹¹ which risks limiting the ability of these countries to expand their programmes.

The situation will be worsened by unprecedented cuts in development aid. It is estimated that these cuts will result in the deaths of at least 4.5 million children under age 5 by 2030.¹² Each of these deaths is a tragedy for a family, and a shocking loss of human potential for our societies.

Aid cuts will also limit children's ability to learn and build brighter futures. International aid for education is projected to fall by almost a quarter by 2026, leaving 6 million more children at risk of being out of school by the end of next year.¹³ That number represents the equivalent of emptying every primary school in Germany and Italy. The challenges underscore the need in many countries for social sector reforms and increased domestic investment in children.

National action and ownership are essential – but mounting debt threatens to undermine both. Developing countries across Africa are in the midst of a debt crisis, which is forcing governments to divert funding away from essential services for children. Forty-five of the world's developing countries now pay more on interest than they spend on health, and 22 spend more on interest than education.¹⁴ Countries' inability to invest in children's health and well-being creates a vicious cycle: Failing to invest in children's human capital undermines economic prosperity, which in turn hinders countries' ability to repay debt.

Break the cycle

Without coordinated global action to address the debt challenges of developing countries,¹⁵ we risk creating an indebted generation – a cohort of children whose futures are compromised as countries struggle to service debt incurred before they were born.¹⁶

It makes no sense.

It makes no sense to undermine our societies' prosperity by depriving children of the resources that would equip them to contribute in the future.

It makes no sense to tell our young people that they are the future when we are not investing in those futures.

Young people know what is happening. They experience the gap between rhetoric and reality.

They said the economy was recovering. We didn't feel it. They said schools were open. Ours were underwater. They said children were resilient. We were exhausted. They said we were the future. We asked: Whose?

Nahjae Nunes, 2023 United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Youth Foresight Fellow

Whose future? Theirs.

Whose responsibility? Ours.



Photo: Astride welds a brazier in an open courtyard that serves as a workshop in Tshala, Lualaba Province.
Below: Thanks to an intervention by para-social workers, Astride was able to quit working in unregulated mines and build her skills as a welder.

Astride | Age 16

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Forged in fire

Astride, 16, raised in a mining town, trades copper dust for welding sparks.

"I lost five years of schooling to the mines. But through welding I gained strength and independence," explains Astride, 16, as she examines a window frame she has just finished welding.

Astride, the eldest of nine children, grew up in Tshala, a mining town in Lualaba Province. When she was young, her father operated machinery that crushed stone. But when tuberculosis paralyzed him, he was unable to continue working.

To survive, Astride's mother Fanny – and her children – started working in the local unregulated copper mines. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, children work for as many as 12 hours per day for as little as US\$2.

"I knew children should be in school, but I had no choice: Either we

worked in the mines or we starved," Fanny says.

Astride collected and washed copper scraps. The work was tough and risky – it meant exposure to toxic dust and chemicals, physical injury, and even sexual abuse.

"Working in a mine as a girl means living in constant fear because nothing is done to protect children, least of all girls," says Astride.

Fortunately, para-social workers – trained community members who identify vulnerable families and connect them to essential services – stepped in. Fanny joined a three-month mobile cash transfer programme, receiving US\$40 monthly. She used it to start a small plant nursery; she now earns an income by selling seedlings.

Astride's siblings returned to school, but she chose a six-month welding course run by the Division of Social Affairs (DIVAS), through which she received a full toolkit. Today, she works in a local workshop under Papa Kamwila, a respected welder in Tshala.



"I want other children to have a chance at a different life, but still many spend their days in the mines here," Astride says. "I dreamed of becoming a doctor, but life took me elsewhere. Today, I am proud and happy with my career path."

A young child with dark hair, wearing a black sleeveless top and blue jeans, is crouching on a dirt ground. The child is playing with a yellow toy excavator and a pink toy truck. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with some wooden debris.

Child poverty today

Chapter 1

At its core, poverty is a lack of financial resources. This alone does not capture the full reality for children. Child poverty must also be understood through the lens of the multiple deprivations children face in their daily lives. This chapter explores child poverty through both monetary and multidimensional definitions, disaggregated by country income group. It highlights the progress made to date, while emphasizing how fragile and uneven that progress remains.

Poverty violates children's fundamental rights. In a world where hundreds of millions of children continue to suffer deprivations, children's rights in areas like education, housing, sanitation and more – as set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child – are not being fully realized.

At its most basic level, poverty reflects a lack of access to financial resources. According to the most recent estimates, almost **one in five** of the world's children live in extreme poverty. Worldwide, children are more than twice as likely to live in extreme poverty than adults.¹⁷ Because their bodies and minds are still developing, children are also more vulnerable to the effects of poverty than adults, with potentially lifelong consequences for their well-being.¹⁸

But monetary poverty only tells part of the story.¹⁹ Poverty for children also needs to be understood in terms of the deprivations that they experience in their everyday lives. In the world's low- and middle-income countries, **more than one in five** children suffer deprivations in at least two key areas, lacking access to necessities like education, a healthy diet and housing (see *Figure 1.7*).²⁰

Is the outlook for the world's poorest children improving? From the start of this century, the world made impressive progress to reduce childhood poverty but that came to a halt, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic.²¹ Sub-Saharan Africa saw major setbacks even earlier – with some countries making little to no progress in reducing child poverty since 2014.²² As a result, the world remains far short of its goals for poverty reduction.



Today,
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children are
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sanitation and
clean water.

Monetary poverty

Monetary measures have long been central to assessing poverty, and these measures are regularly updated to reflect economic developments. In June 2025, the World Bank updated its thresholds to:²³

- \$3.00 per person, per day in low-income economies (the threshold for 'extreme poverty');
- \$4.20 per person, per day in lower-middle-income economies; and
- \$8.30 per person, per day in upper-middle-income economies.

Child monetary poverty is measured by counting the number of children living in monetary poor households.

Low- and middle-income countries

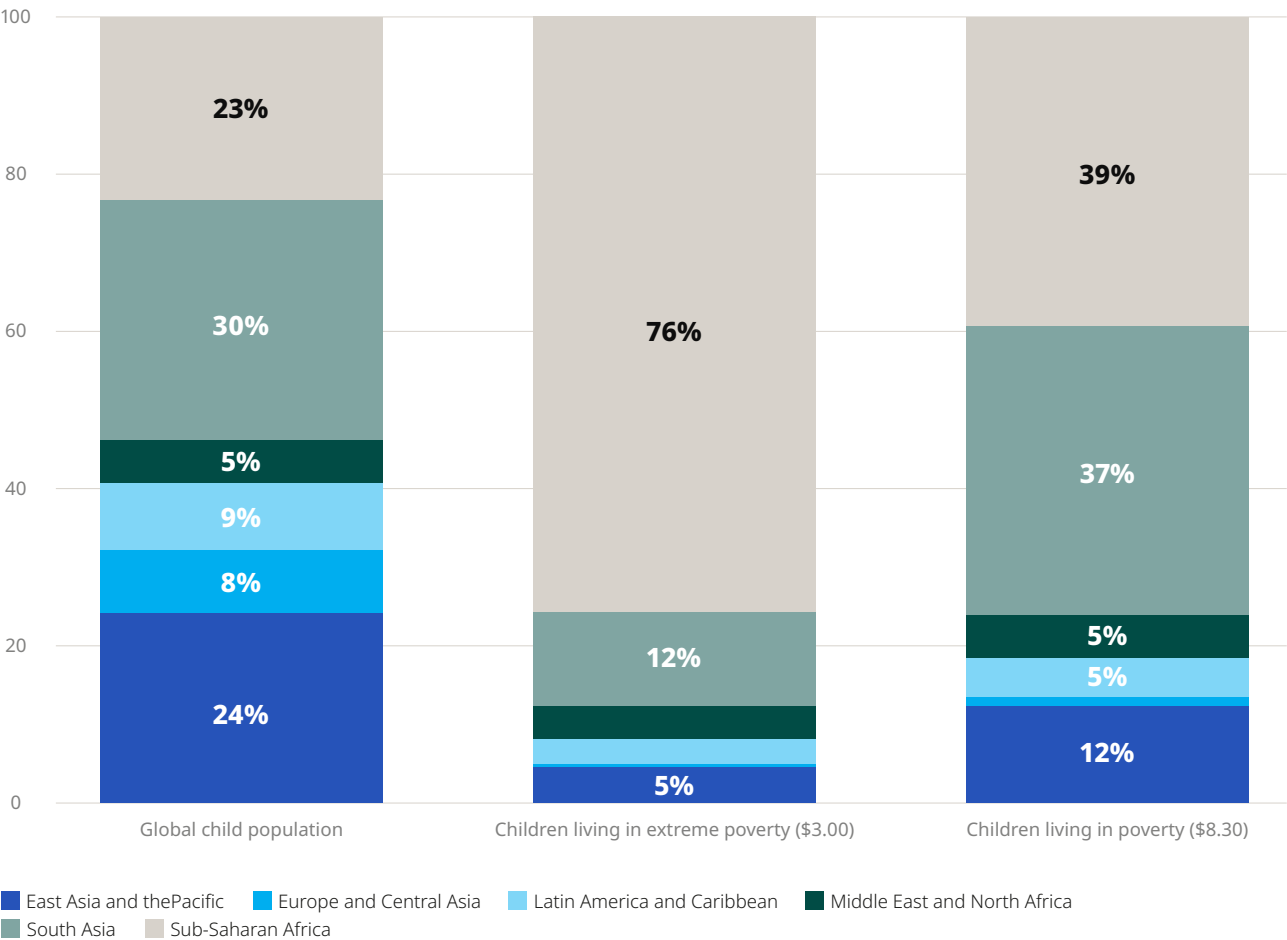
Globally, more than 412 million children live in households in **extreme monetary poverty** (less than \$3.00 a day), representing 19.2 per cent of the world's children.²⁴

Increasingly, these children are concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa: The region is home to just under one in four (23 per cent) of the world's children but accounts for more than three out of four (76 per cent) of all children living in extreme poverty (see *Figure 1.1*).²⁵ Efforts to eradicate extreme child poverty will increasingly need to prioritize sub-Saharan Africa. This reflects the needs of the more than 311 million children in the region who live in extreme poverty.²⁶ It also reflects demographic shifts: By 2050, sub-Saharan Africa is projected to be home to more than a third of all children in the world, up from a quarter in 2025. By 2100, the ratio will be more than two in five children globally.²⁷

South Asia is another region with a high concentration of children in extreme monetary poverty, accounting for 12 per cent of the global total.²⁸ Together, sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia account for almost 9 out of 10 (88 per cent) of the children who live in extreme poverty, despite being home to just over 5 out of 10 of the world's children (53 per cent).²⁹

This concentration in these two regions is no reason for complacency elsewhere. The World Bank's higher thresholds for poverty indicate substantial levels of child poverty around the world, even in countries that are now considered relatively well off. Based on the higher poverty line (\$8.30 per day), almost two out of three children globally (65.9 per cent) are living in poverty, accounting for 1.4 billion children. In regions like East Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and Caribbean, more than one in three children are poor – even though most countries in these regions are classed as middle-income.³⁰

Figure 1.1 Child populations and child poverty rates, calculated at \$3.00 and \$8.30 per child a day in 2024



Source: UNICEF, World Bank and Lara Ibarra, Salmeron Gomez, et al., 'Children in Monetary Poor Households', Policy Research Working Paper 11203, World Bank Group, Washington, D.C., September 2025, <<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099151009052581696/pdf/IDU-439588fb-b2c2-4d7f-941b-90275692e782.pdf>>, accessed 20 October 2025, Figure 5, p. 8.

Progress in tackling extreme child poverty

At the global level, extreme child poverty is declining. Between 2014 and 2024, the percentage of children living in extreme poverty fell from 24.3 per cent to 19.2 per cent, or from 507 million to 412 million children (see *Figures 1.2(a) and 1.2(b)*). The COVID-19 pandemic caused a setback but progress has since resumed, albeit at a slower pace than in the years before 2019.

Figure 1.2(a) Percentage of global children living on less than \$3.00 a day, 2014–2024

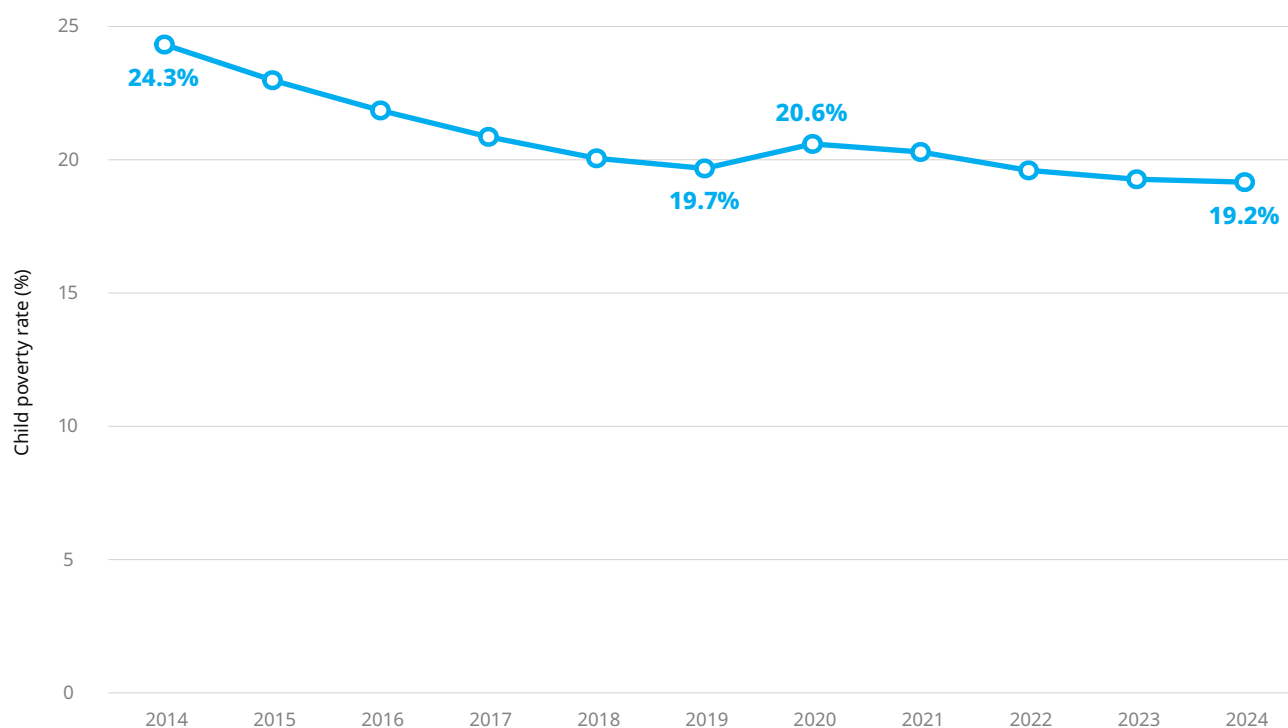
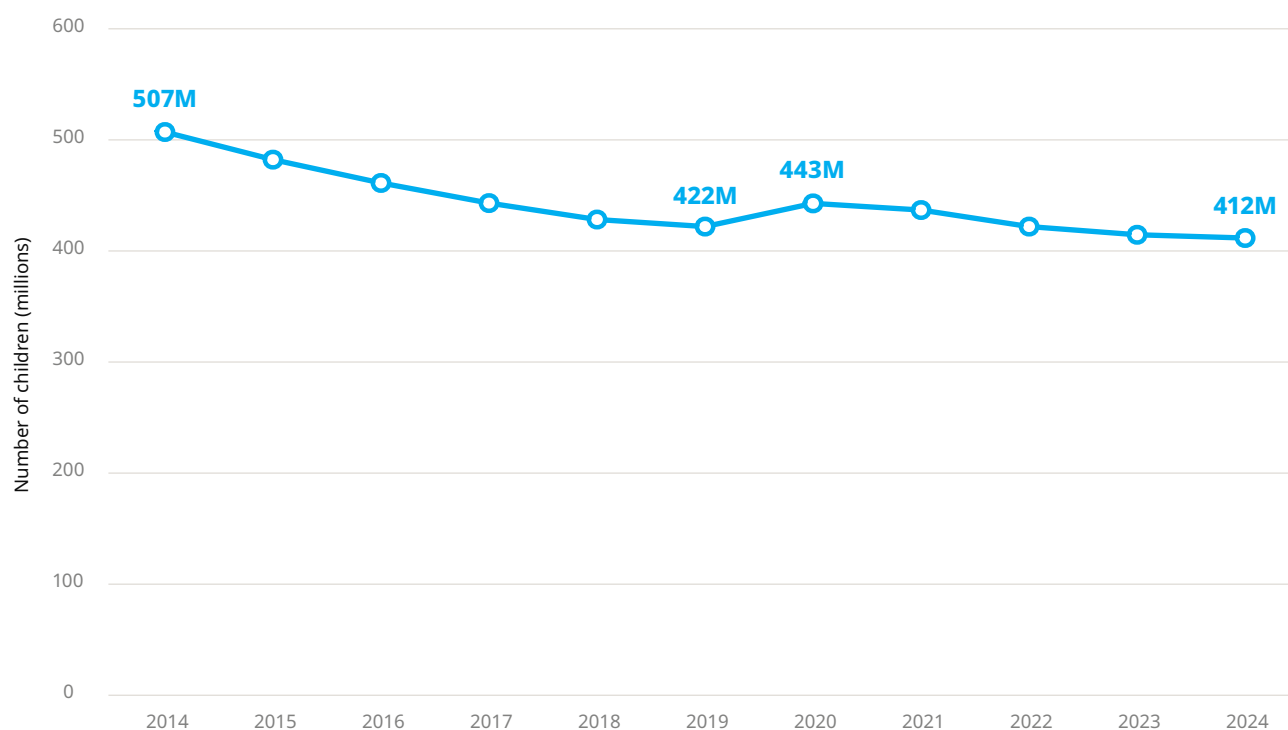


Figure 1.2(b) Number of children living on less than \$3.00 a day, 2014–2024



Source: UNICEF, World Bank and Lara Ibarra, Salmeron Gomez, et al., 'Children in Monetary Poor Households', Policy Research Working Paper 11203, World Bank Group, Washington, D.C., September 2025, <<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099151009052581696/pdf/IDU-439588fb-b2c2-4d7f-941b-90275692e782.pdf>>, accessed 20 October 2025, Figures 1 and 2, p. 7.

The important exception to the global trend is sub-Saharan Africa, a region which saw almost no change in the percentage of children living in extreme poverty between 2014 and 2024 (from 52.3 per cent to 52.2 per cent).

The impact of conflict on childhood poverty (see *Chapter 4*) is evident in the 31 countries classified by the World Bank as fragile and conflict-affected states. Rates of extreme poverty among children in these states rose from 46 per cent in 2014 to 50.2 per cent – or about one in two children – in 2024. By contrast, rates of extreme childhood poverty in countries not classified as fragile or conflict-affected fell from 19.9 per cent to 11.4 per cent over the same period.³¹ The increasing concentration of extreme childhood poverty in fragile and conflict-affected states is particularly concerning given the inherent challenges of providing families with services and support in such settings.

