



INVESTING IN CHILDREN NOW

A smart investment in a safer,
prosperous, and stable world for all



Joint position paper

The strength and future prosperity of the European Union (EU) depend fundamentally on the well-being and potential of all children, wherever they are. As the EU begins in earnest its plans for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034, it faces both a significant opportunity and a moral imperative: to prioritise investments in children across its humanitarian aid and development cooperation efforts. By strategically allocating resources to address the immediate needs and long-term development of children, the EU can protect their rights, strengthen resilience in crisis-affected regions and promote sustainable, inclusive growth in partner countries – ultimately contributing to a more stable, equitable, and prosperous world for all¹.

In this position paper, Joining Forces – an alliance of the six largest child-focused international NGOs – outlines how the next MFF must strategically place children at the core of its external dimension. In particular, for the future MFF, Joining Forces calls on the EU to:



Maram*, 1, during her visit to health clinic in Gaza. Photo: Shaima Al-Obaidi / Save the Children

1 Put the most vulnerable children at the centre of the external dimension of the MFF

Target the most vulnerable children and their families through a robust intersectional lens.

Ensure the protection of children is at the forefront of the EU's integrated approach to fragility. This includes increasing the EU's Official Development Assistance (ODA) going to Fragile and Conflict Affected Situations (FCAS) to 50% and meeting the target of 0.2% GNI in ODA to Least Developed Countries.

Apply a child-sensitive, rights-based approach to guide EU migration spending, to truly support children on the move.

2 Keep separate the EU's external financing instruments² to address children's specific needs

Reject the merger of the external financing instruments and ensure targeted and impactful aid and assistance.

3 Ensure ambitious child-focused ODA funding across these three funding instruments

Meet the EU member states' previous commitment to allocate 0.7% of GNI for ODA to safeguard children's rights.

Allocate €25 billion to match the allocation in the EC MFF proposal.

Prioritise children's well-being and child-focused infrastructures, including by committing at least 20% of the EU's ODA to human development. This leads to bolstering essential services like health, nutrition and education, and expanding social protection systems.

Recommit to the 10% earmarked funding for education in emergencies.

4 Track and report the levels of child-focused external investment

Adopt a child marker in the external funding instruments to help assess and adapt the EU's specific, sensitive investment in children's rights.

1

Put the most vulnerable children at the centre of the external dimension of the MFF

An overarching intersectional approach

We urge the European Union to prioritise ODA that targets the most vulnerable children by adopting a robust intersectional approach. Recognising that vulnerabilities are often compounded by factors such as gender, disability, socioeconomic background, minority background, and geographic location, EU-funded programmes should be designed to address these overlapping barriers. By ensuring that interventions are inclusive and equitable, the EU can play a pivotal role in reaching marginalised children who face the greatest challenges in accessing education, healthcare, and protection, thereby advancing social justice and sustainable development goals.

Addressing the needs of children in fragile and conflict-affected countries

The protection of children, alongside a shock-responsive and conflict-sensitive approach to building family resilience in these settings, must be at the forefront of the EU's integrated approach to fragility, including its funding side. The EU's disengagement from fragile and conflict-affected countries would disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations and already fragile progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda.

Thus, we urge the EU to commit to increasing the share of its ODA going to Fragile and Conflict Affected Situations (FCAS) to **50%**, and to meeting its longstanding target of **0.2% GNI** to ODA to Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in the next MFF, ensuring that ODA is directed where the needs are greatest ▶

In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, where families' coping capacities are stretched to the brink, targeted investments in social protection, mental health support, and child protection are not only lifesaving but critical to avoid family separation, institutionalisation, and long-term trauma.

The EU should develop tailored funding strategies for specific needs, using Global Gateway in contexts where it adds value, but prioritising grants for fragile and conflict-affected states and LDCs to meet urgent needs, like the provision of basic and essential services, especially for children. In line with the updated EU Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict, the EU should adopt a comprehensive approach to supporting children affected by armed conflict.

