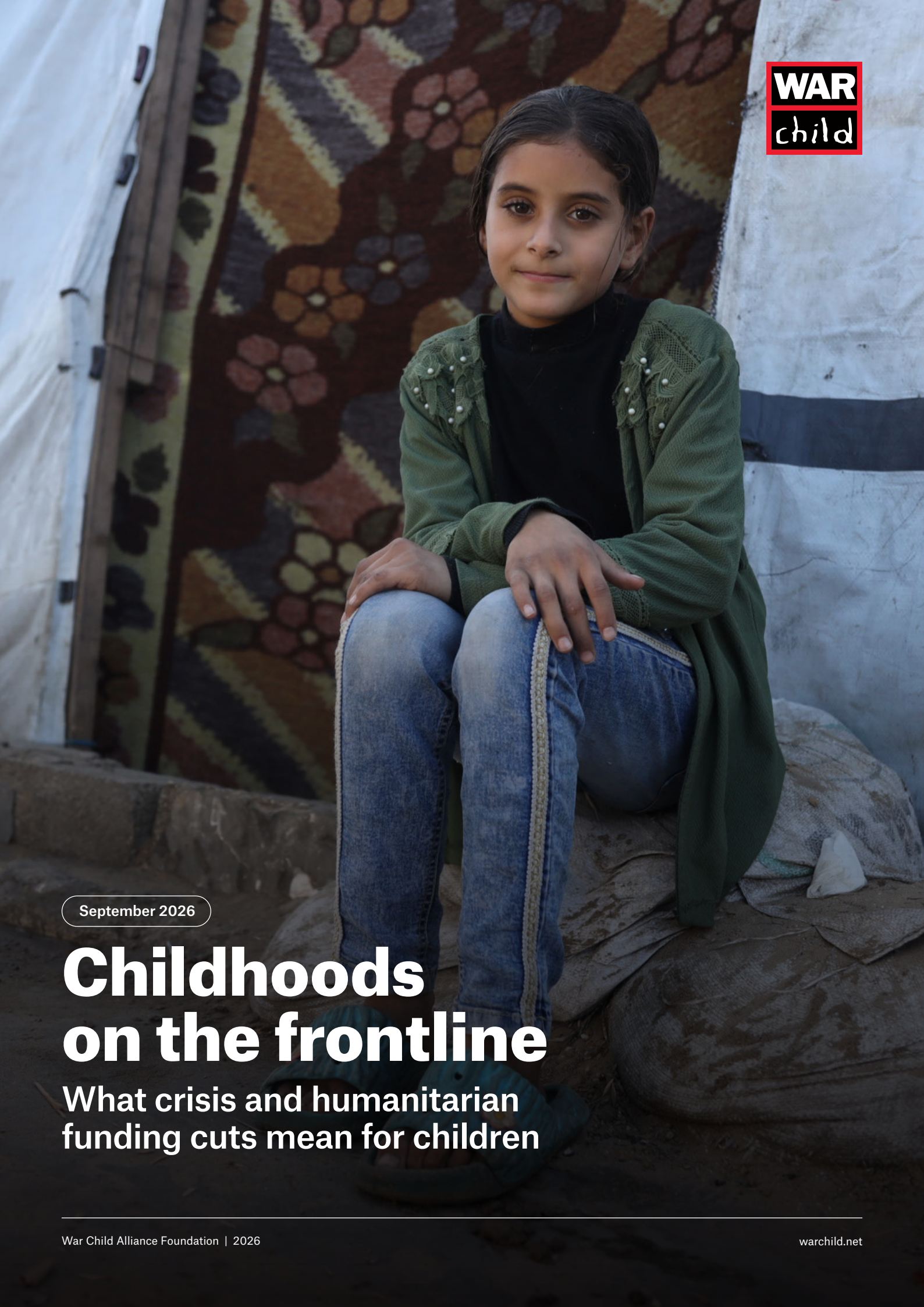

September 2026

Childhoods on the frontline

What crisis and humanitarian funding cuts mean for children

War Child Alliance Foundation | 2026

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Contents

Executive summary 3

Introduction: Every fifth child 4
- Impact of aid cuts 5
- The case for investment in child rights 6
- Methodology 6

Child protection: Preventing death, abuse, neglect and exploitation 7
- A protection crisis 8
- Impact of aid cuts 8
- Deprioritisation of child protection 9

Education in emergencies: Survival, recovery and hope 10
- A growing education gap 11
- Impact of aid cuts 11
- When education fails, societies suffer 11