Fighting poverty to reap a demographic dividend

Tackling poverty and investing in their poorest children is essential for African countries to grow their economies over the coming decades and reap the benefits of a potential ‘demographic dividend’.

The number of children in the world has stabilized at about 2.3 billion.³² By contrast, the adult population continues to grow – and age. Globally, people over 65 will outnumber children under 18 by the 2070s.³³ Fertility rates are falling and life expectancy is rising, leading to smaller, older populations (see *SOWC 2024*).

There is one crucial exception: **sub-Saharan Africa**. There, child populations are still growing,³⁴ and the region has a rising share of working-age adults (18–64).

Managed well, this growing population of young people has the potential to deliver a one-off dividend of strong economic growth, allowing the region to mirror the economic experience of other regions in the world. For example, **East Asia and the Pacific** saw significant economic growth in the late twentieth century amid similar demographic transitions.³⁵

Success in those countries was linked to targeted policies that benefited households, grew state budgets and reduced child poverty.

Encouragingly, some sub-Saharan African countries are showing early signs of economic growth, but outcomes remain uncertain.³⁶ The key to achieving this potential lies in a careful blend of policies that focus on maternal and child health, education, and girls’ empowerment.³⁷

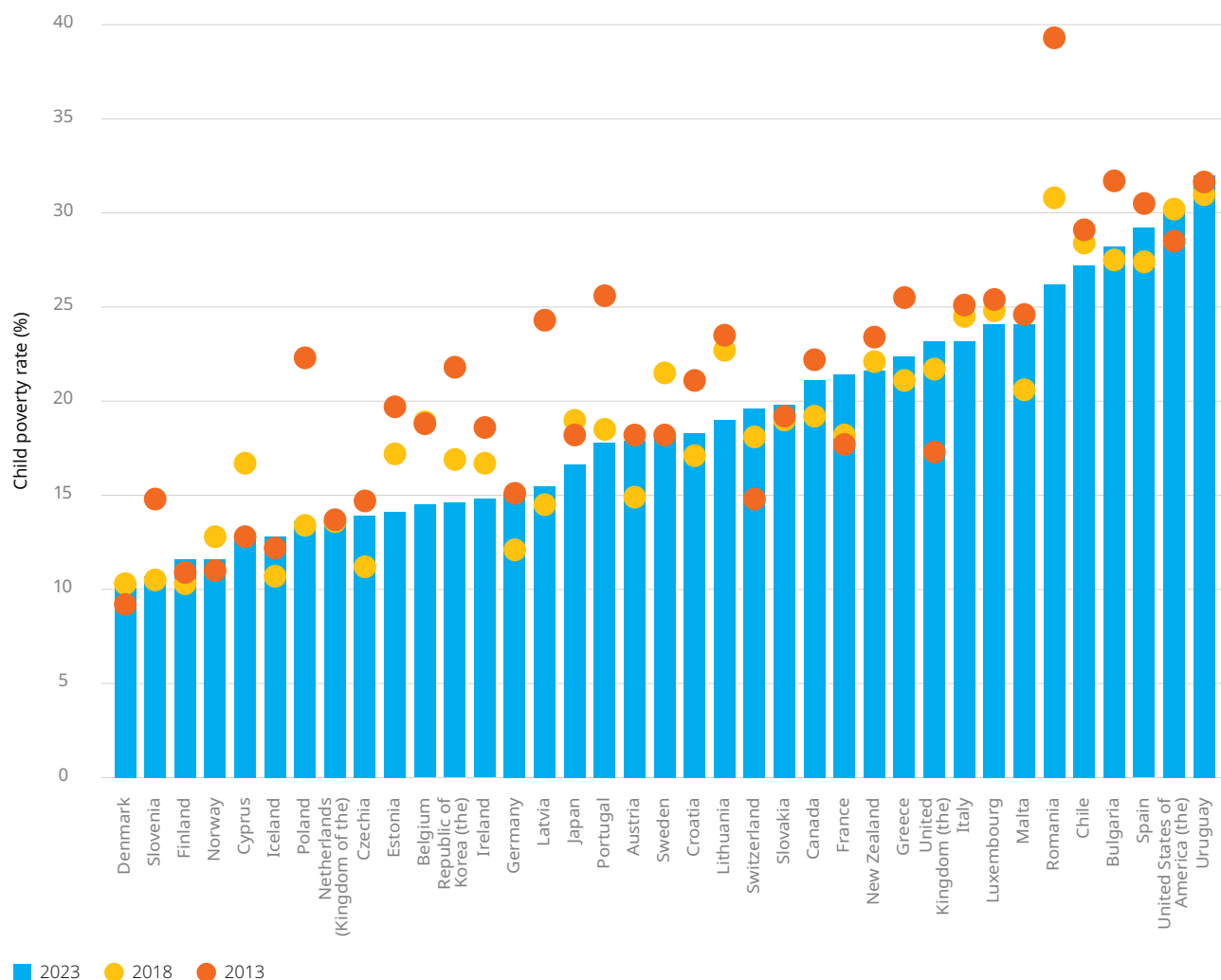
Conversely, in countries where working-age populations are shrinking, a ‘demographic deficit’ could occur.

High-income countries

Although extreme monetary poverty is rare in high-income countries, children in rich countries still experience poverty, with detrimental effects on their lives.³⁸

The most widely used measure in wealthier countries is **relative poverty**, which is usually defined in terms of a percentage of median household income in each country.³⁹ An analysis of data from 37 countries, using a relative poverty threshold of 60 per cent of a country’s median household income, shows worrying levels of poverty in the richest countries. Even amid wealth, about 50 million children in high-income countries live in monetary poverty.⁴⁰

Figure 1.3 Rates of child monetary poverty in high-income countries, 2013–2023



Note: Japan, Korea, Switzerland, the United States of America (2022) and Chile (2022=2021, 2018=2016, 2013=2012).

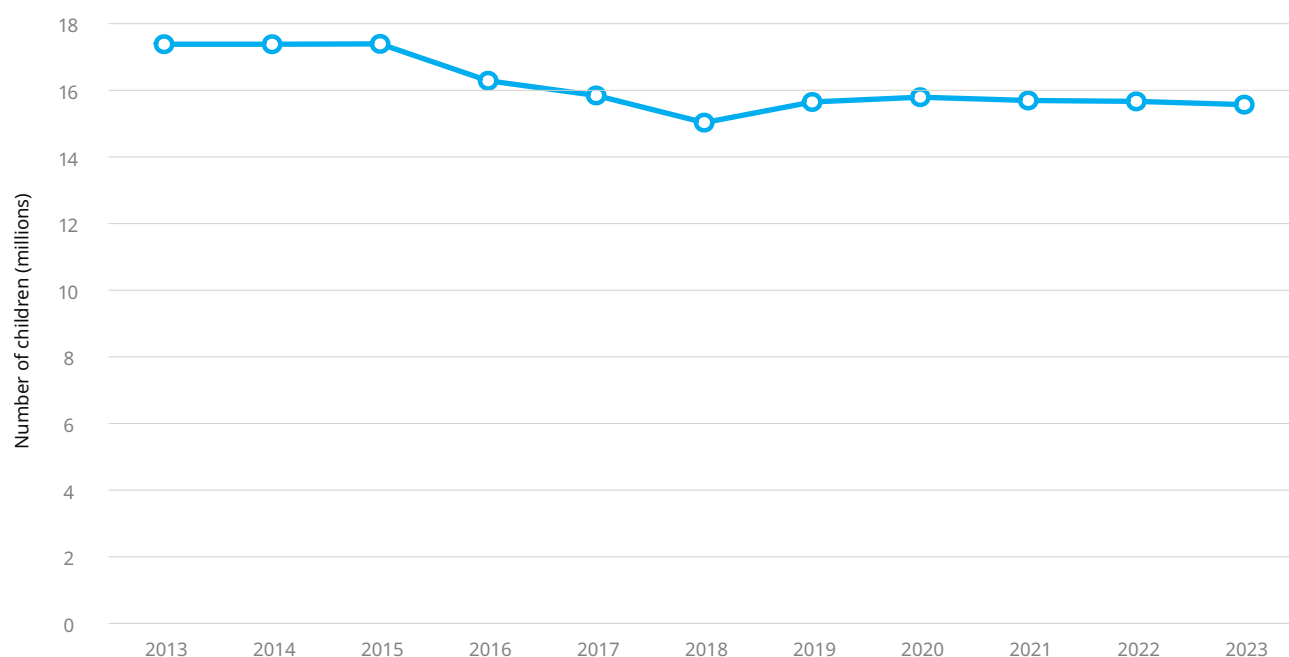
Source: For countries participating in the Eurostat statistical framework, Eurostat, 'At-risk-of-poverty rate by poverty threshold, age and sex' data set, accessed 21 October 2025. Data for the Republic of Korea were provided by Statistics Korea, for Canada by Statistics Canada and for Japan by Tokyo Metropolitan University. For the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, data were calculated from the Households Below Average Income study (FYE 2023/24). For the United States of America and Uruguay, we report our own calculations based on the Luxembourg Income Study. For Chile, we report our own calculations based on the Casen Survey.

Progress in tackling monetary poverty in high-income countries

The good news is that the average child poverty rate across these countries fell by around 2.5 per cent over the course of a decade (2013–2023).⁴¹ The bad news is that most of that drop occurred early in the 10-year period, and the fast pace of reduction was followed by stagnation. As a result, progress over the past decade towards ending child monetary poverty in these 37 countries has effectively stalled.

The picture varies significantly by country, however. Eight countries cut child monetary poverty rates by a quarter: Canada, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, the Republic of Korea, Romania and Slovenia. By contrast, in France, Switzerland and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, child monetary poverty increased by more than 20 per cent.

Figure 1.4 Number of children living in relative monetary poverty in the European Union, 2013–2023



Source: Eurostat, 'At-risk-of-poverty rate by poverty threshold, age and sex' data set, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_li02_custom_18410801/default/table>, accessed 21 October 2025.

How do children see poverty?

“You can get thin because of thinking too much ... You think about the future and wonder if you will manage all right.”⁴²

These words, spoken by a boy in Malawi, are testament to the reality that children often have an acute

and nuanced understanding of what poverty is, what causes it and the role it plays in their lives.

Researchers are increasingly using such perspectives, alongside monetary or deprivation-based measures, to build more

comprehensive pictures of childhood poverty. UNICEF Innocenti – Office of Research and Foresight is currently finalizing a review of qualitative research studies from around the world to better understand children’s perspectives on poverty.



Photo: Sylvia, who has cerebral palsy, attends therapy at the Community Support Center in Burgas, Bulgaria. A mobile team visiting the Roma community in Meden Rudnik identified her, opening the door to care she once lacked.

Sylvia | Age 6

Bulgaria

Unseen, unknown and uncounted – until social workers arrived

Timely and consistent support gives a 6-year-old with cerebral palsy the chance to grow and thrive.

In April 2021, social worker Katya Kirova was making the rounds in the Roma community of the Meden Rudnik neighbourhood in Burgas, Bulgaria, when she came across a child who showed signs of developmental delay.

“I remember the first time I saw Sylvia, she was quite tiny and sat supported by pillows so she wouldn’t fall,” says Kirova.

That was Sylvia at 2 years old. At an age when most children can run, jump and kick a ball, Sylvia couldn’t even stand.

Born in the Roma settlement, Sylvia – now 6 – is one of five children. Her mother, Zhyumbyula Moskova, gave birth to her first child at just 13. Since then, she has raised her children independently, with occasional support from relatives. As a young single parent with little support, Moskova – and her children – slipped through the cracks. The family were unregistered in school, unseen by the health care system and overlooked by social services – until Kirova’s team arrived.

Under the European Child Guarantee pilot project, funded by the European

Commission and implemented by UNICEF Bulgaria, Kirova’s mobile team enrolled Moskova’s children into schools, offered guidance and arranged medical visits for Sylvia. Through these medical assessments, Sylvia’s cerebral palsy was identified. As her daughter’s personal assistant, Moskova also started receiving a monthly cash benefit.

Almost a year and half after her therapy began, Sylvia took her first steps.

“Today, Sylvia is not only walking, but she is running. It is a vivid example of when a case is covered in time, there can be amazing results and this child can develop potential that even specialists did not initially imagine,” explains Maria Atanasova, manager of the Community Support Center where Sylvia receives therapy.

Sylvia and Moskova are just two of the 3,600 children and 2,800 parents across seven municipalities in Bulgaria who received support from the mobile teams.

Multidimensional deprivation-based poverty

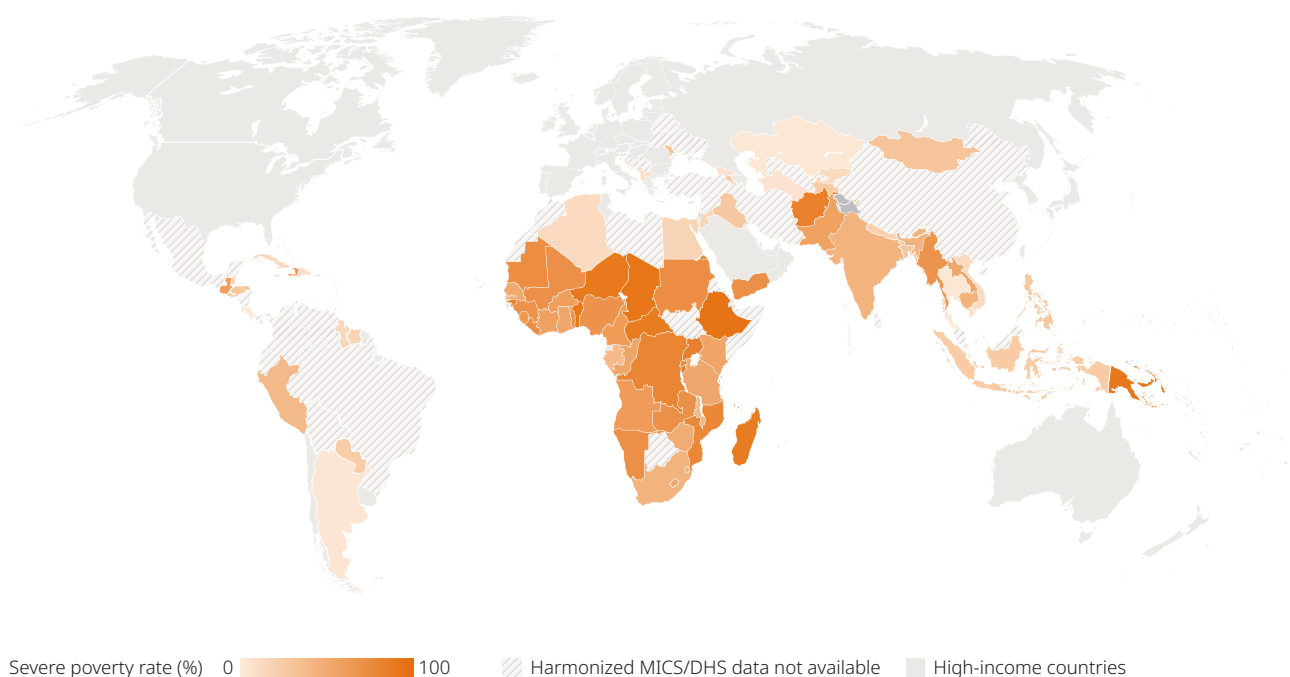
Measuring the range of material deprivations that constitute poverty is essential for understanding – and overcoming – the challenges faced by children living in poverty.⁴³

For this report, UNICEF and partners in the Global Coalition to End Child Poverty produced a statistical model of deprivation for 133 countries in six categories – education, health, housing, nutrition, sanitation and water. A child experiencing deprivation in at least one of these six categories is considered to be living in **severe deprivation**.⁴⁴

Low- and middle-income countries

As with extreme monetary poverty, the highest rates of severe deprivation are concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa.

Figure 1.5 Rates of severe deprivation among children in low- and middle-income countries



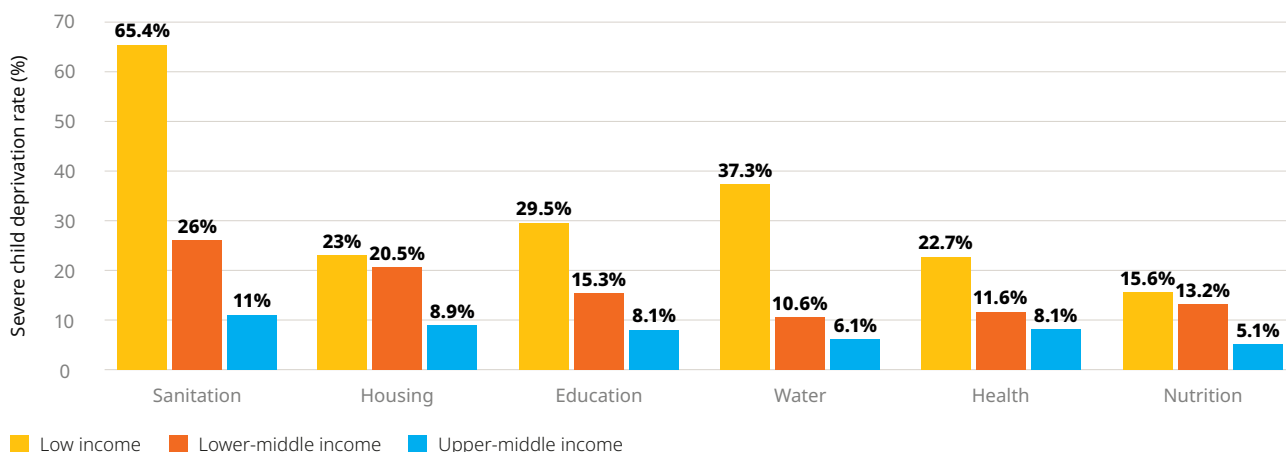
Note: The map shows the percentage of children aged 0–17 with one or more severe deprivations. The severe deprivation rates indicated in areas shaded from solid peach to solid orange are based on harmonized MICS/DHS data from 2015 to 2023. Grey striped areas represent low- and middle-income countries for which harmonized MICS/DHS data were not available at the time of publishing. Areas shaded grey represent high-income countries where these measures do not apply. This map does not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or territory or the delimitation of any frontiers. The dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties. The final boundary between the Sudan and South Sudan has not yet been determined. The final status of the Abyei area has not yet been determined.

Source: UNICEF analysis of data from MICS and DHS, compiled by Save the Children. For more details, see Annex.

Severe deprivation can stem from different sources – the dimensions of multidimensional poverty. While richer countries have lower rates of severe deprivation as a group (see Figure 1.6), country income level itself does not determine these rates.

Across income groups, sanitation – as measured by access to a toilet – is the most widespread severe deprivation (see Annex for how each dimension is measured).