Addressing the needs of children on the move

The current 10% cap on migration spending under the Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-GE) must be used to deliver real, positive development outcomes for displaced children, not to fund restrictive migration policies. Children on the move face heightened risks of violence, exploitation, trauma, and long-term exclusion. Yet, EU external funding has increasingly prioritised deterrence and border control over protection and rights.

This **10% allocation** should be directed towards initiatives that enhance access to international protection, create safe migration pathways in line with EU international commitments, and address the root causes of forced displacement, including conflict, inequality, and climate change – key drivers which disproportionately affect children ▶

All funded actions must align with OECD ODA criteria, reflect partner country priorities, and be firmly grounded in humanitarian and human rights principles. A child-sensitive, rights-based approach should guide the EU migration spending, backed by do-no-harm assessments, risk mitigation measures, and clear accountability frameworks. To truly support children on the move, EU funding must prioritise long-term solutions, sustainable support for host communities, and investment in systems that protect and empower children across borders.



Children skipping at a Child Friendly Space in Puntland, Somalia. Photo: Mustafa Saeed / Save the Children

2

Keep separate the EU's external financing instruments, to address children's specific needs

Each external financing instrument serves a vital and distinct role. It is crucial that the different instruments stay separate to ensure targeted and impactful aid and assistance. While strategic, long-term planning through development funding is essential for fostering sustainable development, peace, and global partnerships, and pre-accession assistance is crucial for democratic reforms, the EU must maintain a distinct development cooperation instrument. This dedicated approach guarantees sustained funding for reducing poverty and inequalities, tackling climate change and environmental protection, and advancing sustainable development – all without compromising urgent humanitarian needs or geopolitical considerations.

Equally, the EU must prioritise directly high-quality humanitarian funding to local, national and frontline organisations. This ensures swifter, more targeted

aid delivery based on actual needs, enhancing both effectiveness and accountability. To safeguard children's futures and ensure that support reaches those most in need in fragile contexts, the principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence in humanitarian action must be upheld.

Critically, neither humanitarian nor development funding should be tied to migration management, border control, or defence and military spending ▲

Such linkages risk undermining the fundamental purpose of supporting vulnerable communities, especially children and those left furthest behind. Any migration-related activities within ODA spending must strictly adhere to objectives and principles grounded in development, humanitarian, and human rights frameworks, always keeping the well-being and futures of children at the forefront.

3

Ensure ambitious child-focused ODA funding across these three funding instruments, both in scale and quality

Ambitious ODA in scale

The EU has the opportunity to meet the EU member states' previous commitment of 0.7% GNI for ODA, by scaling up the funding level under the successor of the NDICI-GE³.

Strengthening international development cooperation is essential for safeguarding children's rights, which, in turn, will accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Previous global investments have helped to halve under-five child mortality, prevented more than 68 million child marriages and provided access to education to nearly 9 in 10 children worldwide⁴. Yet challenges remain—globally, one in every five girls is formally married or in an informal union before reaching age 18, highlighting the urgent need for sustained and targeted action.

Children's rights and needs must not be further deprioritised in humanitarian responses. Notably, crises exacerbate existing gender inequalities and create new forms of discrimination against girls, particularly adolescent girls who face heightened risks during emergencies. It is important that the upcoming MFF reflects the disproportionate impact of humanitarian crises on children in the EU's financial commitments to humanitarian aid.

The EU should allocate **€25 billion to match the allocation in the EC MFF proposal**. Any decrease would significantly undermine the EU's capacity to respond to humanitarian emergencies swiftly and effectively like it did in the past. ►

This would exacerbate poverty and forced displacement, further aggravating the lives and well-being of affected populations and disproportionately harming children who often pay the highest price for these crises.

Ambitious ODA in quality

Prioritising children's well-being and child-focused infrastructure demands robust investment in strengthening their foundational needs. This includes bolstering basic and essential services like health and nutrition, ensuring access to quality and inclusive education, including digital learning opportunities and environmental education, and expanding social protection systems. Furthermore, promoting local manufacturing of essential commodities for children, such as medicines, vaccines, and ready-to-use therapeutic food, is crucial – a strategy



After his father's death, 11-year-old Faustin* and his mother Marie* were forced to work in dangerous cobalt mines in Lualaba, DRC, so they could survive – costing Faustin* his chance to go to school. Photo: Save the Children

that can be powerfully advanced through initiatives like the Global Gateway.