Mental health and psychosocial support: Healing invisible wounds 12
- A critical but neglected sector 13
- Impact of aid cuts 13
- The consequences for children 13
- Healing invisible wounds 14

Maximising impact: Localised, evidence-based and integrated approaches 15
- Local leadership and partner-driven implementation 15
- Applying evidence-based approaches 16
- Integrated action is more effective and efficient 16

Recommendations 17
- Recommendation 1: Protect children's rights and essential services 17
- Recommendation 2: Fund better, and fund more 17
- Recommendation 3: Put local actors at the centre of responses 17
- Recommendation 4: Invest in integrated, inclusive and evidence-based responses 18

Executive summary

At a time of escalating conflict, increasing human rights violations against children and record global military spending, deep cuts to humanitarian assistance are leaving millions of crisis-affected people without essential support. Children are paying the highest price.

Since the beginning of 2025, the humanitarian sector has been in a period of **profound crisis**. Dramatic funding reductions have forced organisations to close programmes, reduce staff and services, and narrow assistance to an increasingly limited set of interventions. These cuts come as humanitarian needs continue to rise, driven by the spread and escalation of armed conflict, violations of international law, displacement and the compounding effects of climate change. They have also impacted sectors that were already chronically underfunded, pushing inadequate provision towards dangerously low levels.

The consequences are already visible. Child protection programmes and referral systems are contracting at a time when risks to children are increasing. Education services are closing or deteriorating, while financial pressures push vulnerable children out of school and increase exposure to child labour, early marriage and other harmful coping strategies. Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services are being reduced as conflict, displacement, poverty and uncertainty increase psychological distress among children and caregivers. These impacts reinforce one another: **when education, protection or MHPSS services disappear, the effectiveness of the wider protective system around children is weakened**.

This report draws on secondary and open-source evidence and testimonies from children, young people and frontline organisations. Their experiences illustrate how funding reductions are translating into heightened risks for children. The report also highlights a wider systemic challenge. **Local and national organisations – often those closest to affected communities and most likely to remain when international actors leave – have been particularly exposed to the funding contraction**. Rather than shifting power and resources towards local actors, there is a danger that the humanitarian system is instead shifting risk downwards.

The response cannot simply be to **do more with less**. Governments and donors need to protect and increase humanitarian funding, particularly in services essential to children's rights, safety and development. At the same time, the scale of the crisis makes it more important than ever that available resources are used effectively. This means moving away from fragmented, short-term and siloed responses towards approaches that are **locally led, integrated, evidence-based, conflict-sensitive and focused on prevention as well as response**.

Child protection, education and MHPSS should be understood as interconnected parts of a wider protective system. Education can provide an entry point to protection and psychosocial support; MHPSS can strengthen children's ability to learn and caregivers' ability to protect them; and child protection systems can identify children at risk and connect them to the services they need. **Integrated approaches can strengthen outcomes across all three areas while helping ensure that vulnerable children do not get left behind**.

The report calls on governments, multilateral institutions and donors to take action in four areas:

- **Protect children's rights and essential services:** uphold international humanitarian and human rights law, strengthen accountability for violations against children, and safeguard child protection, education and MHPSS as essential components of humanitarian response.
- **Fund better, and fund more:** protect and increase investment in these services and provide flexible, predictable and multi-year funding that sustains both frontline interventions and the systems and expertise behind them.
- **Put local actors at the centre of responses:** translate localisation commitments into greater leadership, decision-making power and direct, equitable funding for local and national actors, while sharing rather than transferring risk.
- **Invest in integrated, inclusive and evidence-based responses:** break down sectoral silos, strengthen prevention, prioritise those facing the greatest risks, and invest in proven approaches while minimising unintended harm.

Together, these actions are essential to safeguard children's rights, wellbeing and future opportunities in an increasingly constrained humanitarian environment. **It is not too late to change course**. By protecting humanitarian funding, upholding international law, and investing in children's protection, education and MHPSS, governments and donors can help prevent lasting harm and safeguard the future of a generation affected by conflict and crisis.



A Sudanese family finds shelter in a refugee settlement in Uganda. © War Child

Introduction

Every fifth child

Today, a record **520 million children – one in five globally – live in conflict zones**, a 60% increase since 2010.[1] At the same time, the number of armed conflicts has reached the highest level in decades: in 2024, the International Committee of the Red Cross documented 130 armed conflicts worldwide, more than double the number from 15 years earlier.[2] The nature of conflict is also changing. Conflicts are becoming longer and more complex. They are more likely to be fought in densely populated areas, and are increasingly shaped by new technologies, such as drones, AI and long-range weapons that extend violence far beyond traditional frontlines. Geopolitical shifts meanwhile are compounding conflict risks. Intensifying competition for power and resources is weakening multilateral cooperation and placing international norms and institutions under strain. Violations of international law are frequently met with limited accountability, while institutions designed to uphold justice face growing political and operational pressures.