Figure 1.6 Average rates of severe deprivation by individual dimension and country income group



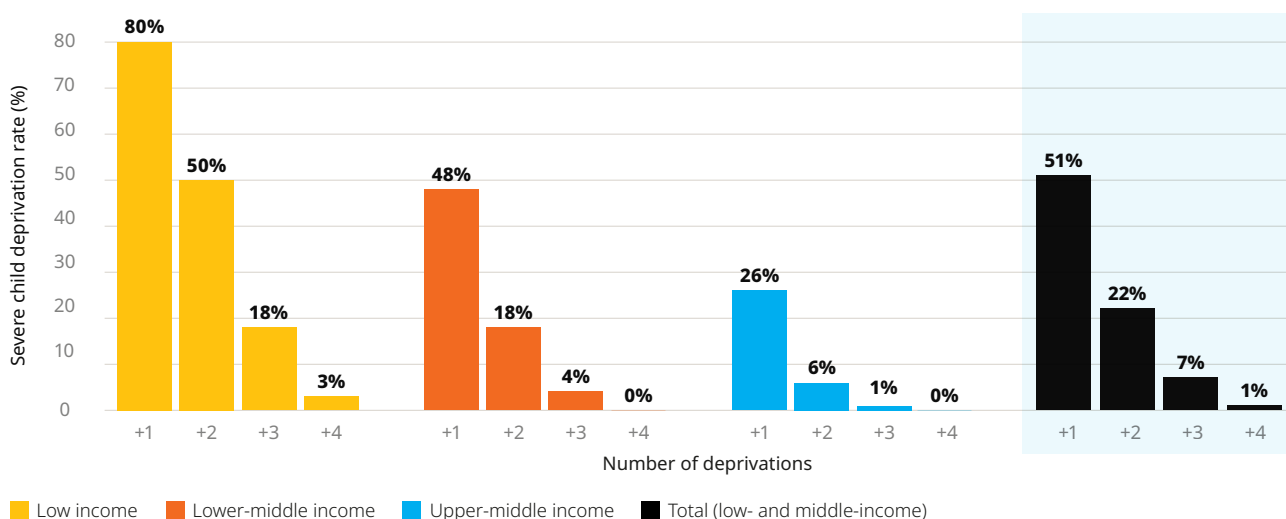
Source: UNICEF analysis of data from MICS and DHS, compiled by Save the Children. For more details, see Annex.

How many deprivations?

Overall, 417 million (22 per cent) children in low- and middle-income countries experience two or more deprivations, while 118 million children (7 per cent) experience three or more deprivations, and 17 million children (1 per cent) face four or more deprivations (see Figure 1.7).

In some countries with large child populations, the overall number of children living in severe deprivation may be high, but the average number of deprivations per child may be low. For example, about 206 million children in India experience at least one deprivation, but fewer than one third of them (62 million) experience two or more.⁴⁵

Figure 1.7 Severe deprivation rates among children by country income group (based on number of deprivations)



Source: UNICEF analysis of data from MICS and DHS, compiled by Save the Children. For more details, see Annex.

The highest rates of severe child deprivation in multiple dimensions are concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. In Chad, for example, 64 per cent of children face two or more severe deprivations, and just under 25 per cent face three or more.⁴⁶

Poverty and access

Access to digital technology – and the skills to use it effectively – has become critical for full engagement in today's world. Its absence can hinder a child's access to information education and health care, for example. In this sense, digital technology can be considered a gateway need in understanding a child's experience of poverty.

Socioeconomic status is a strong predictor of whether a child has internet connectivity at home in every part of the world, but more so in low- and middle-income countries. Children living in poorer households are more likely to lack

connectivity, irrespective of their age or the overall level of economic development of the country.⁴⁷

A recent UNICEF report covering 12 countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia found that nearly one in five children aged 12–17 does not use the internet at home, according to their parents. Across the sampling of countries in Eastern and Southern Africa, between 33 per cent and 75 per cent of children are not connected to the internet,⁴⁸ reflecting the global divide between the digital haves and have-nots.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, education in many countries moved online and achievement subsequently dropped.⁴⁹ This provides insight into the role digital technology plays as a tool for children to exercise their rights, while also highlighting the importance of digital access for educational equity and opportunities to learn, socialize and create.

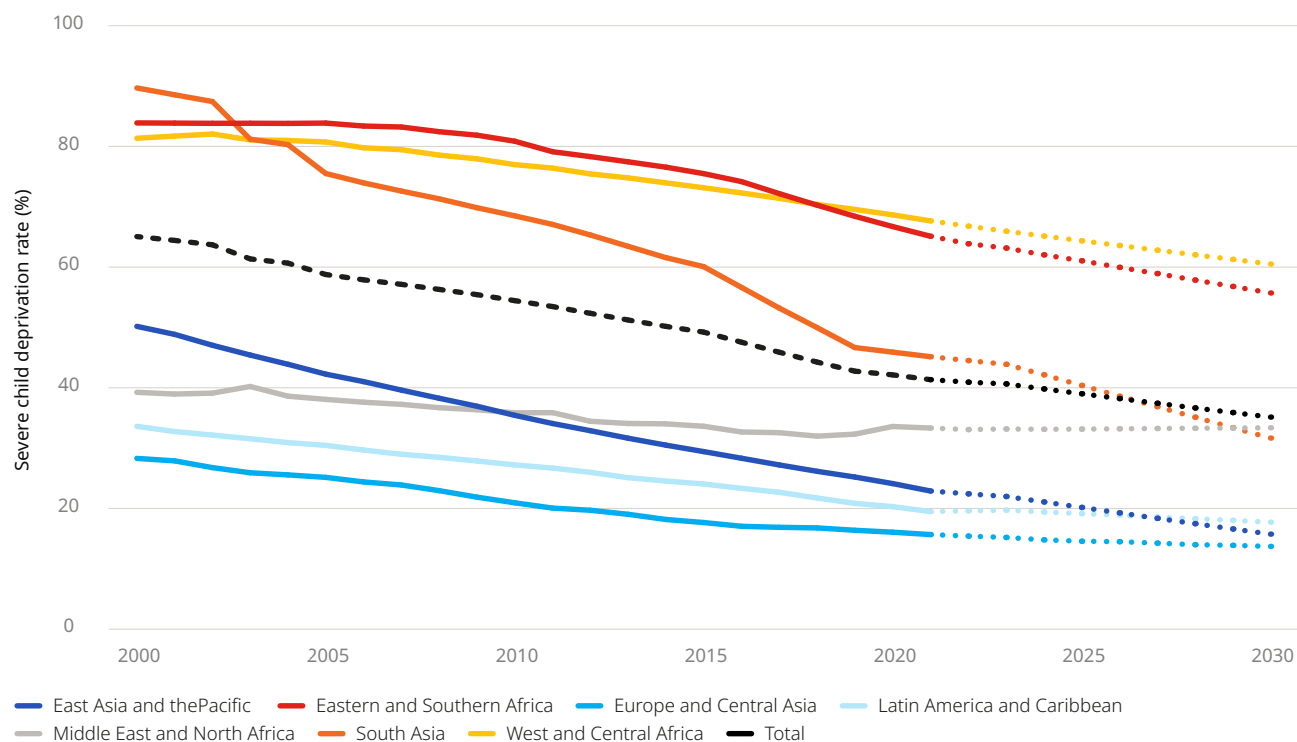
As digital technology becomes more essential to daily life, some of children's fundamental rights are now partially or fully enabled through digital means – fully in the case of access to information, and partially in the case of access to education.

Progress in reducing child deprivations

Since 2000, countries have made progress towards reducing child poverty as measured by **severe deprivation**.⁵⁰

Estimates show that poverty based on severe deprivation in at least one area has fallen by one third since 2000 in low- and middle-income countries.⁵¹ Within this period, the rate dropped from 51 per cent in 2013 to 41 per cent in 2023.⁵² But amid shocks from the pandemic, mounting debt, the climate crisis and rising levels of conflict, progress is stalling (see Chapter 4).

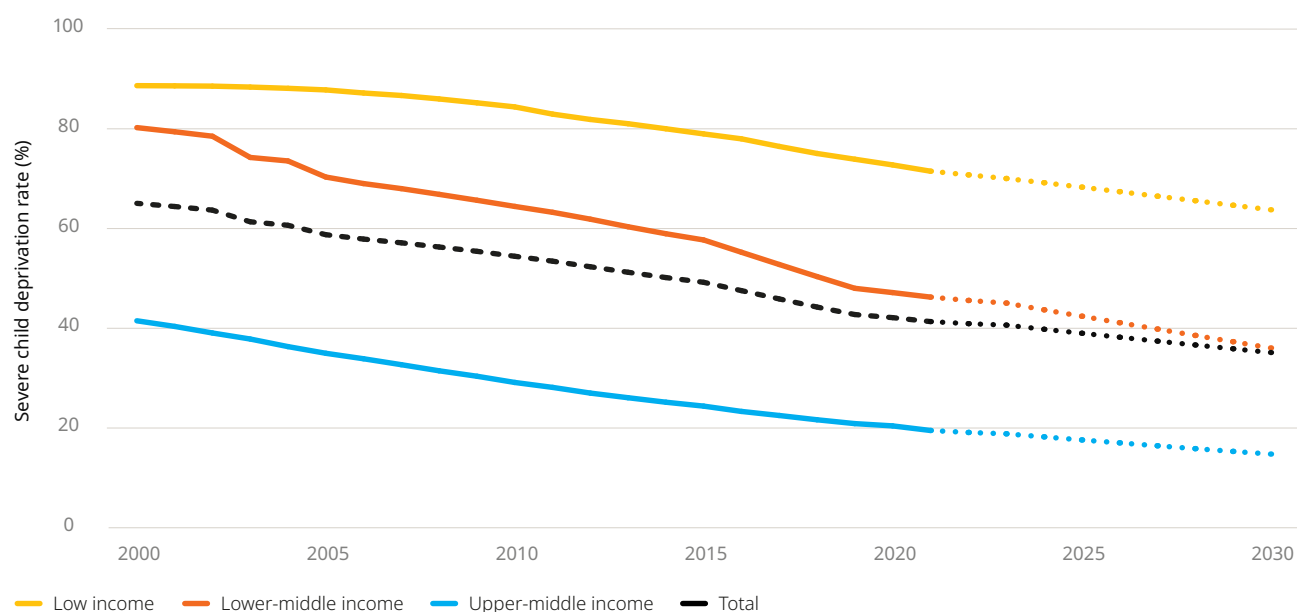
Figure 1.8(a) Global and regional severe child deprivation rates, historic and projected, 2000–2030



Note: This chart shows the percentage of children aged 0–17 with one or more severe deprivations. Household survey data that serve as the basis for the estimates cover less than 50 per cent of the child population in East Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and Caribbean. Refer to endnote table for specific values.⁵³

Source: Save the Children modelled estimates of multidimensional poverty rates for 2000–2023; UNICEF projections for 2024–2030. For more details, see Annex.

Figure 1.8(b) Severe child deprivation rates by income group, historic and projected, 2000–2030



Note: This chart shows the percentage of children aged 0–17 with one or more severe deprivations. Household survey data that serve as the basis for the estimates cover less than 50 per cent of the child population in upper-middle-income countries.

Source: Save the Children modelled estimates of multidimensional poverty rates for 2000–2023; UNICEF projections for 2024–2030. For more details, see Annex.

High-income countries

Data on severe deprivation in high-income countries are not directly comparable with the data for low- and middle-income countries. But while different measures and indicators are used in these wealthy settings, the concept of deprivation is the same.

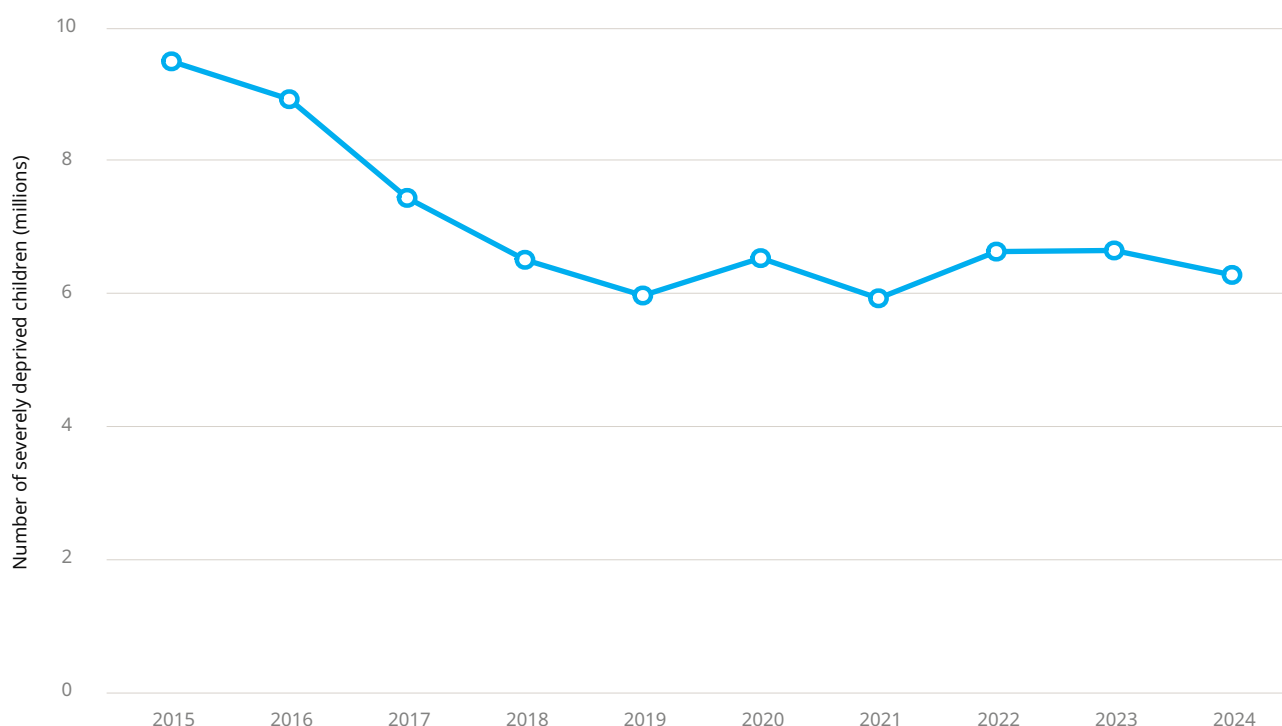
For example, in the 27 European Union (EU) countries plus Norway and Switzerland, **severe material and social deprivation** is defined as a lack of at least 7 out of 13 goods, services and social activities that “lead to an adequate life”.⁵⁴ Some of these goods and services include the capacity to face unexpected expenses and the ability to keep the home adequately warm.⁵⁵

Progress in reducing child deprivations

Figure 1.9 shows that child poverty based on deprivation declined in the 27 EU countries over almost a decade. However, the progress only occurred during the first half of the period, and there has been no sign of deprivation reduction in recent years.

Even accounting for this progress, more than 6 million children in the EU live in poverty based on a measure of severe deprivation.

Figure 1.9 Number of children living in severe deprivation in the European Union, 2015–2024



Source: Eurostat, ‘Severe material and social deprivation rate by age and sex’ data set, accessed on 21 October 2025, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_mdspd11_custom_18410940/default/table>, accessed 21 October 2025.

The risk of living in poverty

To meet the needs of children living in poverty, we need to understand the lives of those most at risk, including very young children, children with disabilities and children facing discrimination.⁵⁶

The world's **youngest children** experience the highest rates of poverty.⁵⁷ In 2024, 22.3 per cent of all children below 5 years of age lived in extreme monetary poverty, compared with 14.9 per cent of 15- to 17-year-olds.⁵⁸

One hypothesis for this is that older children can make a greater contribution to household income – although, this comes at a cost to their education and long-term employment prospects. The same dynamic could also increase the likelihood of child marriage. A second potential reason is that younger children on average have younger parents, who must contend with the costs associated with the early years.

With regard to **gender**, the data suggest little overall difference in poverty rates between boys and girls but young women between the ages of 25 and 34 are at a much higher

risk of living in poverty than men of the same age.⁵⁹

Most of the children facing extreme monetary poverty – 79 per cent – live in **rural areas**.⁶⁰ These children are also more likely to suffer severe deprivation. However, it is important to understand that all forms of poverty are undercounted in **urban slums** and informal settlements,⁶¹ where deep inequities exist.

The education level of the head of household is also a factor: Children face an extreme poverty rate of 32.9 per cent when the household head has no education, compared with just 5.8 per cent when the head has tertiary education.⁶²

By most measures, **children with disabilities** are more likely than children without disabilities to live in poverty.⁶³ These children's families may face disproportionately higher health care costs, while parents and caregivers may be unable to work outside the home.⁶⁴

In contexts with armed conflict and instability, a greater proportion of children face extreme poverty. Half

of all **children living in fragile and conflict-affected settings** live in extreme poverty, versus 11.4 per cent of children outside of these states.⁶⁵

Too little is known about poverty among **children who are displaced or refugees**. Displacement means these children often go uncounted, with their experience of poverty going unnoticed.

Nevertheless, studies from several countries, including Colombia, Lebanon and Uganda, indicate that refugees and displaced people are at heightened risk of poverty, both while they are in transit and when they arrive at a new location.⁶⁶

Children from **indigenous families** are also often at higher risk of poverty. An estimate from the 23 countries that ratified the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention showed that 18.7 per cent of indigenous peoples – adults and children – lived in extreme monetary poverty, compared with 9.3 per cent of the general population.⁶⁷

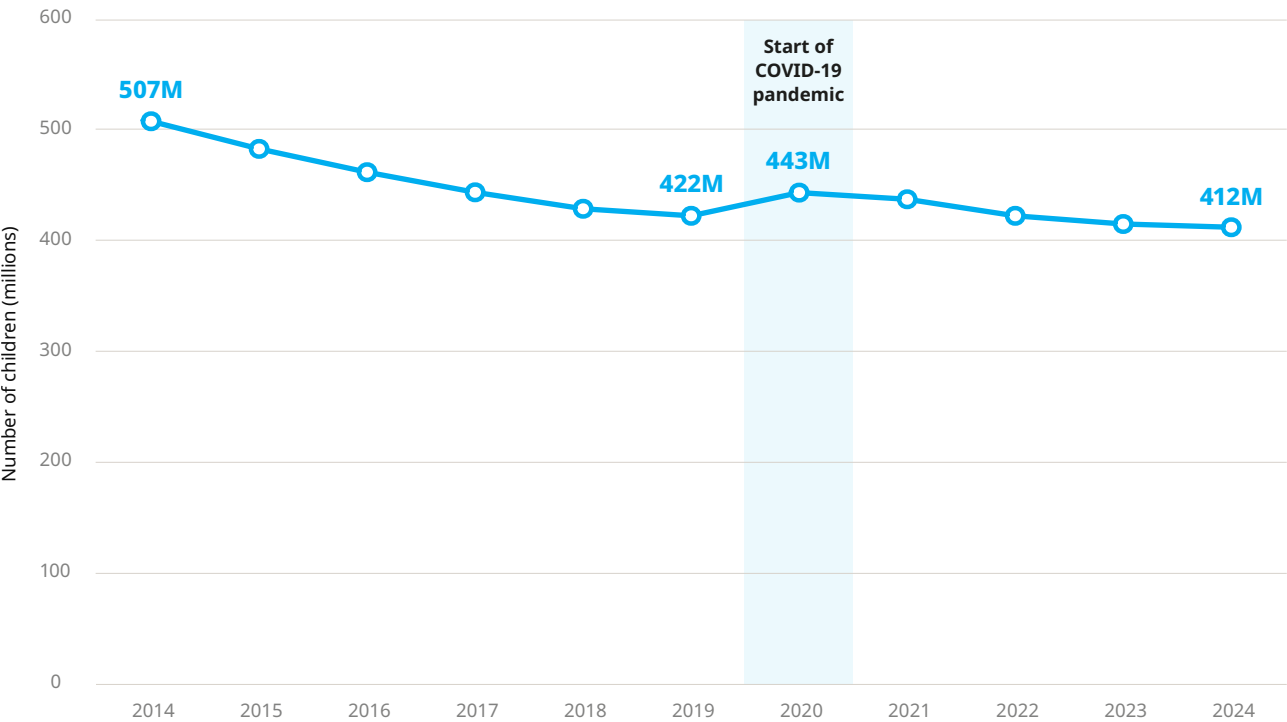
A critical juncture

A global commitment to ending child poverty was made explicit in 2015 when nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), affirming that ending poverty is indispensable to achieving a more peaceful, prosperous and sustainable planet.⁶⁸

As this chapter shows, progress has been made towards meeting that commitment. But, as the global recession of 2008–2010 and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2022 demonstrated, progress is fragile. During the pandemic, for example, 20 million more children were living in extreme poverty in 2020 than a year earlier (*see Figure 1.10*).