Investing in human development must also include systematic, longer-term funding and impact-driven implementation, capable of transforming child protection systems to become more integrated, effective and rights-based – enabling early identification of children and their family distress and providing preventive support to them – essential for avoiding violence, child marriage, child abuse and neglect, child labour, household instability and child-family separation.

Additionally, the EU should continue providing strong financial support for child-focused multilateral mechanisms such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, Gavi, the Vaccines Alliance, the Global Financing Facility for Children and Adolescents, the Global Partnership for Education, and Education Cannot Wait.

As the European Commissioner for International Partnerships Jozef Síkela rightly stated, “Education and health are not just thematic priorities in their own rights – they are prerequisites for attaining the other Global Gateway goals and are embedded in them”.

We, therefore, urge the EU to commit **at least 20% of its ODA** to human development and consider increasing it up to 50%, keeping children and their rights at the heart of EU external action ▶

The EU's financial commitments to humanitarian aid must be ambitious and put children at the centre of its responses. This includes sustained investment in education, including education in emergencies, WASH, nutrition, healthcare, mental health and psychosocial support, and child protection.

We ask the EU to re-commit to the **10% earmarked funding** for education in emergencies. Education is a fundamental right for children that does not end in times of emergency. It is the foundation for social cohesion, peace, stability, economic recovery and, for many children, a vital source of hope for the future ▶

In addition to ensuring access to education, humanitarian response must include the delivery of survival skills and risk-specific knowledge (lifesaving learning) to help children navigate crises safely. Equally important is preventing child deaths during the acute phase of a crisis or recovery, as this empowers children and their communities to take an active role in their own protection and helps prevent further deaths and injuries.

Humanitarian funding for children must also explicitly support preventive family and reintegration services and child-sensitive gatekeeping mechanisms. At the same time, the EU should lead by example, establishing standards for other donors and international actors, including working towards joint commitments under the Grand Bargain.

4

Track and report the levels of child-focused external investment

A Child Marker in the external funding instruments can help assess and adapt the EU's specific and sensitive investment in children's rights. Tracking EU spending that directly or indirectly impacts children's rights and well-being remains challenging. The lack of a systematic approach to data collection on child-relevant spending affects the ability to monitor not only financial allocations but also the added value of EU investments. While the Inequality Marker offers insights into funding for disadvantaged groups, it does not require a systematic disaggregation of data by age. This results in a limited and incomplete picture of how much funding directly benefits children, making it difficult to assess whether investments are adequately targeted.

Introducing a **Child Marker** could help fill these gaps in data collection and ensure more systematic tracking and reporting on investments that support children's rights and needs across EU external action ▼

At the same time, to ensure effectiveness without creating unnecessary administrative burdens, the marker should remain as simple, practical and easy to apply as possible.

Endnotes

1 World Vision's report ["Putting Children First for Sustainable Development"](#) shows that every USD 1 of ODA spent on children reaps a return of USD 10 in health, education, and other social benefits to children and their communities.

2 i.e., Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-GE), the Humanitarian Aid Instrument (HUMA), and the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA).

3 EU ODA should represent at least €200 billion over the next MFF – this figure is calculated on the basis of EU Member States reaching their international ODA commitments by 2030 and retaining this level of investment through 2034, and assuming they continue to channel 23.1% of their ODA via the EU budget. Methodology [available here](#).

4 Child Mortality - UNICEF DATA; [A path towards ending child marriage](#) | UNICEF; [250 million children out-of-school: What you need to know about UNESCO's latest education data](#) | UNESCO



Shadi*, 8, plays football near his tent in Gaza.
Photo: Sacha Myers / Save the Children



On the cover: Ladan* (top right), 10, lives in Somalia with her mum Casho* and five siblings. Her baby brother Aaden* suffered from severe acute malnutrition but recovered after treatment. With cash assistance, the family can now buy food, and Ladan* is back to learning, playing, and dreaming of becoming a teacher. Photo: Mustafa Saeed / Save the Children