Although children play no role in causing or sustaining war, and have no power to end it, they **bear its heaviest consequences**. Children are disproportionately impacted by armed conflict, facing direct violence, displacement and grave violations while being particularly vulnerable to the destruction and disruption of essential services, including healthcare, water and sanitation, and, of course, education. They have fewer means to cope with prolonged crises, whilst the impacts can be life-long. Experiences of violence, deprivation, displacement and loss can increase the risk of intergenerational trauma and instability and contribute to the perpetuation of cycles of conflict. The loss of safe and stable childhoods impacts both individual and community wellbeing over generations.

Children are more than mere 'collateral damage' in conflict. They are often the explicit **targets of aggression**, whether through forced recruitment, child abduction, sexual violence or the targeting of schools and other child-focused services by armed forces and groups. While international humanitarian law (IHL) affords children specific protection, the willingness and ability of the international community to protect the rights of children in conflict are also being increasingly eroded. Children today face higher levels of conflict, with fewer protections, than at any time in recent history. Urgent action is needed.

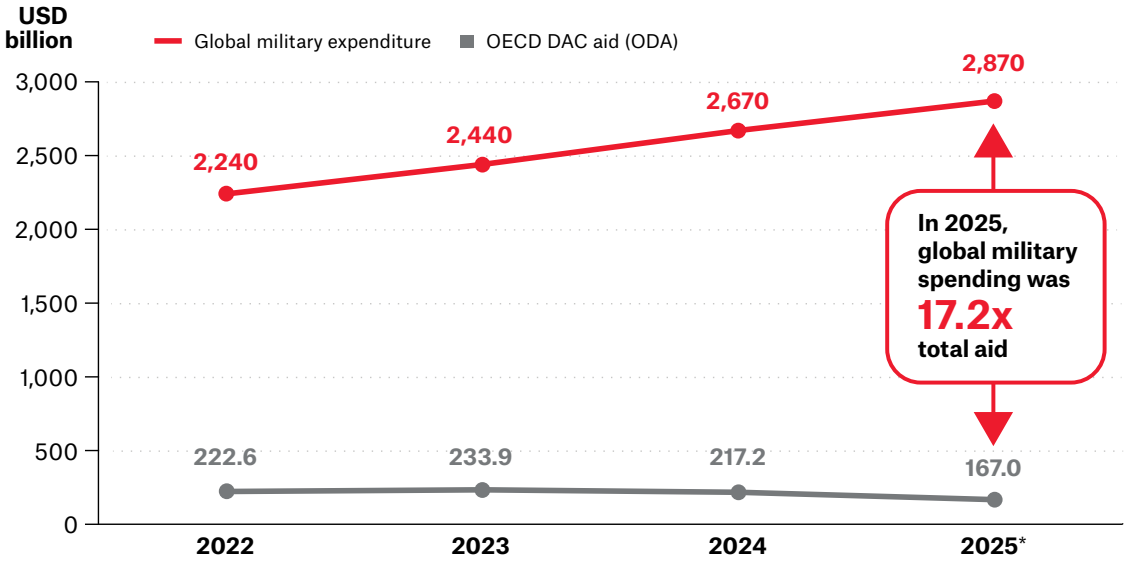
Impact of aid cuts

Despite these trends, the resources available to respond to, resolve and prevent conflict are shrinking. 2025 saw a 23.1% decrease in Official Development Assistance (ODA) provided by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries,[3] **the largest reduction since reporting began**. This fall was precipitated by the dramatic cutting of US aid budgets in early 2025, but also reflects longer-term trends.[4] **Humanitarian funding gaps are equally stark**. The United Nations (UN) Global Humanitarian Overview appeal for 2025 received only $12 billion – about a quarter of what was requested. The 2026 appeal, at $33 billion,[5] is the lowest in a decade. These abrupt reductions had immediate consequences: programmes closed, staff were laid off, priorities were narrowed to the most urgent life-saving interventions, and parts of the international aid system were restructured.