Without decisive action, we risk losing momentum in the fight against child poverty. Further stagnation or setbacks could consign millions more children to deprivation.⁶⁹

Figure 1.10 Children living in extreme poverty (\$3.00), before and after COVID-19

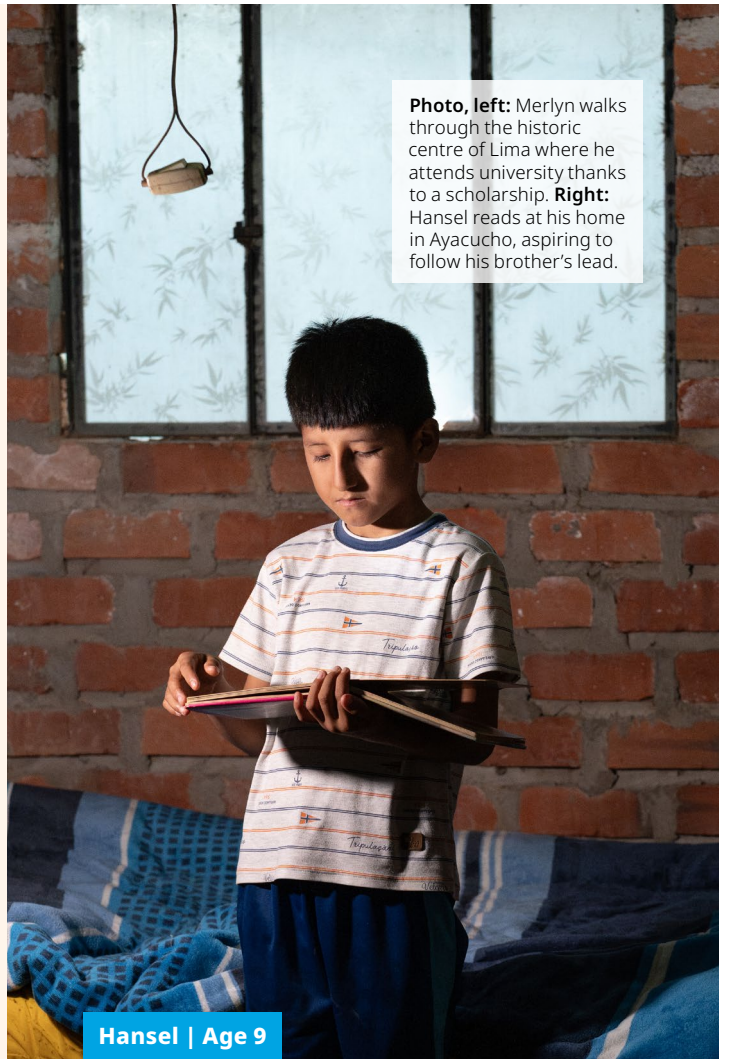


Source: UNICEF, World Bank and Lara Ibarra, Salmeron Gomez, et al., 'Children in Monetary Poor Households', Policy Research Working Paper 11203, World Bank Group, Washington, D.C., September 2025, <<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099151009052581696/pdf/IDU-439588fb-b2c2-4d7f-941b-90275692e782.pdf>>, accessed 20 October 2025, Figure 2, p. 7.



Merlyn | Age 18

Peru



Hansel | Age 9

Photo, left: Merlyn walks through the historic centre of Lima where he attends university thanks to a scholarship. **Right:** Hansel reads at his home in Ayacucho, aspiring to follow his brother's lead.

Blueprints of hope

In a remote region of Peru, two brothers envision a better future for their loved ones.

"When I grow up, I want to be a civil engineer like my brother Merlyn. I dream of building a house next to his, so my parents can live with us," says Hansel Mauricio Zárate, 9.

He lives in Pampa Miraflores village, which is in the remote Apurímac, Ene and Mantaro Rivers Valley (VRAEM) in the Peruvian jungle.

Hansel's brother Merlyn Mauricio Zárate, 18, was the first student from the community to earn a place in a high-performance school and receive a state scholarship to the National University of Engineering in Lima.

For many, VRAEM is synonymous with drug trafficking and the lingering shadows of the terrorism that devastated Peru in the 1980s. In Pampa Miraflores, most families rely on cocoa farming – a livelihood in which children often take part to help keep their families afloat.

"My husband grows cocoa, but he doesn't have a fixed income. We must pay rent and support Merlyn with his daily expenses. As an early childhood educator and social worker, I earn up to 1,530 soles (approximately US\$444) and that helps us," explains the boys' mother, Nayci Zárate.

Since Merlyn was 5 years old, as part of the national Juntos programme, the family has received 200 soles (approximately US\$58) every two months, provided they fulfil their responsibilities, such as ensuring that children attend school and receive regular health checkups.

"Sometimes we have nothing at home, and then the money arrives. We use it to buy food, notebooks or shoes. It's something we can count on every two months," says Zárate.

The Juntos programme has ensured that children like Hansel and Merlyn can thrive.

"I want to finish my studies, help my family and my community. Instead of dirt roads, I want to see paved streets and better homes," says Merlyn.



Youth visions: Poverty-free futures

Chapter 2

How do children and young people experience poverty? This chapter articulates young people's experiences: The challenges they must confront and the futures they dare to shape. The insights presented here are drawn exclusively from a global youth foresight workshop held in July 2025 that brought together over 20 participants between ages 15–25 years from more than 10 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America.

This chapter presents findings from a youth foresight exercise designed to explore possible futures through the active participation of children and adolescents. Unlike traditional qualitative research, which often seeks to represent and explain current experiences, this foresight approach engages young people as agents in imagining and shaping future possibilities.

Every young person who participated in the workshop reported they had experienced poverty or economic shocks in some form. Some had been pushed out of school to earn an income. Others had endured hunger, early marriage, unsafe labour or the slow violence of inflation.⁷⁰ They all came from places where systems have faltered, their lives shaped by daily acts of adaptation.⁷¹ This chapter shows the fractures that children and young people see most clearly. It also highlights innovations young people are already leading to counter these issues.

More than 20 young people between ages 15 and 25 years from around the world gathered at a youth foresight workshop in July 2025 to share their experiences of poverty and their visions of possible futures without it.⁷² Participants were purposefully selected to capture diverse perspectives across contexts, ensuring that the scenarios and recommendations are informed by the lived realities and unique insights of youth in different settings. These participants are not representative of all children and young people in their respective countries, and the views expressed in this chapter do not necessarily reflect the views of UNICEF. For a more detailed explanation of the methodology, please refer to the annex of this report.

This chapter is their contribution – an approach that aligns with broader shifts in global governance. The United Nations’ Quintet of Change calls for foresight and anticipatory governance across systems,⁷³ while the Pact for the Future urges institutions to embed youth inclusion into the heart of international cooperation.⁷⁴ Direct quotes presented here from the source transcript have been anonymized. Participants also wrote imagined messages from their future selves, reflecting on what a just world for children would look like. Excerpts from some of these letters are also included in the chapter.

“What’s here isn’t a vision of what might be. It’s a record of what’s already begun.
Drawn by those who refuse to wait their turn.”

Nahjae Nunes, 2023 UNICEF Youth Foresight Senior Fellow

Front lines and futures

To young people, childhood has become a front line. What used to be considered a protected stage of life is now exposed to heat – not only from climate change but also from recurring economic shocks, such as inflation, political instability, pandemic fallout and cuts to the very aid meant to soften their impact. These are not momentary disruptions. They are recurring, compounding events that have made crisis a condition.

Participants describe poverty as something that does not just exist but is built. Designed. Enforced. Shaped by decisions that render some children visible and others disposable. Exclusion is upheld by decisions on what gets funded, what gets ignored and who gets heard.

When asked, “What is the current reality children and young people are experiencing as a result of economic shocks in their community?”, no matter their origin, participants voiced a shared reality. They said they felt invisible, unheard, overwhelmed and forced to compromise on their dreams – all while bearing the consequences of decisions made by others.

Across regions, participants described exclusion not as a temporary misfortune but as a lasting structure – one that trades in neglect, rewards scarcity and calls inequality inevitable. But young people refuse to accept inevitability. They name systems not to indict them, but to reimagine them. The question of children living in poverty is not just about being poor. It is also about being poorly served. Poorly governed. Poorly prioritized. It is not whether we see this – but what we choose to do with it.

Education is one of the first things to burn

While declared a universal right, education is conditional in many places – available only if children can afford not to work, marry, migrate or care for others.

Participants described schools that have closed indefinitely because teachers went unpaid or because public funds were diverted elsewhere. They recalled students being pulled from classrooms to help their families survive when food prices spiked, when wages collapsed or when crises forced parents into desperate trade-offs. In places hit by inflation or disasters such as floods or droughts, the choice was stark: Food on the table or books in a backpack.

“Many children dropped out of school permanently because their families needed them to work, and now they can’t catch up.”

Participant, youth foresight workshop 2025⁷⁵

Even if schools remain open, learning is not guaranteed. Language and curriculum transitions can deepen the loss. Young people described experiences of not having adequate tutoring to prepare for exams in non-native languages, and having to sit these exams at short notice.

When writing a letter from the future during the workshop, a 15-year-old from the Democratic Republic of the Congo wrote: “In an economically just society, no child should ever have to give up school to carry the weight of their family’s survival. I want you to remember this: You deserved to learn, not to hustle.”

The digital divide has become a fault line

In rural regions, students spoke of lost years, particularly during the pandemic and in its aftermath, when the pivot to online education revealed deep inequalities. When schools shifted online, unequal access to digital technology meant that entire communities of children were cut off from education altogether. Millions were left behind with no device, no data, and no electricity.

“The children who live in remote areas didn’t even know that online school was an option.”

Participant, youth foresight workshop 2025⁷⁶



The question of children living in poverty is not just about being poor. It is also about being poorly served. Poorly governed. Poorly prioritized. It is not whether we see this – but what we choose to do with it.

Mental and emotional well-being are crumbling

Emotional trauma is part of this infrastructure too. One participant explained that in the context of where they grew up, a single psychologist may be responsible for hundreds of children, illustrating how overstretched mental health services leave most without support.⁷⁷

In a letter from the future, a 17-year-old from India wrote during the workshop: “In an economically just society, no child should cry quietly in a corner thinking they’re weak. Remember this: Silence was never strength. You are allowed to need help.”

In conflict areas or migrant pathways, the pain of separation is treated as background noise. In public schools, mental health is rarely budgeted for. Economic shocks intensify these gaps: Budget cuts reduce counselling staff, aid shortfalls disrupt psychosocial programmes and families under financial stress deprioritize mental health care altogether. The emotional costs of crisis are often unnamed, unmeasured and untreated. Young people reported few places to talk, and fewer still to heal.



The emotional costs of crisis are often unnamed, unmeasured and untreated. Young people reported few places to talk, fewer still to heal.

Food systems are buckling too

In aid-dependent regions, shocks – such as deep cuts in official development assistance in 2025 – mean immediate hunger. When support vanishes, so do nutrition and health care. Malnutrition surges. Children go to bed hungry or drop out of school to help pay for meals.

“So many children in deprived areas depend on funding from [non-governmental organizations] or government aid to survive.”

Participant, youth foresight workshop 2025⁷⁸

The fire tends to spread along gendered lines

Girls, especially in rural areas, may be pushed into early marriage or burdened with caregiving when families face economic shocks. Several participants highlighted the risk of early marriage during these shocks – especially when food prices spiked or jobs vanished.⁷⁹ In fragile economies, boys may also be pushed into exploitative labour markets.

What appears to be tradition may actually reflect policy failures: An absence of reproductive health funding, weak enforcement of child protection laws and insufficient income support can leave families with impossible choices.

Participants visualized exclusion as a tangled web of harms. While individual forms of exclusion may seem unrelated, their intersection deepens systemic damage. When multiple types of exclusion converge, they compound the experience of harm, making it more difficult to heal, recover or move forward. Young people described feeling abandonment in a world designed to prioritize stability for some, while allowing others to slip through the cracks.

In a letter from the future, a 20-year-old from Ghana wrote: “In an economically just society, no child should trade their future for a dowry. Please remember: Your life is not a bargaining chip.”

“Being poor is not just about money. It’s about being left behind.”

Participant, youth foresight workshop 2025⁸⁰

Emergent acts of defiance

Refusing to be sidelined, participants shared a range of solutions that are models of care, education and governance. They reroute power sideways, towards peers, neighbourhoods and shared accountability. Each intervention is seeded in struggle and watered by ingenuity, reaching towards something more durable than relief: justice.

In Jamaica's St. Elizabeth parish, adolescents are creating **community gardens** to confront inflation and hunger. As one participant explained, the goal is "to help families who can't afford fresh food ... get local leaders to support and fund it so it can grow".⁸¹

Youth in Egypt **partnered with small businesses** to sponsor orphaned children through public exhibitions.⁸² In Myanmar, in contexts in which limited digital access and conflict-driven displacement may prevent formal schooling, peer educators are creating **offline learning spaces** that allow children to study "without giving up work, at their own pace".⁸³

In Ecuador, volunteer psychologists ran **parenting workshops** to support caregivers in creating nurturing, rights-based environments. These helped transform "environments where they grow up".⁸⁴

In Madagascar, the national TV & Radio Scola^{rit} broadcast reached over 4 million children during school closures, using content "adapted to local security and language" to ensure relevance and reach.⁸⁵ In the Philippines, alternative **community-run schooling** models offer re-entry points for youth who had been excluded or pushed out.

Participants proposed stronger **library networks, universal internet and curriculum reform** under banners like a "Strategic Advocacy Plan for Inclusive Education".⁸⁶

Participants also proposed participatory budgeting mechanisms to give communities "a more direct democratic say" over public resources like housing and free meals.⁸⁷ They called for curriculum audits that reflect "social, cultural and political realities", insisting that education should not be divorced from lived experience.⁸⁸

In multiple regions, youth designed **databases to track stories** of survival, so that others could "share what helped them survive".⁸⁹ These data were not collected to be stored – they were meant to be activated.

In the workshop, foresight was used as a tool for democratic repair, with participants devising playbooks and toolkits to scale youth foresight globally. Some called for **new international taxation** structures to fund basic protections: "Tax corporations to fund social safety".⁹⁰ In all of this, the point is not to tweak broken systems but to seed alternatives that might one day replace them.



Each intervention is seeded in struggle and watered by ingenuity, reaching towards something more durable than relief: justice.

These efforts show how youth-led initiatives are stepping in where economic shocks have widened service gaps. What binds these efforts is a conviction that care should be public, proximate and shared – and young people are already laying the scaffolding for it. For these efforts to grow, they need not just applause but sustained investment, access to decision-making and policy integration.



For these efforts to grow, they need not just applause but sustained investment, access to decision-making and policy integration.

A blueprint for just futures

Participants framed poverty as structural neglect: an ecosystem where support is conditional, safety is uneven and opportunity is priced. The five policy priorities outlined below are participant-defined non-negotiables – distilled from testimony, foresight exercises and letters from the future developed during a visioning exercise (*see Annex*).

These are the five priorities identified by participants:

- 1. Education must be universal, continuous and available in all languages children speak.** Learning cannot pause for conflict, crisis or cost. No child should be left offline. No child should be left behind. Governments must guarantee multilanguage instruction, digital access and continuity of education – especially during emergencies – through targeted investment, offline learning models, and universal access to data, devices and electricity.
- 2. Mental health is not a luxury. It is a right.** Stigma is policy failure. Systems must meet the emotional weight children carry – everywhere. Integrate community-based mental health services into public systems, ensure rural access and mandate mental health as a core part of school and protection services – not as an add-on.
- 3. No child should have to trade safety for survival.** Protection must be proactive, not performative. Strengthen enforcement of child protection laws, ensure cash and care support reach households early, and shift from reactive protection to anticipatory systems that flag and prevent child risk.
- 4. Youth solutions need funding, not just applause.** Community gardens. Radio schooling. Mental health helplines. Scale them. Resource them. Now. Create dedicated funding streams for youth-led initiatives, integrate them into formal systems where relevant and remove bureaucratic barriers that keep informal innovation invisible or under-resourced.
- 5. Young people are co-authors of the future.** Decision-making must be real, not rehearsed. Foresight is not a workshop – it is governance. Institutionalize youth foresight and participation into policy design cycles, budgeting processes and accountability frameworks. Move beyond tokenism towards shared governance.



Photo: With no play areas in Silvertown, Ompfuna rides her toy motorbike along the polluted Jukskei River— just a kilometre away, children in wealthy Sandton enjoy sprawling spaces.

Ompfuna | Age 10

South Africa

No fair play

Ompfuna, 10, plays along a precarious riverbank, while glittering towers rise behind her.

Ompfuna, 10, rides her yellow scooter along a narrow footpath outside her house in Silvertown, near Alexandra township in South Africa. Her home is less than 20m away from the Jukskei River's edge, and she's careful not to ride too close to the steep bank.

"At Sandton they have big areas to play; here we have small areas to play," says Ompfuna.

Sandton, Africa's richest square mile, stands in stark contrast to

the congestion and squalor in Alexandra. The lack of playing areas isn't Ompfuna's only concern – the river next to her house is a constant threat.

"Sometimes when it rains that [riverbank] will fall down. That's why it's scary," Ompfuna explains.

With no space left to build on higher ground, families have built their homes along the Jukskei, which runs along the bottom of Alexandra. Chequered shanties line the bank, while empty shells of former homes lost to the floods are a daily reminder of the river's ferocity.

"When it starts raining, I can't sleep," says Sam Nkhumeleni, Ompfuna's father.

Ompfuna lives with her family in a three-section house: a small kitchen,

a sleeping room shared by four children and a multipurpose room. The bathroom is located inside the children's room.

As a caddy at a country club, Nkhumeleni is surrounded by patrons who easily spend R5,000 (US\$288) on lunch – his monthly salary.

The money that he and his wife, Portia – a domestic worker in Sandton – make is nowhere near enough to cover their expenses. They rely on the Child Support Grant from the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) to support their two youngest children.

"I want to make sure my kids all finish school and go to university so that one day they too can play golf and get caddies," says Nkhumeleni.



Proven ways to reduce child poverty

Chapter 3

What drives reductions in child poverty? Evidence from countries that have achieved significant progress points to five key policy pillars that, when implemented together, can deliver lasting change. This chapter outlines these core pillars and highlights the enabling conditions necessary to support and sustain effective policy action.

Decades of efforts to end child poverty have supplied proven strategies that offer our best hope of success. These strategies focus on **intergenerational approaches**, recognizing that improving family conditions directly benefits children; **integrated models**, realizing the multiplier effect of combining efforts across nutrition, health, education, housing and the labour market – and that poverty is multidimensional; **equity**, reaching marginalized groups; **empowerment**, not only providing support but helping families become self-sufficient; and **evidence-based design** to target, test, monitor, evaluate and refine interventions.

Five policy pillars for ending child poverty

With enabling conditions in place (*see box on page 39*), proven policies that address the multiple causes and manifestations of child poverty will deliver significant results. Evidence from countries that have achieved significant progress points to five core policy areas that, when combined, create lasting impact:

1. Make ending child poverty a national priority.
2. Establish supportive macroeconomic policies.
3. Expand inclusive social protection.
4. Expand access to quality public services.
5. Promote decent work for parents and caregivers.

Make ending child poverty a national priority

Embedding child poverty reduction into laws, plans and budgets transforms it from an aspirational goal into a binding obligation, recognizing children as rights holders.

Prioritizing child poverty in national strategies drives political commitment, mobilizing resources and ensuring coordinated action across sectors. Integrating child poverty into broader development frameworks also strengthens accountability and secures sustained funding.

Various countries have successfully integrated child poverty considerations into existing development frameworks. For example, **Bangladesh** adopted a comprehensive strategy combining social protection with investments in education, health, nutrition, and sanitation – alongside inclusive economic growth policies – which helped cut multidimensional child poverty by 32 percentage points between 2000 and 2023.⁹¹

In the **United States of America**, the expansion of the Child Tax Credit under the American Rescue Plan during the COVID-19 pandemic led to the largest recorded drop in child poverty, demonstrating how integrating child-focused measures into national economic recovery strategies can yield rapid, large-scale impacts.⁹² It is worthy of note that the child poverty rate in the United States of America went up again beginning in 2022, when pandemic relief ended.

These cases illustrate how prioritizing child poverty at the national level not only elevates children's needs but also delivers measurable reductions in poverty.⁹³



Embedding child poverty reduction into laws, plans and budgets transforms it from an aspirational goal into a binding obligation.

To ensure poverty reduction is a national priority, governments must adopt robust monitoring and accountability systems. Doing so requires regularly measuring child poverty and implementation of policies, publicly reporting results and adjusting policies based on evidence.

Key takeaways

- **Embed child poverty reduction into laws, national plans and budgets.** Make it a binding obligation, recognizing children as rights holders.
- **Prioritize child poverty in national development and poverty reduction strategies.** Drive political commitment, mobilize resources and ensure cross-sector coordination.
- **Integrate child-focused measures into national monitoring systems.** Tailor interventions and track progress.
- **Adopt child-sensitive economic policies and social protection measures.** For example, expand child tax credits or similar instruments to achieve rapid poverty reduction.
- **Establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.** Include regular, disaggregated measurement, public reporting and evidence-based policy adjustments.

Establish supportive macroeconomic policies

Reducing child poverty requires embedding children's needs into the core functions of economic and fiscal governance. Formal coordination,⁹⁴ among economic policymakers, can significantly improve responsiveness to economic shocks and deliver better outcomes for vulnerable groups, including children.⁹⁵

Central banks should assess how interest rate changes affect families, particularly through job losses and food price inflation,⁹⁶ and consider adopting 'food-aware' inflation targets to protect poor households.⁹⁷

Securing sustained funding for child poverty reduction involves both domestic resource mobilization and legal safeguards. Legal frameworks should protect child-related spending from diversion and include automatic inflation adjustments. International financing agreements must also support child-focused investments during both stable and crisis periods.

Child-sensitive budgeting and transparency mechanisms support accountability. Countries that are more transparent about their budgets tend to spend more on health and child well-being. Institutionalizing child-focused public expenditure tracking helps guide decisions, monitor financial commitments and ensure progress towards realizing children's rights.⁹⁸

Key takeaways

- **Require formal coordination** among finance ministries, central banks and trade departments through joint action plans and automatic triggers that improve shock responsiveness.
- **Secure and safeguard funding for child poverty reduction.** Legal frameworks can protect child-related spending and include automatic inflation adjustments.
- **Implement child-sensitive budgeting and expenditure tracking.** Institutionalize public expenditure monitoring focused on children and promote budget transparency, enhancing accountability and guiding resource allocation towards child well-being.

Expand inclusive social protection

Comprehensive cash assistance programmes for families with children are an essential component of child poverty reduction strategies. Both universal and targeted cash transfers have proven effective in reducing poverty rates and severity, improving nutrition and health, and increasing school attendance and completion.⁹⁹ These programmes can also reduce child labour and gender-based violence through greater economic security.

The most impactful cash transfers provide regular, predictable and adequately sized transfers.¹⁰⁰ Targeted cash transfer programmes have proven effective in countries in Latin America (such as **Brazil** and **Mexico**),¹⁰¹ and sub-Saharan Africa (such as **Ghana**, **Malawi** and **South Africa**). Where they are employed, careful mechanisms are needed to ensure all children in poverty are effectively covered.

Universal child benefits, where all families with children receive regular benefits regardless of family economic status, have so far been implemented primarily in high-income countries. **Poland**, for example, has in recent years implemented a universal child benefit that has helped drive a substantial reduction in child poverty rates.¹⁰² **Mongolia's** universal Child Money Programme, which provides unconditional cash to all children, is an example of such a programme in an upper-middle income country.¹⁰³

Cash transfer programmes are particularly effective in addressing multidimensional child poverty when directly linked with social services. Complementary policies – like free primary education, health fee waivers and affordable childcare – enhance the impact of cash programmes.¹⁰⁴ For example, the **United Republic of Tanzania** achieved a 46 percentage-point reduction in its severe child deprivation rate from 2000 to 2023 – thanks to an expanded cash transfer programme as well as investments in child nutrition, improved urban water and sanitation access, and fee-free primary and secondary education.¹⁰⁵

Only about a quarter of children globally were covered by social assistance in 2023, leaving 1.8 billion without support.¹⁰⁶ Coverage is especially sparse in low-income countries. Recommended policy actions include:

- Advocate for scalable benefit programmes for families with children, emphasizing long-term gains and the cost of inaction. A comprehensive accounting of costs versus benefits brings clarity to policy deliberations.
- Design adequate, appropriate and sustained benefits for families with children.

- Include maternity and disability benefits in social protection systems, tailored to national contexts.
- Ensure coverage and continuity of delivery of child and family benefits in fragile and humanitarian contexts.
- Build coherent and inclusive income support systems for working-age parents and prospective parents who are unemployed or underemployed, combining contributory and non-contributory schemes to ensure that no one falls through the gaps.
- Link beneficiaries to complementary social services, active labour market policies and social welfare support to address multidimensional poverty.

Key takeaways

- **Establish comprehensive cash assistance programmes for families with children**, including maternity and disability benefits. Prioritize regular, predictable and adequate transfers.
- **Expand coverage of child-focused social assistance**. Close gaps in access, especially in low-income countries and fragile and humanitarian contexts, by scaling up programmes and ensuring sustainable financing.
- **Link cash transfers to complementary services**. Strengthen impact by integrating cash transfers with free education, health fee waivers, affordable childcare and active labour market policies.
- **Ensure inclusive income support systems for parents**. Provide adequate non-contributory minimum income guarantees and ensure contributory schemes offer proportionate benefits to avoid gaps in coverage.

Social insurance

Social insurance programmes – such as health insurance, unemployment insurance and pensions – are vital tools for protecting families from falling into poverty during times of crisis. **Health insurance** is important in countries where out-of-pocket (OOP) payments are required to access health services. In 2020, OOP was the main financing scheme in 30 low-income and lower-middle-income countries. In 20 of those, it accounted for more than half of total health spending.

In 2019, 344 million people were pushed into extreme poverty due to OOP health spending, and 13.5 per cent of the global population spent more than 10 per cent of their household budget on these payments.¹⁰⁷

For children, health-related costs can create hardships. They can drain household income – causing caregivers to lose wages when tending to sick children – and force children out of school because of financial strain.

Expanding access to social health insurance is vital. Coverage gaps are significant: In 2023, 34.2 per cent of the global population lacked legal entitlement to health services without hardship; rising to nearly 50 per cent in low-income countries. Even in high-income countries, about a quarter of the population were not entitled to health services.¹⁰⁸

Unemployment insurance can substitute for income during job loss, economic downturns or times when

parents reduce work hours due to caregiving. Extending coverage to informal sector workers can fill a major gap in income security for families with children.

Contributory pension schemes also play a crucial role, especially when they account for women's caregiving years. They protect elderly women and the grandchildren who often depend on them. Viet Nam's 2024 Social Insurance Reform reduced the minimum number of contributing years required to qualify and expanded coverage to include household businesses and cooperatives – a model that promotes inclusivity and long-term family well-being.¹⁰⁹

Expand access to quality public services

Children need reliable access to essential public services – such as education, health care, water, sanitation, nutrition, information, play and housing – to support their learning, development and well-being. These services are central to fulfilling child rights, as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child,¹¹⁰ and are crucial for addressing the multiple dimensions of poverty and breaking its intergenerational cycle. Lack of access to education, including preschool, is a key indicator of deprivation. Barriers such as unaffordable fees, a lack of schools in remote areas and insufficiently trained teachers disproportionately affect marginalized children.¹¹¹



Children need reliable access to essential public services to fulfill their rights and reach their potential.

Many countries have responded with targeted initiatives. **Indonesia's** School Operational Assistance programme has reduced financial burdens on families, increasing enrolment and retention.¹¹² **Peru's** extended school day integrates health, nutrition and remedial support, improving educational outcomes for vulnerable groups. Health programmes, including vaccination campaigns and nutrition interventions, have dramatically cut child mortality and stunting in several countries. **Bangladesh's** integrated maternal and infant nutrition and community health education efforts have steadily lowered stunting rates. **Senegal's** free immunization and maternal health care initiatives ensure coverage for poor and rural populations. Access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services is essential for child health and school attendance. Globally, more than a quarter of schools lack adequate sanitation, disproportionately affecting girls and children with disabilities.¹¹³ **Bangladesh's** achievement in eliminating open defecation, from 17 per cent in 2000 to zero in 2022, offers a powerful example. **Cambodia's** rural sanitation programmes also continue to deliver steady gains among the poorest households.¹¹⁴

Nutrition, although partly dependent on household resources, can be supported through public services like healthy school meal programmes that offer nutritious and diverse foods. These not only improve nutritional intake but also enhance food security, school attendance and outcomes.¹¹⁵

Children have a right to information. A lack of access is a violation of their rights as defined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children have the right to access age-appropriate mass media, books and a diverse range of information sources. This provision includes having “particular regard to the linguistic needs of the child who belongs to a minority group or who is indigenous”. Public services can play an important role in meeting children's information needs through schools, libraries, and free public service broadcasting and information services.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child also establishes children's right to play and leisure. Play has a very important role in children's healthy physical, cognitive and social development, and lack of access to play is a fundamental deprivation. Yet many children around the world lack the time and adequate, safe spaces for play and leisure (see *Ompfuna's story from South Africa*). A comprehensive, multidimensional approach to child poverty reduction must include public policy measures that ensure no child is denied their right to play and leisure.

Housing quality is another key aspect of child deprivation, encompassing overcrowding, lack of privacy, poor building materials and unsafe conditions (e.g., cooking facilities, dampness, excessive noise and lack of light). Although household income plays a role, public policy is essential to addressing systemic housing inadequacies.

Expanding these essential public services benefits not only children, but the whole population. Priority should be given to the communities that are most often left behind. Services should be inclusive, remove barriers to access and be responsive to diverse needs. Strengthening the social services and community health workforce is vital for identifying and supporting malnourished and out-of-school children through referrals and case management.

A comprehensive example of this kind of policy initiative is the **European Child Guarantee**, which ensures access to free early childhood education, free health care, at least one healthy school meal per day and adequate housing. Developed by the EU, it targets marginalized groups including homeless children, children with disabilities, children with a migration background, children of minority ethnic origin and children in alternative care or precarious family situations (see *Sylvia's story from Bulgaria*). Governments are encouraged to develop national action plans across all these areas to reduce child poverty and social exclusion.¹¹⁶

Key takeaways

- **Expand access to inclusive and quality education**, including preschool, by removing financial and geographic barriers and investing in trained teachers and integrated school programmes that support vulnerable children.
- **Scale up essential health services for children and mothers** by implementing free immunization, maternal care and nutrition programmes, especially in underserved areas.
- **Ensure universal access to WASH services in schools and communities** by prioritizing sanitation infrastructure, particularly for girls and children with disabilities.
- **Support nutrition and health interventions**, including healthy food environments, micronutrient supplementation, and nutritious and diverse school meals.
- **Improve housing conditions through public policy** by addressing overcrowding, unsafe environments and lack of privacy or study space with targeted investments and inclusive housing strategies.

Promote decent work for parents and caregivers

Children's well-being is closely tied to the economic security of their caregivers, most of whom rely on labour income as a source of livelihood. Ensuring that work is decent is essential for reducing child poverty. Decent work provides wages that meet basic living standards; protection from arbitrary dismissal; access to safe working conditions, health insurance, a pension, paid leave and skills development; work-life balance; reasonable accommodation for essential life-cycle needs; and non-discrimination, among other provisions. Decent work should also provide family-friendly policies such as parental leave, time allowance for childcare, breastfeeding spaces and breaks for mothers, and paid time off for childcare emergencies. Despite the challenges, promoting decent work in countries with high levels of informal employment is equally important.

Although global unemployment reached a historic low of 5.2 per cent in January 2025, more than 58 per cent of the global workforce was in informal employment in 2023. In Africa, nearly 29 per cent of working people were living in poverty in 2023 – more than four times the global rate of 6.9 per cent.¹¹⁷

More than 11 per cent of the global workforce are in low-wage jobs – earning less than 50 per cent of the median hourly wage in their country, with a wide disparity between low- and high-income countries (21.7 per cent versus 3.3 per cent). Women make up 50.4 per cent of low-wage workers globally, despite constituting 39.3 per cent of the working population.¹¹⁸

Moreover, International Labour Organization estimates show that compliance with freedom of association and collective bargaining rights of employees (SDG 8.8.2) has declined globally since 2015.¹¹⁹ This trend suggests that overall, workers will continue to have diminished agency on issues relating to their jobs and less of a voice at work.

Promoting access to decent work should therefore be a critical policy priority – one that, as evidence shows, helps reduce child poverty. Women’s increased workforce participation, as seen in **Bangladesh’s** garment sector, has contributed directly to reducing household poverty.¹²⁰ **Indonesia’s** efforts to formalize informal work have expanded access to health insurance and retirement benefits, enhancing family stability.¹²¹

Practical steps to promote decent work include legislating and enforcing minimum wages and job security for all workers in both formal and informal employment; increasing formalization in the labour market through tax and other incentives; extending social security coverage to informal sector workers to facilitate pension contributions and access to unemployment and work injury benefits; and supporting workers with balancing work and family responsibilities, particularly for single parents. Such support includes parental leave, income supplements for low-wage workers and affordable, quality childcare.

Key takeaways

- **Promote decent work standards across all employment sectors** by enforcing minimum wages, job security and safe working conditions.
- **Expand formal employment and social protection coverage** by incentivizing the formalization of informal work and extending access to health insurance, pensions and unemployment benefits.
- **Support work–life balance through family-friendly policies** such as providing parental leave, affordable childcare, income supplements for low-wage workers and accommodations for caregiving.
- **Strengthen labour rights and worker representation** by upholding freedom of association and collective bargaining to ensure workers have a voice in shaping their employment conditions.

Cultivate an enabling environment

Effective child poverty reduction calls for more than good policies – it demands fostering an enabling environment for policy action to succeed.

Recognize our shared global responsibility. In today's interconnected world, addressing global trends is a collective international responsibility. This is especially true when it comes to child poverty. No matter how determined, national efforts alone cannot end child poverty. A shared moral imperative and collective mechanisms – such as debt relief, global investments in health and education, and cross-border support for climate resilience – boost national efforts.

Catalyse public and political support for change. Building public support is key to generating political will to end child poverty. Since people hold varied beliefs about its causes,¹²² it is essential to shift public perception towards understanding poverty as a structural issue. This can put pressure on policymakers to prioritize children's needs. Effective strategies include

framing child investment as both a moral and economic imperative, empowering youth advocates, using international accountability tools and strengthening implementation capacity.

Count well and include all. Even with political will and proven policies, disaggregated data – by gender, disability, location and other key markers – and high-quality multidimensional measurement, including at the child level, are key to understand the scale and nature of child deprivation and monitor progress. Many children face severe deprivations within households not counted as poor.

Involving children in defining and measuring poverty leads to more accurate and meaningful insights,¹²³ yet this practice remains rare. Recognizing diverse realities is also crucial for designing responsive policies and improving outcomes. In the Philippines, a project to estimate the cost of raising children with different disabilities is helping the Department of Social Welfare

and Development design more responsive interventions.¹²⁴

Listen to children. Solutions must include the voices of those most affected – especially children. Engaging children in both policy design and implementation enhances relevance, reveals overlooked barriers and builds community trust.¹²⁵ However, most children still lack adequate opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them.¹²⁶ Promising examples include participatory budgeting in the Philippines, youth councils in Brazil and children's forums in India, all of which have contributed valuable insights to policymaking.¹²⁷

Build foresight capacity. Anticipating future challenges and opportunities, using tools like trend analysis, scenario planning and horizon scanning, helps governments prepare for shocks, design resilient policies and make better long-term decisions. Forward-thinking policies can help break the cycle of poverty across generations.