The cuts reflect shifting global priorities. Geopolitical rivalries and increasing power politics in many donor countries are driving record levels of military spending. In 2024, global military expenditure rose by 9.4% to $2.7 trillion – the tenth consecutive annual increase.[6] By comparison, total ODA from Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and non-DAC providers amounted to $255.4 billion, equivalent to just 9.4% of global military expenditure in that year.[7] Despite claims that rising military budgets enhance peace and security, current trends suggest otherwise. This imbalance matters. As resources for war expand and support for people affected by war contracts, **the international community's capacity to prevent harm, protect civilians and support recovery is being weakened**.

Global military expenditure vs OECD DAC aid (ODA)

Constant 2024 prices, USD billion



*2025 = preliminary. Note: ODA in constant 2024 prices. Military expenditure in constant 2024 prices.
Sources: OECD DAC Statistics (ODA) – April 2025 release. SIPRI Military Expenditure Database – April 2025 release.

Global military expenditure has risen every year since 2015, reaching $2.87 trillion in 2025.

ODA from OECD DAC countries has **fallen** by **24.9%** since 2022.

Military spending now equals more than **17 times** the amount spent on aid.

The 2026 UN humanitarian appeal of **$33 billion** was just 1.1% of global military spending in 2024.

The case for investment in child rights

The funding cuts are contributing to **reduced access to humanitarian assistance** at a time when needs are increasing. Although entire populations suffer, **children bear the greatest and most enduring burden**. Children have fewer means to cope with prolonged crises and are among the first to suffer when food systems, schools, health services and protection mechanisms break down. When humanitarian assistance is reduced or withdrawn, services such as child protection, education, healthcare and MHPSS can disappear quickly, placing children's safety, development and futures at immediate risk.

Directing humanitarian aid to only the most 'urgent needs' – food, shelter and health for example – leaves **children exposed to ongoing risks**. Adverse childhood experiences are linked to long-term negative outcomes, including lower education and income and higher vulnerability to exploitation. Failing to invest early also carries significant economic costs, leading to predictable and expensive outcomes: increasing displacement and escalating[8] gender-based violence and long-term harm.[9] Violence against children alone can cost up to 8% of global GDP.[10] Child protection, education and MHPSS interventions are not therefore secondary services that can safely be postponed until a crisis has passed. They are essential both to immediate protection and to long-term recovery.

On the other hand, **strategic investment in children delivers clear returns**. Investing in protection and early action reduces displacement pressures, strengthens stability, and helps avoid far higher downstream humanitarian and migration costs.

Education is a proven driver of long-term economic growth, with estimates suggesting returns of up to $10–15 for every $1 invested.[11] Mental health interventions are also highly cost-effective, generating significant economic and social returns through improved health, productivity and resilience.[12] Investment in child protection, education and MHPSS therefore does more than respond to immediate need: it reduces future displacement and instability, lessens the need for more costly humanitarian interventions, and generates lasting social and economic benefits.

Investing early in children is therefore one of the most cost-effective ways to strengthen societies, reduce future humanitarian need and deliver value for money. For donors, **investing today can reduce the costs of crisis tomorrow**.

Methodology

This report examines what it means for conflict- and crisis-affected children to be left without lifesaving aid, and more specifically, protection, education and MHPSS. It seeks to inform policy and programming decisions taken by international humanitarian stakeholders, including donors, governments and multilateral agencies. It draws on open-source and secondary data, complemented by the findings from four focus group discussions with 36 refugee and host-community children and young people in Kyangwali and Bidibidi settlements in Uganda.[13] Fourteen key informant interviews and two focus group discussions were also conducted with national and local organisations from Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Jordan.[14] The voices and views of conflict-affected people are included throughout the report.



Children in Afghanistan gather in a dedicated child-friendly space following the 2026 earthquake. © War Child



War Child works in Colombia to support communities affected by armed conflict with child protection, education and psychosocial support. © War Child

Child protection

Preventing death, abuse, neglect and exploitation

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **The global protection environment is deteriorating.** Grave violations are at historically high levels.
- **Aid cuts are hitting child protection hard,** leading to suspended services, fewer frontline workers and measurable increases in violence and exploitation.
- **Vulnerable children pay the highest price.** Conflict-affected children, children with disabilities or complex needs, unaccompanied or separated children, and adolescent girls are disproportionately affected by shrinking protection services.
- **Local and national organisations are bearing the brunt,** weakening frontline capacity and referral systems where needs are greatest.
- **Less funding means less visibility, and less protection.** Violations against children are increasingly going undocumented and unaddressed.
- **The international child protection architecture must be protected.** Cuts and planned reforms could weaken monitoring, lead to loss of expertise and undermine accountability.