Five actions to implement the five pillars

Reducing child poverty requires not only proven, context-appropriate policy, but also effective implementation. The main factors for successful implementation are as follows:

- 1. Develop an agreed, comprehensive national strategy** that includes clear objectives, targets, mechanisms and review processes to ensure coherence and accountability. For example, **New Zealand's** Child Poverty Reduction Act mandates clear targets and annual reporting, creating accountability and driving policy coherence.¹²⁸
- 2. Integrate policies across sectors and levels of government**, ensuring 'horizontal integration' across ministries and 'vertical integration' between national and sub-national actors, supported by a designated coordinator.
- 3. Ensure transparency and accountability in budgeting and implementation** using tools like child-sensitive budgeting. Regular reviews can bring efficiencies that do not require additional funding. Budgetary support may also include tax waivers on essential goods and services for children. For example, **South Africa's** annual Children's Budget publicizes government spending on children, exposing gaps between commitments and actual expenditures to enable advocacy and corrective action.¹²⁹
- 4. Protect and sustain child-focused funding through legal frameworks.** Guarantee minimum budgets for health, education, nutrition and child benefits, with automatic inflation adjustments, and establish mandatory reporting to show spending per child across sectors and Child Impact Assessments for all major budget decisions. When military spending or debt payments rise, proportional 'child offsets' built in pre-crisis can help maintain resources for children's programmes.¹³⁰ For example, governments can create dedicated **Child Stabilization Funds**, a child-focused version of what are commonly known as 'rainy-day funds', of around 0.3–0.5 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) that is protected from general reserves to provide additional resources during downturns or crises.
- 5. Adopt a multifaceted, sustained approach.** Combine strong social protection systems, public services and family-friendly labour market policies in integrated frameworks that reinforce each other over time. Countries like **Bangladesh, Cambodia** and the **United Republic of Tanzania** have all developed integrated policy frameworks that coordinate across sectors.¹³¹



Photo: In a market stall in the Uvinza, District Antini trains as a sewist. **Below:** Antini stands with her siblings Mariam, 9, Pendo, 7, and their mother, Koretha Mkonongo (right), 48, in Malagalasi Village located in the Uvinza District.

Antini | Age 17

United Republic of Tanzania

Stitching a future

For a 17-year-old from Kigoma Region, learning to sew has become a calling.

Squeezed into a narrow market stall in Kigoma Region, 17-year-old Antini is busy stitching clothes.

"I love fashion, it's my calling now," Antini says. "My dream is to have my own shop with 30 sewing machines, where I can also teach youth."

This future is very different from the one she'd envisioned for herself before her father died.

"My late husband and I shared one dream: That all five of our daughters finish school," explains Koretha Mahepa, Antini's mother. "He always said: 'Education is the one thing no one can ever take away.'"

Their dream was shattered when, after suffering a mental breakdown,

Antini's father turned to alcohol.

"He wasn't himself anymore," Mahepa says. "One day, I found him lying cold on the floor."

His death changed everything for the family. Mahepa began subsistence farming and Antini, then aged 12, dropped out of school. Her two oldest sisters were already married, so Antini became the caretaker of her two younger sisters.

"I want my sisters to have a better future," she says. "When Dad passed, I knew I had to step up to help my mother and siblings. Even though I wanted to learn, it felt impossible."

But things began to change when Antini's uncle informed her about *Ujana Salama* ("Safe Youth" in Swahili).

Implemented by the Tanzania Social Action Fund, *Ujana Salama* is a cash-plus intervention – part of

the government's Productive Social Safety Net programme.

Through *Ujana Salama*, Antini received an initial grant of US\$50. After developing a business plan, she received an additional US\$30, which she used to buy a sewing machine, a floral printed dress and a pair of sandals.



"My sewing machine changed my life. I can make clothes and provide for my family," Antini explains.

"But one day, I hope to dress celebrities and have my own fashion show."



Climate, conflict and the funding crisis

Chapter 4

Although proven solutions exist, three immediate challenges – the climate and environmental crises, rising levels of conflict and the funding shortfall – threaten to undermine efforts to reduce child poverty. This chapter explores how these acute crises, alongside long-term megatrends, are harming children and jeopardizing their well-being.

This chapter focuses on three crises that are immediate, destructive and life-threatening. They differ from long-term megatrends – such as demographic shifts and rapid digital advancement – in that those offer powerful opportunities together with new risks, depending on governance and investment.

Climate shocks and conflict destroy livelihoods, driving families deeper into poverty. The damage and destruction they leave in their wake displace families, disrupt education, and result in hunger and malnutrition. The breakdown of systems, coupled with economic hardship, also increases children's exposure to violence, exploitation and recruitment.

The immediate impacts can have lifelong consequences – first by causing prolonged gaps in access to health care, education, social protection and essential services like water and sanitation. These gaps then cause lasting detriments to health, nutrition, cognitive development and future earning potential, which reinforce an intergenerational cycle of poverty.

Shortfalls in aid fuel crises. Funding cuts directly impact life-saving programmes, forcing the delay or suspension of critical support in education, health and protection for children caught in crises. Austerity measures and debt distress lead to cuts on social spending for children. Countries burdened by high debt are less able to respond to external shocks like climate shocks or conflict, leaving children highly vulnerable.

With levels of conflict rising and the frequency of climate disasters expected to increase, the window for action is closing, limiting solutions such as debt-for-child development or debt-for-climate solutions – where a country's debt obligations are converted into national investments – or broader reforms. Parallel reforms in funding could include increasing the share of official development assistance (ODA) that goes to preparedness, resilient public services, climate adaptation and education in emergencies, for example.



Children living in poverty are more likely to be exposed to extreme climate hazards. These hazards, in turn, often push families deeper into poverty.

The climate and environmental crises

The climate and environmental crises – driven by climate change, biodiversity loss and pervasive pollution – affect the lives of children worldwide. These crises are not distant threats; they are present realities that affect nearly every child, often in multiple and compounding ways. From disrupted education to displacement and deteriorating health, their impacts are far-reaching. Their frequency continues to increase, causing further displacement. For example, some parts of the world are becoming uninhabitable because of flooding.¹³² These effects are unevenly distributed. Children living in poverty and in low-income countries bear the brunt of the crises, facing a cycle of disadvantage that threatens their development, rights and future.

Disproportionate impact on children

About 1 billion children, nearly half of the children in the world, live in countries that are at 'extremely high risk' from the impacts of the climate crisis.¹³³ Each year, four out of five children face at least one extreme climate hazard.¹³⁴ These hazards disrupt learning, displace families and expose children to illness. Many experience more than one of these threats simultaneously.

Children's developing bodies make them especially vulnerable to health burdens from climate change-related hazards,¹³⁵ such as pollution, heat exposure, floods, hurricanes, droughts, food insecurity, infection and mental health harms.¹³⁶ Even before birth, their developing brains, lungs and immune systems are shaped by their environments – by air quality, disease exposure and extreme weather events.¹³⁷

Children who live in poverty often face multiple vulnerabilities at once, including malnutrition and inadequate water and sanitation. These conditions weaken their ability to ward off illnesses such as diarrhoea and malaria, which can spread following a disaster.¹³⁸

Climate hazards and poverty: A vicious cycle

Climate hazards and poverty are deeply interconnected, forming a cycle of risk and vulnerability. Children living in poverty are more likely to be exposed to extreme climate hazards, and these hazards, in turn, often push families deeper into poverty.

In 2024, at least one in seven children – 242 million – experienced school disruptions due to climate shocks.¹³⁹ These disruptions can lead to learning losses.

Research shows that extreme climate and environmental events can push households into **extreme monetary poverty**. A 2020 study estimated that the effects of climate change could force up to 132 million more people into extreme poverty by 2030,¹⁴⁰ with more optimistic scenarios predicting 32 million.¹⁴¹ The most affected populations live in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia – regions with the highest child poverty rates.

Measuring poverty in monetary terms alone does not provide a full picture of children's experience living in poverty. A growing body of evidence demonstrates the link between environmental hazards and child poverty defined as **severe deprivation**.¹⁴² In the aftermath of flood events in **Malawi, Nigeria** and **Uganda**, research shows children in flood zones were 48 per cent more likely to experience poverty defined as severe deprivation than those outside flood zones.¹⁴³

Climate and environmental crises affect child poverty in ways that ripple outward, creating both immediate harm and long-term consequences.¹⁴⁴ For example, when a school is destroyed by a storm, children lose access to education – an immediate setback. But the long-term consequences include children falling behind, dropping out, and facing reduced job prospects and earnings. Similarly, droughts can lead to malnutrition, economic collapse, and irregular, unsafe migration and displacement. Climate-related nutritional deprivation can persist across generations, with today's malnourished children becoming tomorrow's disadvantaged parents.¹⁴⁵



Countries that contribute least to climate change suffer most from its impacts – and children living in poverty bear the greatest burden.

Inequality and escalating risk

The burden of climate and environmental hazards is not shared equally. Poor countries and communities – which contribute least to greenhouse gas emissions – suffer disproportionately from disasters and environmental degradation.¹⁴⁶ Children in these settings face additional risks because there is little climate-resilient infrastructure and few resources available to respond and adapt to hazards.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, homes in low-income communities are more likely to be located in high-risk zones with limited capacity to withstand hazards.¹⁴⁸

In 2023, nearly 9 million children were displaced from their homes by such disasters, many of which were climate-related.¹⁴⁹ The dangers are only expected to increase. Projections for 2050 show about 8 times more children will be exposed to extreme heatwaves, 3.1 times more children to extreme river floods and 1.7 times more children to extreme wildfires.¹⁵⁰

Climate and environmental crises are not only ecological and economic challenges – they are human rights emergencies for children. The evidence paints a stark picture: Millions of children are already suffering, and the risks are escalating. The interplay between poverty and climate hazards creates a cycle that threatens to entrench inequality and deprivation across generations. As seen in Chapter 1, the most vulnerable poor children, including children with disabilities and those subject to discrimination, face heightened risks. Addressing these crises requires urgent, climate-responsive and child-centred action that prioritizes resilience, equity and justice. Without it, the future of millions of children – and the societies they will shape – remains at grave risk.

Policy actions

Up to 175 million people could be lifted out of extreme poverty by 2050 through decisive and effective action on climate change.¹⁵¹ Tackling poverty and climate crises in isolation misses the opportunity to create synergistic solutions that are more effective, equitable and sustainable. This section includes recommended actions for governments, local authorities, schools, communities and other advocates for a climate-responsive approach to reducing child poverty.



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175 million
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Table 4.1 Recommended actions for a climate-responsive approach to reducing child poverty**Governments**

- **Strengthen public services and infrastructure for climate resilience** by investing in emergency preparedness systems – such as early warning mechanisms, rapid response protocols and recovery planning – to minimize disruption and accelerate recovery after climate shocks. For example, in Europe:
 - **Paris** transformed 10 schoolyards into ‘cool islands’, using trees and gardens to reduce urban heat.
 - **Barcelona** redesigned 11 primary schools with shaded areas and water features, creating climate-resilient spaces that are open to neighbourhoods on hot days.
 - **Madrid** converted three schoolyards into multifunctional green spaces – achieving impact without dedicated budget allocations.¹⁵²
- **Expand shock-responsive social protection systems**, including anticipatory cash transfers triggered by early warning indicators. Such systems reduce the impact of climate shocks, support climate adaptation, and improve food security and well-being.¹⁵³
 - In **Bangladesh**, 23,000 households in flood-prone areas received US\$53 via mobile banking four days before floodwaters reached critical levels, reducing stress and anxiety and allowing families to take protective measures.¹⁵⁴
- **Strengthen child protection systems** to address other risks, such as gender-based violence and children left behind or unaccompanied because of family separation.

Civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

- **Prepare for an increase in migrant and displaced children** by strengthening support systems to ensure they retain access to education, health care, social protection, housing and legal identity.
 - Several countries, including **Brazil**, **Morocco** and **Türkiye**, have policies that ensure migrant and refugee children can access services, regardless of migratory status.¹⁵⁵
 - Use **UNICEF’s nine guiding principles** to support children who are forced to move due to climate-related disasters and environmental degradation. These include keeping families together, ensuring legal identity is retained, maintaining uninterrupted education and enabling children’s participation in decisions that affect their lives.¹⁵⁶
- **Integrate child-focused investments and social protection into national climate commitments and adaptation plans.** Articulate how these policies safeguard our collective future, and leverage climate finance to implement them.
- **Empower communities and children in climate adaptation** by facilitating community- and child-led initiatives that build resilience, raise awareness and reduce the psychosocial impacts of sudden disasters.
 - In **Maban County, South Sudan**, community consultations led to locally defined flood-preparedness solutions, including early warning systems and resource pooling mechanisms.¹⁵⁷
 - The programme also featured **child-led anticipatory action**, where children designed and implemented flood-preparedness plans – such as creating safe learning spaces and evacuation strategies – enhancing both practical readiness and emotional resilience.¹⁵⁸
- **Support migrant and displaced families and children** by advocating for inclusive policies and providing legal, educational and psychosocial support to children affected by climate-related migration and displacement.
- **Fund scalable and flexible social protection programmes** by supporting anticipatory cash transfers and integrated services that can be rapidly deployed in response to climate shocks.
- **Promote inclusive climate adaptation frameworks** to ensure that global policy efforts recognize and protect the rights of children affected by climate change, using tools like UNICEF’s guiding principles.¹⁵⁹



Derara | Age 7

Ethiopia

Photo, left: Derara leads the family goat to graze after school. Cash assistance didn't just replace what drought destroyed – it gave his family the means to invest, rebuild and take control of their future. **Right:** Derara poses with his parents and brothers in front of the shelter serving as home.



We left with nothing. I didn't know what we'd find here, but we had no other choice."

The family relied on aid organizations to provide varying amounts of cash, ranging from 1,000 to 3,000 birrs (approximately US\$7 to US\$21), to buy food and essentials. Though helpful, these small amounts weren't enough for the family to rebuild their lost livelihood.

That was until, through the Ethiopia Crises to Resilience programme – a cash-plus climate awareness and adaptation initiative – Godana received two transfers of 10,000 birrs (approximately US\$140 in total) over two months.

For Derara's family, this has made all the difference.

"I purposely bought a pregnant goat and chickens to grow my livestock and start selling eggs. I don't want to rely on aid forever," says Godana. "If I can escape this poverty and help my children finish their education, then with God's help, I will find happiness."

The Ethiopia Crises to Resilience programme, funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, has supported over 1,200 vulnerable households in Dubuluk camp and nearly 25,000 drought-affected households in the Oromia region.

From 25 cattle to one goat

After losing their home to a drought, 7-year-old Derara's family rebuilds life in Dubuluk camp.

Derara, 7, plays on the sun-scorched ground in Dubuluk camp for displaced persons in southern Ethiopia. His laughter rises above the stillness of the camp, which is lined with makeshift shelters. A heavy sense of uncertainty lingers but, for Derara, a sense of normality is slowly returning.

"I like it here because I have a lot of friends," he says.

Derara's mother, Kabale Molu Godana, watches him play. She recounts the painful memory of the drought that gradually took away the family's livelihood.

"We walked here penniless and slept on the roadside. I carried Derara [then aged 3] most of the way," Godana recalls. "I had 25 cattle and all perished. Not even one survived.

Rising levels of conflict

The world is experiencing a historic rise in conflict: 2024 and 2025 have seen the highest number of countries engaged in armed conflict since World War II.¹⁶⁰ Globally, about 19 per cent of the world's children lived in a conflict area in 2024 – nearly double the percentage in the mid-1990s.¹⁶¹ Active conflicts have triggered record levels of displacement and violence, placing children's education and psychosocial well-being at risk.¹⁶²

There has also been an alarming escalation in brutality against children.¹⁶³ In 2024, the United Nations verified 41,370 grave violations perpetrated against children in conflict – a surge of 25 per cent from 2023.¹⁶⁴ These violations – including recruitment and use of children in conflict, killing and maiming – affected 22,495 children.¹⁶⁵

Denial of humanitarian assistance, with more than 7,900 verified instances in 2024, is also expected to increase.¹⁶⁶ Children who are denied such assistance face acute risks including abuse, exploitation, disease, famine or death by exposure.¹⁶⁷

The horrors of conflict have widespread and lingering effects beyond those directly linked to bullets and bombs: Poverty is one of the most pervasive examples.

Although limited evidence exists on the specific impact of conflict on child poverty, the effect of conflict on monetary poverty has been well documented and illustrates a complicated cycle of cause and effect.

A strong link

A well-established link exists between monetary poverty and armed conflict, particularly in countries classified as fragile and conflict-affected.¹⁶⁸ These settings are marked by institutional weakness and social instability.¹⁶⁹

The limited data available on child poverty in fragile and conflict-affected states point to the need to prioritize children living in conflict zones in global poverty eradication efforts. From 2014 to 2024, the extreme child monetary poverty rate in fragile and conflict-affected states rose from 46 per cent to 50.2 per cent, while in all other states it fell from 19.9 per cent to 11.4 per cent.¹⁷⁰ This means half of children in fragile and conflict-affected settings live in extreme poverty, compared to roughly one in nine children in all other states.

This divergence reflects a 'two-speed world' in poverty reduction: While children in post-conflict settings may see improvements, those in ongoing conflict zones face stagnation or rising poverty rates.¹⁷¹

Millions of children live in places dealing with several layers of shocks, such as violent conflict, recurrent climate hazards and displacement. Such experiences threaten to push children into a chronic cycle of poverty. In sub-Saharan Africa, most children living in extreme poverty are found in fragile states (150 million children) versus non-fragile states (87 million).¹⁷²

A complex, bidirectional relationship

Conflict causes poverty through multiple pathways.¹⁷³ It undermines economic stability and household welfare, destroys infrastructure, and disrupts public services such as water, education and energy.



Globally, about **19%** of the world's children lived in a conflict area in 2024 – nearly double the percentage in the mid-1990s.

Disruptions to education can mean long-term reductions in individual and national economic growth and prosperity.¹⁷⁴ Food security drops,¹⁷⁵ while direct and indirect exposure to armed conflict significantly harms children’s physical and mental health.¹⁷⁶

Armed conflict also disrupts economic activities, increases prices and lowers productivity – all of which put pressure on household finances, creating issues such as food insecurity and energy poverty.¹⁷⁷ These economic disruptions extend beyond the borders of the conflict, negatively affecting supply chains and increasing food and energy prices in other countries.¹⁷⁸

The persistence of conflict in a state or region undermines poverty reduction efforts.¹⁷⁹ A 2020 study indicated that countries and areas with persistent conflict accrue a ‘conflict debt’ – cumulative, long-term economic damage caused by armed conflict – that stalls poverty reduction and prevents economic recovery.¹⁸⁰ Countries experiencing repeated or prolonged conflicts can become caught in cycles of violence that keep people trapped in poverty.¹⁸¹

Policy actions

The interplay between poverty, weak institutions and repeated violence creates a durable ‘conflict trap’ that is difficult to escape without sustained peacebuilding and development efforts. The most effective strategies for upholding children’s rights combine flexible humanitarian transfers, education continuity and psychosocial support. These challenges demand sustainable financing and comprehensive, well-designed protections that address both immediate needs and long-term recovery.¹⁸²

Table 4.2 Recommended actions to address child poverty in fragile and conflict-affected areas

Governments

- **Invest in building and strengthening social protection systems**, including by embedding conflict risk into their design. Ensure continuity of unconditional cash programmes for vulnerable families where possible. In areas affected by active conflict, link these programmes with services and supplementary support (e.g., nutrition and gender-based violence services).
- **Integrate services** by linking financial support with mental health, case management and essential services.
- **Prioritize education** by treating it as a core component of crisis response. Establish temporary learning spaces, catch-up classes and hybrid models. Invest in digital tools like solar-powered tablets for remote learning.
- **Restore systems** by rebuilding health, education and civil registration systems. Ensure children have legal identity documents (digital and physical) to access services.
- **Reach the most excluded** by developing outreach strategies for children with disabilities, girls, displaced children and those in remote areas.
- **Improve humanitarian access for children in conflict zones** by upholding international legal obligations, removing barriers to aid delivery, protecting infrastructure like schools and hospitals, engaging with humanitarian actors and ensuring accountability for violations.

Table 4.2 Recommended actions to address child poverty in fragile and conflict-affected areas

Donors and multilateral institutions

- **Embed analysis of the conflict context** into economic policy and poverty reduction programme design – to ensure they do not exacerbate tensions or endanger children – and align them with peacebuilding goals.
- **Improve humanitarian access for children in conflict zones** by upholding international legal obligations, removing barriers to aid delivery, protecting infrastructure like schools and hospitals, engaging with humanitarian actors and ensuring accountability for violations.

Technology providers

- **Enable digital delivery of aid** by partnering with governments and NGOs to support secure digital platforms for delivering cash transfers and educational content.
- **Design inclusive tools** by creating affordable, durable devices that work offline (e.g., solar-powered tablets) for use in low-connectivity areas.

Educators and schools

- **Create safe learning spaces** by setting up temporary classrooms and catch-up programmes, where children affected by conflict or displacement can resume learning quickly – even in emergency settings.
- **Use hybrid and digital models** by combining in-person and remote learning, using tools like solar-powered tablets.
- Leverage specifically designed frameworks for **children and young people affected by armed conflict**. Especially for those formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups, use a self-learning tool published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict.¹⁸³ Its guidance includes how to create predictable routines and nurture environments to help children rebuild trust and confidence; actively prevent bullying, stigma and discrimination; apply trauma-informed, learner-centred approaches; facilitate school re-entry and alternative learning pathways; and promote life skills.

Civil society and NGOs

- **Empower local actors** by training and resourcing community leaders, youth groups and local NGOs. They are the first responders and are trusted by communities.
- **Extend outreach** by using mobile schools, tent classrooms and community-based programmes to reach children in hard-to-access areas.
- **Coordinate holistic support** by delivering integrated services – education, nutrition, water, sanitation and protection – through local platforms.



Photo, above: Sawsan, then 6, recovers at the hospital after being injured in an airstrike outside her home in Beqaa valley. **Below:** Sawsan stands outside a medical centre after receiving treatment in Beirut, Lebanon.

Sawsan | Age 7

Lebanon

Scarred for life

After being wounded in an airstrike, 7-year-old Sawsan faces years of recovery.

It was October 2024. Sawsan, then aged 6, was playing outside her home with friends when an airstrike hit her neighbourhood in the Beqaa Valley, eastern Lebanon.

"I found her on the ground, unconscious," says her mother, Rima.

A piece of shrapnel had struck Sawsan's head.

For two months, Sawsan lay in a hospital bed, surrounded by monitors and IV lines. The injury had stolen her sight, hearing and voice. It left her unable to walk or even swallow.

Meanwhile, her parents struggled to repair the damage to their lives. The airstrike had displaced the family, and Sawsan's father had lost his job.

Although the initial treatment costs were covered by the government, Sawsan was released from the hospital as soon as she was deemed medically stable.

"She had barely improved," Rima remembers.

Sawsan still needed rehabilitation at home, including speech, eye and hearing therapies. Having missed nearly an entire year of school, she also needed tailored educational support. Her family, overwhelmed and under-resourced, struggled to meet her complex medical needs.

But a turning point came when, through UNICEF, Rima learned about a new programme specifically designed to support war-wounded children in Lebanon.

"That call changed everything," Rima says. "They asked me to register Sawsan so that she could get the medical care she still needed. And so, we began again."

With support from the Assistance & Care for War-Wounded and Affected Children (ACWA) programme, and through the work of dedicated doctors and specialists, Sawsan's health began to improve.

"She will never get back the months she lost," Rima says, "but she has her laughter again. She has hope again. ACWA gave us that."

ACWA, which means, 'to be stronger' in Arabic, is funded by the EU and was launched by Lebanon's Ministry of Public Health and UNICEF in March 2025.

The funding crisis

Many governments face an impossible bind: They must invest in children to reduce child poverty, but lack the funds to do so. Even aggressive prioritization of social spending cannot bridge the gap when revenues cover barely half of basic needs. The financing shortfall for children's well-being is not a budgeting problem. It is a structural crisis requiring structural solutions.

Domestic revenue mobilization is essential for funding basic services, but the numbers fall short of the aspirations. Most low-income countries collect below 15 per cent of GDP in taxes, with the median at 13.9 per cent in 2023,¹⁸⁴ against the 25–30 per cent needed to fully fund universal health, education and social protection (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] countries collect over 30 per cent on average).¹⁸⁵ Doubling tax rates would close the gap mathematically but not economically: Rapid increases suppress consumption and investment, while informality, weak administration and narrow tax bases limit actual yields. Without external support, the revenue path to ending child poverty stretches beyond a generation.

Traditional external flows have failed to compensate. ODA has stagnated in real terms, with nominal gains absorbed by inflation and redirected to domestic refugee costs and geopolitical priorities.¹⁸⁶

In one decade, the share of ODA reaching the least-developed countries fell from one third to under one quarter.¹⁸⁷ In practice, ODA is a political transfer, and when rich countries face higher debt service and ageing-driven welfare costs, aid to low-income countries is the first item that can be reduced without significant political fallout. Moreover, rising interest rates and debt burdens in OECD economies have squeezed fiscal space, while political polarization and voter fatigue have reduced appetite for international solidarity.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) to developing countries has declined sharply and is heavily concentrated.¹⁸⁸ Net FDI inflows to developing countries grew steadily in the 1990s and early 2000s but have trended downwards since then, hitting just US\$435 billion in 2023 – its lowest level since 2005 according to the World Bank. Between 2012 and 2023, just three countries (Brazil, China and India) accounted for almost half of total FDI to developing countries.¹⁸⁹

Trade shows similar patterns. South–South trade more than doubled to US\$5.6 trillion between 2007 and 2023, yet the gains are unevenly distributed.¹⁹⁰ The Asia-Pacific region accounted for about 46 per cent of global manufacturing exports in 2023,¹⁹¹ and intra-regional trade accounted for 60 per cent of the region's total exports in 2024.¹⁹² Post COVID-19 pandemic, commerce has realigned along geopolitical fault lines.¹⁹³ Trade between blocs is now growing four percentage points more slowly than within trade blocs, and elevated tariff uncertainty has stalled global merchandise trade growth. Recent trade tensions are compounding these challenges: The World Bank projects that by 2025 tariffs will trim global growth to 2.3 per cent and reduce trade volumes by 0.2 per cent, relative to baseline.¹⁹⁴



Countries are trapped between unpayable debts and underinvestment in children.

While **remittances** have remained resilient, they provide limited scope for fiscal expansion. They are private transfers primarily used for household consumption rather than public investment. Remittance flows remain highly concentrated in a few corridors. Moreover, they cannot fund infrastructure or universal child services. And even this source of external income is increasingly at risk, as migration backlashes in developed economies threaten future flows.¹⁹⁵

For the poorest nations, the promise of development through global integration grows more distant as capital and commerce bypass them for more attractive destinations. With private investment concentrated elsewhere, aid flows stagnant and domestic revenues covering barely half of basic needs, governments are left with few options.

To fill funding gaps, many low-income countries have turned to borrowing. In recent years, many have begun paying out more in debt service than they receive in new funds – a significant reversal that began in the early 2020s.¹⁹⁶ External debt service now consumes around one fifth of government revenue in many low-income countries, often exceeding combined health and education spending.¹⁹⁷ In Africa specifically, per-capita spending on interest (US\$70) exceeds spending on health (US\$44) or education (US\$63).¹⁹⁸

When debt payments spike, ministries cut the most politically orphaned lines first – nutrition, school maintenance and social protection. Each cut weakens future growth capacity, worsening the very debt ratios that triggered the cuts – and children pay the price, facing stunting and lost learning. Each generation inherits both the obligations and the diminished potential they create.

External pressures compound the crisis. Climate adaptation requires roughly 3–3.5 per cent of GDP each year in low-income countries.¹⁹⁹ The lingering effects of the pandemic, commodity shocks and conflict add cascading fiscal demands.

The debt architecture built for the 1990s cannot manage today's creditor mix. For example, China holds a significant share of developing countries' sovereign debt in bilateral claims outside traditional Paris Club frameworks (the long-standing system used by Western creditor-countries for debt restructuring). Dispersed private bondholders resist coordination, while multilateral institutions' preferred-creditor status complicates burden-sharing. Restructurings are slow and shallow, as illustrated by Zambia's more than three-year process under the Common Framework.²⁰⁰

This leaves countries trapped between unpayable debts and underinvestment in children. When traditional financing fails, debt fills the gap. When debt becomes unsustainable, only restructuring remains. Restructuring that merely trims payments perpetuates the cycle; what is needed is restructuring that converts debt into development capital.

If ending child poverty requires meaningful public expenditure increases for health, education, social protection and resilience, repairing the debt architecture is not optional. It is a precondition for progress.



To end child poverty, repairing the debt architecture is not optional. It is a precondition for progress.

Seeking new solutions to end child poverty

The traditional solutions have been tried and failed. Debt cancellation sounds decisive, but history shows its limitations. The Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative that started in 1996, cancelled US\$100 billion in debt for 37 countries,²⁰¹ yet many fell back into distress within a decade because cancellation without capacity building merely resets the clock.²⁰²

A massive aid increase is politically impossible with donor countries facing their own fiscal pressures and ageing populations. Austerity to restore debt sustainability has been the International Monetary Fund's (IMF's) traditional prescription, but cutting spending when children already lack basic services violates both human rights and economic logic. Growing out of debt requires the very investment debt service prevents. Borrowing from new sources merely shifts creditors and adds to the burden.

Rather than choosing between these flawed options, solutions must transcend their limitations. Rejecting the false choice between debt sustainability and human development, solutions should instead create a structure where improvements in one strengthen the other. This structure must provide immediate fiscal relief while also building sustainable capacity. It must align creditor and debtor incentives rather than leave them at odds. It must generate new resources rather than simply redistributing existing ones. And it must make child welfare an asset to fiscal sustainability, rather than a cost.

One promising option is debt restructuring with purpose. This could transform debt service into development investment and provide a coordinated path to break the debt-poverty cycle. Such a plan would ensure debt relief translates directly into better outcomes for children, while creditors would see a sustainable path to repayment. Unlike traditional debt forgiveness, which provides temporary relief without changing underlying structures, this approach would allow countries to earn continued debt relief by hitting dual targets of more effective tax collection and measurable improvements in children's lives.

This approach includes the following features:

Linking debt relief to child progress: Countries would restructure their debt to reduce immediate payments while simultaneously strengthening their ability to raise domestic revenue. As countries collect more tax revenue through improved systems, most of this revenue would go to investments in children's health, education, nutrition and protection, while a smaller portion would continue servicing the restructured debt. To maintain creditor confidence, countries would deposit regular payments into a jointly managed escrow account. Progress would be measured against clear targets of stronger revenue systems and measurable gains for children.

Fast, practical support: Technical assistance would be deployed from the start through multilateral channels to deliver tangible results. The focus would not be on long-term advisory projects but on rapid, measurable upgrades in digital tax systems, compliance and base broadening to raise domestic revenue within two to three years. As revenue begins to rise, verified gains would be automatically shared between creditors and development priorities. Most of the new revenue would support investments in nutrition, education and social protection, while the rest would service restructured debt at sustainable levels.

Shared benefits: This would align incentives. Governments would see visible social dividends, creditors would receive predictable returns and fiscal reforms would acquire political traction because citizens can observe their benefits.

Gradual progress: Over time, countries would graduate from the framework as they meet specific benchmarks in both revenue capacity and child development outcomes. Graduation would be gradual, maintaining stability as domestic systems strengthen. Each successful transition would build momentum, providing evidence that debt can be managed without sacrificing investment in children.

Such a plan would turn debt into a tool for development, build trust between governments and lenders, improve children's lives today and strengthen economies for the future.

What works in which contexts?

Context shapes everything. The same policy that transforms children's lives in one setting may fail in another. A universal child benefit that works seamlessly in a stable country would need a different design in a conflict-affected state. Cash transfers delivered digitally succeed where connectivity exists but exclude the most vulnerable where it does not. To effectively protect children from poverty, matching policy to context is essential.

The policy solutions and adaptations outlined in *SOWC 2025* therefore represent a menu of possibilities, not a one-size-fits-all prescription. The following framework illustrates how different contexts require distinct combinations of policies. While the core principles remain constant – protecting children's rights, ensuring adequate resources, and building resilient systems – their application must respond to local realities.

Table 4.3 Priority actions by country context

Country context	Typical characteristics	Priority actions
Countries in conflict, at risk of conflict or in post-conflict settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Countries currently in conflict involving state or non-state actors • Countries with high tensions between or among groups • Countries emerging from active conflicts • High political contestation of legitimacy of existing governments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure support from the international community to end conflicts and establish strong governance and institutions to rapidly restore basic services. • Establish structured financing across the humanitarian, development and peace nexus to ensure continuity of social services (including social protection), with attention to inclusion and exclusion aspects. • Facilitate humanitarian access for children in conflict zones. • Promote global solidarity for rapid integration of refugees and displaced people into host countries in accordance with international conventions.

Table 4.3 Priority actions by country context**High vulnerability to climate change and climate events**

- Small island countries with rising sea levels
- Countries with frequent and intensive climate shocks
- Invest in mitigation and adaptation strategies using global facilities such as climate-change financing and other multilateral lending.
- Establish shock-responsive social protection and improve the resilience of social services to climate shocks.
- Leverage carbon taxes earmarked for providing key social services.
- Invest in climate-resistant agriculture to help families maintain their agricultural livelihoods in the face of climate-induced stressors.

Debt distress or high risk of debt distress

- Countries with a 10% yield (or higher) in a USD-denominated sovereign bond
- Countries with credit rating in categories B to CCC from major credit rating agencies
- Countries with high debt service burden, often exceeding allocations to essential sectors (such as health or education)
- Secure international support for debt forgiveness and debt swaps.
- Restructure debt with explicit commitments to invest deferred payments in child development outcomes, including in social protection and education.
- Reform international tax justice to ensure big cooperations pay fair taxes in the countries where they operate.

Youthful populations

- Countries where the share of the young population is still increasing
- Countries with high fertility rates
- Invest in education and health for the young to improve skills for productivity.
- Invest in labour-intensive employment opportunities to achieve high levels of employment, increasing the likelihood of a demographic dividend.
- Maintain an optimal balance between labour and automation to boost employment rates.



Kulsum | Age 14

Bangladesh

Photo: Kulsum (front row, second from right) interacts with the teacher during class at the learning centre in Camp 18 for Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar. Below: Kulsum poses for a portrait in the temporary shelter she stays in with her maternal grandparents, aunt and cousins (not pictured).

Who gets to learn?

In Cox's Bazar's Rohingya refugee camps, 14-year-old Kulsum* returns to class several months after aid cuts closed learning centres.

Fourteen-year-old Kulsum attends class in a makeshift bamboo classroom in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Around her, the walls are adorned with colourful teaching and learning aids in Burmese and English. After three months off, she is finally back in class.

The learning centre – a place where she feels seen, heard and hopeful – closed unexpectedly in July 2025 after funding cuts swept through the humanitarian aid sector. Thousands of learning centres across Cox's Bazar shuttered as a result.

"This was the saddest day of my life. I couldn't imagine not going to school. I could see my dream of becoming a teacher disappearing," says Kulsum.



For Rohingya children, these centres are sanctuaries, offering a lifeline to a dignified future. Fortunately for Kulsum, she didn't have to wait too long. Classes reopened in September, thanks to a call to action that pulled in funding: Around 62,000

students in secondary and Grade 5 classes were able to resume learning.

"For me, education is so important because I have no parents. I must take care of myself. I must create my own life. I heard there is no more money to teach us. But I was very happy when I was told some of us can return to school," explains Kulsum.

In 2025, global funding cuts forced UNICEF and its partners to make the heartbreaking decision to pause early childhood and primary-level classes and end the volunteer agreements of more than 1,000 Bangladeshi teachers.

The consequences of the cuts have been far-reaching. As of October 2025, more than 150,000 children in Rohingya camps are out of school. With their learning on pause, their futures hang in the balance.

**Name has been changed to protect privacy.*

Conclusion



Chapter 5

In so many areas, we already know what needs to be done to combat child poverty. And we have the foresight and experience to do more to tackle our future challenges.

So why are we not doing more?

Progress in reducing poverty this century has been substantial. Driven by action at the national level, this progress reflects concrete political and economic action, such as making tackling child poverty a national policy priority and supplementing family incomes.

But no matter how determined, national efforts alone are not always enough to end child poverty. Economic crises, climate shocks and conflicts know no borders, making child poverty a shared imperative for us all.

And even now, at a time when countries' determination to work together to achieve global objectives is faltering, we still have shared imperatives.

They are shared because in a world of plenty, poverty is stripping too many children of their rights – and endangering their futures.

They are shared because poverty benefits none of our societies. By undermining social cohesion, human potential and economic prosperity, we all lose. And they are shared because the challenges we face are beyond the powers of any one state to resolve.

A question of will

In so many areas, we already know what needs to be done to combat child poverty. And we have the foresight and experience to tackle our future challenges. So why are we not achieving more?

In the first-ever edition of *The State of the World's Children* report in 1980, UNICEF Executive Director James P. Grant assessed the extent of global resources and knowledge available to combat child poverty and declared that they were sufficient to do the job.

Back then, just like today, we knew what to do and we had the resources to do it.

“It is not over our capacity to achieve this goal that the question mark now hovers.
It is over our wisdom and our will to do so.”

James P. Grant, Former UNICEF Executive Director

The progress the world has made to reduce child poverty since the first edition of this report shows that will was found.

Today, and even in these most challenging times, we believe it can be found again.

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REGION	2000	2023	2030
East Asia and Pacific	50.2	22	15.7
Eastern and Southern Africa	83.9	63.2	55.7
Europe and Central Asia	28.3	15.2	13.7
Latin America and the Caribbean	33.6	19.7	17.7
Middle East and North Africa	39.2	33.2	33.4
South Asia	89.7	43.9	31.7
West and Central Africa	81.4	65.9	60.5
Total	65.1	40.6	35.1

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Annex

Methodological note: data analysis

There are two main sources of data on multidimensional poverty levels:

- I. The first consists of **harmonized data from Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS)**. This dataset, prepared jointly by UNICEF and Save the Children, includes 89 countries with available data covering years from 2012 through 2024 (see *Table A1*). In line with methodology employed for the 2025 paper *What Works to Reduce Child Poverty? Insights from Across the Globe* from the Global Coalition to End Child Poverty, data are harmonized as described below to address several limitations inherent in household survey data.

One limitation is that many surveys measure some, but not all, of the full ideal set of components of multidimensional poverty. Thus, in some cases it can be difficult to ascertain if all rights constitutive of poverty are realized. A second limitation is that, even if an indicator is included in the survey, it may not be asked of all children (e.g. nutrition is not usually measured for adolescents). Consequently, harmonizing data across surveys involved looking at six dimensions (instead of the usual nine) to measure child poverty: **education, health, housing, nutrition, sanitation, and water**. Each dimension was operationalized with a relevant indicator and consistent thresholds for each indicator were applied across surveys to determine if a child was severely or moderately deprived in a given dimension. The indicators and thresholds are presented in *Table A2* below.

Several criteria were used to select indicators and thresholds. They include:

- Validity (indicator measures what it is supposed to measure)
- Reliability (the measurement is accurate)
- Simplicity (one indicator per dimension/right)
- Maximization of country coverage (indicator available for many countries)
- Internationally agreed criteria for deprivation
- Feasibility of separating severe and moderate deprivation.

More details of the harmonization process and its principles can be found here: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-poverty-profiles-understanding-internationally-comparable-estimates/>.

A limitation that could not be addressed by the data harmonization process is that, for some of the 89 countries, available multidimensional child poverty data come from the pre-pandemic period and may not fully capture the significant socioeconomic impacts and shifts caused by COVID-19. More recent political, social or economic changes in the countries studied may also not be accounted for. (See *What Works to Reduce Child Poverty? Insights from Across the Globe*, Global Coalition to End Child Poverty, 2025).

Table A1 Countries with survey data included in the harmonized MICS/DHS dataset				
Country	Region	Income level	Survey type	Survey time frame
Afghanistan	South Asia	Low income	DHS	2015
Albania	Europe and Central Asia	Upper-middle income	DHS	2017–2018
Algeria	Middle East and North Africa	Upper-middle income	MICS	2018–2019
Angola	Eastern and Southern Africa	Lower-middle income	DHS	2015
Argentina	Latin America and the Caribbean	Upper-middle income	MICS	2019
Armenia	Europe and Central Asia	Upper-middle income	DHS	2015–2016
Bangladesh	South Asia	Lower-middle income	DHS	2022–2022
Barbados	Latin America and the Caribbean	High income	MICS	2012
Belize	Latin America and the Caribbean	Upper-middle income	MICS	2015–2016
Benin	West and Central Africa	Lower-middle income	DHS	2017
Burkina Faso	West and Central Africa	Low income	DHS	2021–2021
Burundi	Eastern and Southern Africa	Low income	DHS	2016
Cambodia	East Asia and Pacific	Lower-middle income	DHS	2021–2022
Cameroon	West and Central Africa	Lower-middle income	DHS	2018
Central African Republic (the)	West and Central Africa	Low income	MICS	2018–2019
Chad	West and Central Africa	Low income	MICS	2019
Comoros	Eastern and Southern Africa	Lower-middle income	DHS	2012
Congo (the)	West and Central Africa	Lower-middle income	MICS	2014–2015
Costa Rica	Latin America and the Caribbean	Upper-middle income	MICS	2018
Cuba	Latin America and the Caribbean	Upper-middle income	MICS	2019
Côte d'Ivoire	West and Central Africa	Lower-middle income	DHS	2021–2021
Democratic Republic of the Congo (the)	West and Central Africa	Low income	DHS	2023–2024

Table A1 Countries with survey data included in the harmonized MICS/DHS dataset				
Country	Region	Income level	Survey type	Survey time frame
Dominican Republic (the)	Latin America and the Caribbean	Upper-middle income	MICS	2019
Egypt	Middle East and North Africa	Lower-middle income	DHS	2014
El Salvador	Latin America and the Caribbean	Upper-middle income	MICS	2014
Eswatini	Eastern and Southern Africa	Lower-middle income	MICS	2014
Ethiopia	Eastern and Southern Africa	Low income	DHS	2019
Gabon	West and Central Africa	Upper-middle income	DHS	2019–2021
Gambia (the)	West and Central Africa	Low income	MICS	2018
Georgia	Europe and Central Asia	Upper-middle income	MICS	2018
Ghana	West and Central Africa	Lower-middle income	DHS	2022–2023
Guatemala	Latin America and the Caribbean	Upper-middle income	DHS	2014–2015
Guinea	West and Central Africa	Lower-middle income	DHS	2018
Guinea-Bissau	West and Central Africa	Low income	MICS	2018–2019
Guyana	Latin America and the Caribbean	High income	MICS	2019
Haiti	Latin America and the Caribbean	Lower-middle income	DHS	2016–2017
Honduras	Latin America and the Caribbean	Lower-middle income	MICS	2019
India	South Asia	Lower-middle income	DHS	2019
Indonesia	East Asia and Pacific	Upper-middle income	DHS	2017
Iraq	Middle East and North Africa	Upper-middle income	MICS	2018
Jordan	Middle East and North Africa	Lower-middle income	DHS	2023–2023
Kazakhstan	Europe and Central Asia	Upper-middle income	MICS	2015
Kenya	Eastern and Southern Africa	Lower-middle income	DHS	2022–2022
Kiribati	East Asia and Pacific	Lower-middle income	MICS	2018–2019
Kyrgyzstan	Europe and Central Asia	Lower-middle income	MICS	2018

Table A1 Countries with survey data included in the harmonized MICS/DHS dataset				
Country	Region	Income level	Survey type	Survey time frame
Lao People's Democratic Republic (the)	East Asia and Pacific	Lower-middle income	MICS	2017
Lesotho	Eastern and Southern Africa	Lower-middle income	DHS	2023–2024
Liberia	West and Central Africa	Low income	DHS	2019
Madagascar	Eastern and Southern Africa	Low income	DHS	2021–2021
Malawi	Eastern and Southern Africa	Low income	MICS	2019–2020
Maldives	South Asia	Upper-middle income	DHS	2016–2017
Mali	West and Central Africa	Low income	DHS	2018
Mauritania	West and Central Africa	Lower-middle income	DHS	2019–2021
Mongolia	East Asia and Pacific	Upper-middle income	MICS	2018
Montenegro	Europe and Central Asia	Upper-middle income	MICS	2018
Mozambique	Eastern and Southern Africa	Low income	DHS	2022–2023
Myanmar	East Asia and Pacific	Lower-middle income	DHS	2015
Namibia	Eastern and Southern Africa	Upper-middle income	DHS	2013
Nepal	South Asia	Lower-middle income	DHS	2022
Niger (the)	West and Central Africa	Low income	DHS	2012
Nigeria	West and Central Africa	Lower-middle income	DHS	2018
North Macedonia	Europe and Central Asia	Upper-middle income	MICS	2018–2019
Pakistan	South Asia	Lower-middle income	DHS	2017
Papua New Guinea	East Asia and Pacific	Lower-middle income	DHS	2016–2018
Paraguay	Latin America and the Caribbean	Upper-middle income	MICS	2016
Peru	Latin America and the Caribbean	Upper-middle income	DHS	2012–2012
Philippines (the)	East Asia and Pacific	Lower-middle income	DHS	2022–2022
Republic of Moldova (the)	Europe and Central Asia	Upper-middle income	MICS	2012

Table A1 Countries with survey data included in the harmonized MICS/DHS dataset				
Country	Region	Income level	Survey type	Survey time frame
Rwanda	Eastern and Southern Africa	Low income	DHS	2014
Samoa	East Asia and Pacific	Lower-middle income	MICS	2019–2020
Sao Tome and Principe	West and Central Africa	Lower-middle income	MICS	2019
Senegal	West and Central Africa	Lower-middle income	DHS	2023–2023
Sierra Leone	West and Central Africa	Low income	DHS	2019
South Africa	Eastern and Southern Africa	Upper-middle income	DHS	2016
Sudan (the)	Middle East and North Africa	Low income	MICS	2014
Suriname	Latin America and the Caribbean	Upper-middle income	MICS	2018
Tajikistan	Europe and Central Asia	Lower-middle income	DHS	2023–2023
Thailand	East Asia and Pacific	Upper-middle income	MICS	2019
Timor-Leste	East Asia and Pacific	Lower-middle income	DHS	2016
Togo	West and Central Africa	Low income	MICS	2017
Tonga	East Asia and Pacific	Upper-middle income	MICS	2019
Tunisia	Middle East and North Africa	Lower-middle income	MICS	2018
Turkmenistan	Europe and Central Asia	Upper-middle income	MICS	2019
Uganda	Eastern and Southern Africa	Low income	DHS	2016
United Republic of Tanzania (the)	Eastern and Southern Africa	Lower-middle income	DHS	2022–2022
Viet Nam	East Asia and Pacific	Lower-middle income	MICS	2020–2021
Yemen	Middle East and North Africa	Low income	DHS	2013
Zambia	Eastern and Southern Africa	Lower-middle income	DHS	2018
Zimbabwe	Eastern and Southern Africa	Lower-middle income	MICS	2019

Table A2 Dimensions, indicators, and thresholds for moderate and severe material deprivation			
Dimension	Unit of analysis	Severe deprivation definition	Moderate deprivation definition (incorporates severe deprivation)
Shelter	Children under 17 years of age	Children living in a dwelling with five or more persons per sleeping room.	Children living in a dwelling with three or more persons per sleeping room.
Sanitation	Children under 17 years of age	Children with no access to a toilet facility of any kind (i.e. open defecation, or pit latrines without slabs, hanging latrines, or bucket latrines, etc.).	Children using improved facilities but shared with other households
Water	Children under 17 years of age	Children with no access to water facilities of any kind (i.e. using surface water or unimproved facilities such as. non-piped supplies).	Children using improved water sources but more than 15 minutes away (30 minutes roundtrip)
Nutrition	Children under 5 years of age	Stunting (3 standard deviations below the international reference population).	Stunting (2 standard deviations below the international reference population).
Education	Children between 5-14 years of age	Children who have never been to school.	Children who are not currently attending school.
	Children between 15-17 years of age	Children who have not completed primary school.	Children who are not currently attending secondary school (or did not complete secondary school).
Health	Children 12-35 months old	Children who did not receive immunization against measles nor any dose of DPT.	Children who received less than 4 vaccines (out of measles and three rounds of DPT).
	Children 36-59 months old	Children with severe cough and fever who received no treatment of any kind.	Children with severe cough and fever who did not receive professional medical treatment.

II. The second set of data is derived from a **novel modelling exercise carried out by Global Coalition to End Child Poverty and used for its May 2025 report**, *What Works to Reduce Child Poverty? Insights from Across the Globe*. The exercise modelled multidimensional child poverty rates for 130 countries. The modelled data assess severe deprivation along the same six dimensions as the harmonized survey data. A child with one or more severe deprivations is considered multidimensionally poor. The model takes as its inputs the harmonized MICS/DHS data referenced above to produce estimated values where there were gaps in direct multidimensional poverty measurements. For countries with available survey data, the model extended existing multidimensional poverty trends beyond available survey years. For countries with partial or no data, it used available indicators such as stunting or modelled estimates from global exercises– such as immunization coverage rates or water and sanitation indicators – to estimate multidimensional child poverty trends over time.²⁰³

Note that neither the harmonized MICS/DHS data, nor the outputs of the modelling exercise include information on high-income countries. All analyses involving these sources thus apply to low- and middle-income countries only.

The population projections used in analyses throughout this report are derived from the United Nations' Population Division's 2024 revision of *World Population Prospects*.²⁰⁴

Projections from 2024 to 2030 for regional and income-group-based aggregates in Figures 1.8(a)-(b) were done using ARIMA time series forecasting. UNICEF used the Hyndman-Khandakar algorithm for automatic ARIMA modelling to address non-stationarity in the data, perform model selection and calculate the forecasts.²⁰⁵

Youth foresight workshops

Chapter 2 draws exclusively from a global youth foresight workshop convened by UNICEF's Youth Foresight Fellows and Global Network in July 2025. The session, held virtually, brought together over 20 adolescents and young people (aged 15–25) from more than 10 countries, spanning Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America. Participants were selected for their lived experiences of economic shocks and represented diverse geographies, gender identities, and urban and rural contexts.

Chapter 2 employs a participatory foresight approach, which differs from traditional qualitative research in both intent and process. While both methodologies may use tools like focus groups, foresight's objective is to help participants anticipate and shape possible futures, not just describe their current experiences. This process encourages creative and systemic thinking about change, uncertainty and new opportunities.

Participants were chosen to surface a variety of signals, viewpoints, related to child poverty and potential futures. This approach supports the identification of emerging trends and outlier factors – qualities highly valued in foresight for robust scenario development and policy planning. Youth voices in this chapter are therefore positioned as contributors to dynamic collective visioning, rather than sources of representative data points.

For a fuller discussion of foresight methodology and its applications, see *Foresight for Children's Futures: A Primer*, UNICEF, 2025.

The workshop was built on UNICEF's ongoing foresight practice, which since 2022 has trained nearly 50 Youth Fellows across three global cohorts and cultivated a youth network of more than 13,000 members.

Workshop participation tools and frameworks

- **Three Horizons framework:** Adapted for child rights contexts, this foresight tool structures youth thinking across three temporal frames:
 - **Horizon 1:** current systems of exclusion
 - **Horizon 2:** emergent acts of resistance and care
 - **Horizon 3:** visionary, just futures
- **Miro collaborative platform:** Participants engaged through virtual breakout rooms using Miro, an online whiteboard, which allows anonymous sticky note contributions, clustering and tagging.
- **Letter from the future template:** As a creative foresight exercise, participants wrote imagined messages from their future selves, reflecting on what a just world for children would look like. (See template below.)

Core prompts used

Each horizon was scaffolded with open-ended questions:

- **Horizon 1:**
"When economic shocks – such as aid cuts, pandemics or natural disasters – affect your community, what do you think holds children and young people back from achieving their full potential? What do you think children and young people in your community struggle with today that's brushed off as just 'the way things are'?"
- **Horizon 2:**
"What innovations do you think have the potential to empower children through times of economic shock? What is one thing we can do today to ensure each innovation succeeds in bringing about better futures for children?"

- **Horizon 3:**

"Imagine a future in 2035 where children and young people can reach their fullest potential, even in times of economic shocks? (Think about what holds young people back today in times of economic shocks and flip it – how have these things transformed in 2035? What's different about how people, care, support and show up in your community? Imagine that children's education, health and well-being are not impacted and that they are able to thrive.)"

Thematic synthesis approach

All contributions were reviewed and thematically coded. Breakout groups and plenary insights were clustered into four core themes, reflected in this chapter:

- lived realities of crisis
- infrastructures of exclusion
- seeds of change and acts of defiance
- futures imagined by youth

Direct quotations were preserved wherever possible, with light edits for readability and anonymization. In total, hundreds of unique sticky notes, letters and dialogue excerpts were analysed.

Ethical considerations

- All adolescent and youth participants were informed of the potential publication and policy use of their contributions.
- All names and specific locations were removed or anonymized unless already generalized (e.g., by region).
- Creative outputs (e.g., letters, sticky notes, collages) were treated as co-authored knowledge and interpreted with the facilitation team.

Primary sources and data

- UNICEF Innocenti (2025). Youth Foresight Workshop on Economic Shocks and Child Poverty [Dataset and Transcripts]. Florence: UNICEF Global Office of Research & Foresight– Innocenti
- State of the World's Children Workshop 3 Horizons Activity Document (Letters and Miro Board Excerpts)
- participant-generated visuals, quotations and narrative insights from Miro board and workshop dialogue

Letter from the future: Template

Using the template below, each participant was invited to write a letter from their future self to their present self, imagining a world in which justice, equity and dignity for children were no longer aspirations, but realities.

Dear (add your name here),

I'm writing to you from the future – a future where life for children and young people has changed for the better.

In this world:

(What does this future look like? What is different for children and young people?)

In an economically just society, no child should ever have to:

(One thing no child should experience in a fair and just world.)

I want you to remember this:

(A message of hope, a guiding value or a gentle reminder from your future self to your present self.)

With hope,

Your Future Self

Below are excerpts adapted directly from these submissions. Here, youth are remembering forward, carrying fragments of the past into visions of what lies ahead.

Dear Future Me,

I'm writing to you from the future – a future where no child has to drop out of school to work in a factory or a field. In this world, education is free and close to home. Classrooms have enough chairs, books, food and compassion.

In an economically just society, no child should ever have to give up school to carry the weight of their family's survival.

I want you to remember this: You deserved safety even when no one said it. You deserved to learn, not to hustle.

With love,

Your Future Self, 15, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Dear Present Me,

In my world, we don't call it "mental health" – we call it care, and we give it freely. Every rural village has a counsellor, not just a clinic. We don't hide our sadness. We talk. We heal.

In an economically just society, no child should cry quietly in a corner thinking they're weak.

I want you to remember this: Silence was never strength. You are allowed to need help.

With hope,

Your Future Self, 17, India

Dear Me,

I'm writing from a place where no girl is forced to marry because food ran out. Where aid doesn't arrive late or vanish mid-crisis. Where our community gardens feed us. Where parents are less scared, so we are less sacrificed.

In an economically just society, no child should trade their future for a dowry.

Please remember: Your life is not a bargaining chip.

With power,

Your Future Self, 20, Ghana

Dear Me,

We used to dream of internet that worked. Now, it's everywhere – libraries, phones, radios. Even when the roads are broken, the signals reach. Learning is no longer a privilege – it's a promise kept.

In an economically just society, no child should be left behind because of where they were born.

Remember: Your mind is a gift. Keep it lit.

With fire,

Your Future Self, 24, Pakistan

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About us

UNICEF, the United Nations agency for children, works to protect the rights of every child, everywhere – especially the most disadvantaged children and in the toughest places to reach. Across more than 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive and fulfil their potential.

UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight tackles the questions of greatest importance for children, both current and emerging. It drives change through research and foresight on a wide range of child rights issues, sparking global discourse and actively engaging young people in its work.

UNICEF Innocenti equips thought leaders and decision-makers with the evidence they need to build a better, safer world for children. The office undertakes research on unresolved and emerging issues, using primary and secondary data that represents the voices of children and families themselves. It uses foresight to set the agenda for children, including horizon scanning, trends analysis and scenario development. The office produces a diverse and dynamic library of high-level reports, analyses and policy papers, and provides a platform for debate and advocacy on a wide range of child rights issues.

UNICEF Innocenti provides, for every child, answers to their most pressing concerns.

This report

Published by UNICEF since 1980, *The State of the World's Children* report seeks to deepen knowledge and raise awareness of key issues affecting children, and advocates for solutions that improve children's lives.

To access the report online, visit: <https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-of-worlds-children/2025>.

To access a compendium of vital statistics that track progress towards global goals for women and children, scan the QR code the below or visit: <https://unicef.link/sowcdata25>.



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for every child,

Whoever she is.

Wherever he lives.

Every child deserves a childhood.

A future.

A fair chance.

That's why UNICEF is there.

For each and every child.

Working day in and day out.

In more than 190 countries and territories.

Reaching the hardest to reach.

The furthest from help.

The most excluded.

It's why we stay to the end.

And never give up.