Humanitarian crises are, at their core, protection crises. They are driven and intensified by a disregard for IHL and human rights law. Accountability gaps allow perpetrators to act with impunity, while civilians, especially children, bear the heaviest consequences. Several trends further weaken the protection environment, including the selective application of international norms, entrenched double standards, and withdrawals from treaties banning anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions. At the same time, continued arms transfers into conflict zones, rising military spending and shifts in warfare, particularly urban combat and the use of drones and explosive weapons in densely populated areas, have significantly increased risks to civilians. These protection risks are further compounded when family-based care, community support structures, social services and formal child protection mechanisms are weakened or disrupted during prolonged crises.

A protection crisis

Grave violations against children have reached **unprecedented levels**. In 2024, the UN verified 41,763 grave violations against children[15] – the highest number recorded since the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) was established 20 years ago. In 2025, negative trends continued as a record 24,174 children suffered grave violations of their rights in armed conflict[16] – an eight percent rise compared to the previous year and the highest figure recorded since the start of the MRM. However, these figures likely represent only a fraction of the true scale of violations, particularly in contexts where access is restricted, reporting and monitoring mechanisms are weak and underfunded, and frontline child protection presence has been reduced.

Children in conflict can be exposed to **multiple, often cumulative and mutually reinforcing threats**. Some groups are particularly vulnerable, namely displaced children, children with disabilities, unaccompanied and separated children, adolescent girls and children from marginalised communities. Attacks on essential services, such as schools and hospitals, and lack of access to humanitarian aid can also limit access to safe spaces and basic needs. Compounding these challenges, protective environments and community support systems are often weak or have collapsed. This leaves children at heightened risk of forced displacement, sexual exploitation and abuse, neglect, child marriage, trafficking, and the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use by armed groups. Many are killed or maimed by explosive remnants of war, while others suffer severe and lasting psychological trauma. Finally, when protection systems are overstretched or underfunded, safeguarding risks also increase due to weak supervision, unsafe referrals, confidentiality breaches and reduced oversight of frontline service delivery.

Child protection interventions have proven to be effective in conflict contexts. This includes MHPSS, case management, family tracing and reunification, safe referral systems, child-friendly spaces and alternative care for unaccompanied children. Community-based child protection approaches and caregiver support mechanisms are also critical preventive interventions, particularly where specialised services are limited or overstretched. Importantly, the effectiveness and safety of these interventions depends on sustained investment in trained personnel, supervision, safeguarding systems, case management quality and referral pathways.

Impact of aid cuts

A 2025 survey of over 250 child protection practitioners from across 55 countries, by the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action,[17] illustrates the scale of impact of aid cuts on child protection services. The survey found that within only a few weeks 74% of all respondents reported that their operations had experienced funding cuts. Reductions in frontline staff were reported by 70% of respondents, 62% cut capacity-strengthening activities, and more than half lost technical advisers. While international NGOs reported significant reductions, national and local organisations were the hardest hit, with more than half losing over 40% of their child protection budgets. A follow-up survey one year later found these impacts were only deepening.[18]

This contraction is increasing risks for many children. Respondents to the 2026 survey reported increases in sexual violence, mental health and psychosocial distress, and child maltreatment. Children affected by armed conflict are particularly vulnerable because these additional risks compound already high exposure to violence and grave violations. In the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, for example, reported abductions and kidnappings more than quadrupled in 2025. Child marriage increased by 21%, child labour by 17%, and recruitment by armed groups increased eightfold, affecting at least 817 children.[19] While particularly stark, the Rohingya case illustrates the potentially reinforcing effects of prolonged displacement, insecurity, rising household vulnerability and shrinking protection services.

> Families are prioritising immediate survival needs over education and child wellbeing. The reduced availability of specialised protection and referral services has further limited our ability to identify and respond to high-risk cases in a timely manner.
>
> *Representative from a national organisation, Yemen*



A Lebanese family stand outside a tent in the refugee settlement they call their home. © War Child

Local and national organisations report increasing protection risks

Across Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Jordan, local and national organisations report that funding cuts are both increasing protection risks and weakening the systems designed to address them. As household resources decline, families are increasingly resorting to negative coping strategies, including reducing spending on food and health, withdrawing children from school, sending boys to work and marrying girls off earlier. At the same time, non-formal education, case management, MHPSS and community-based protection services have closed or contracted, while the loss of referral partners has disrupted pathways for high-risk cases. As one Syrian NGO put it, **"Cuts do not reduce need but exacerbate it… interrupting programmes creates worse effects than not having started them."**

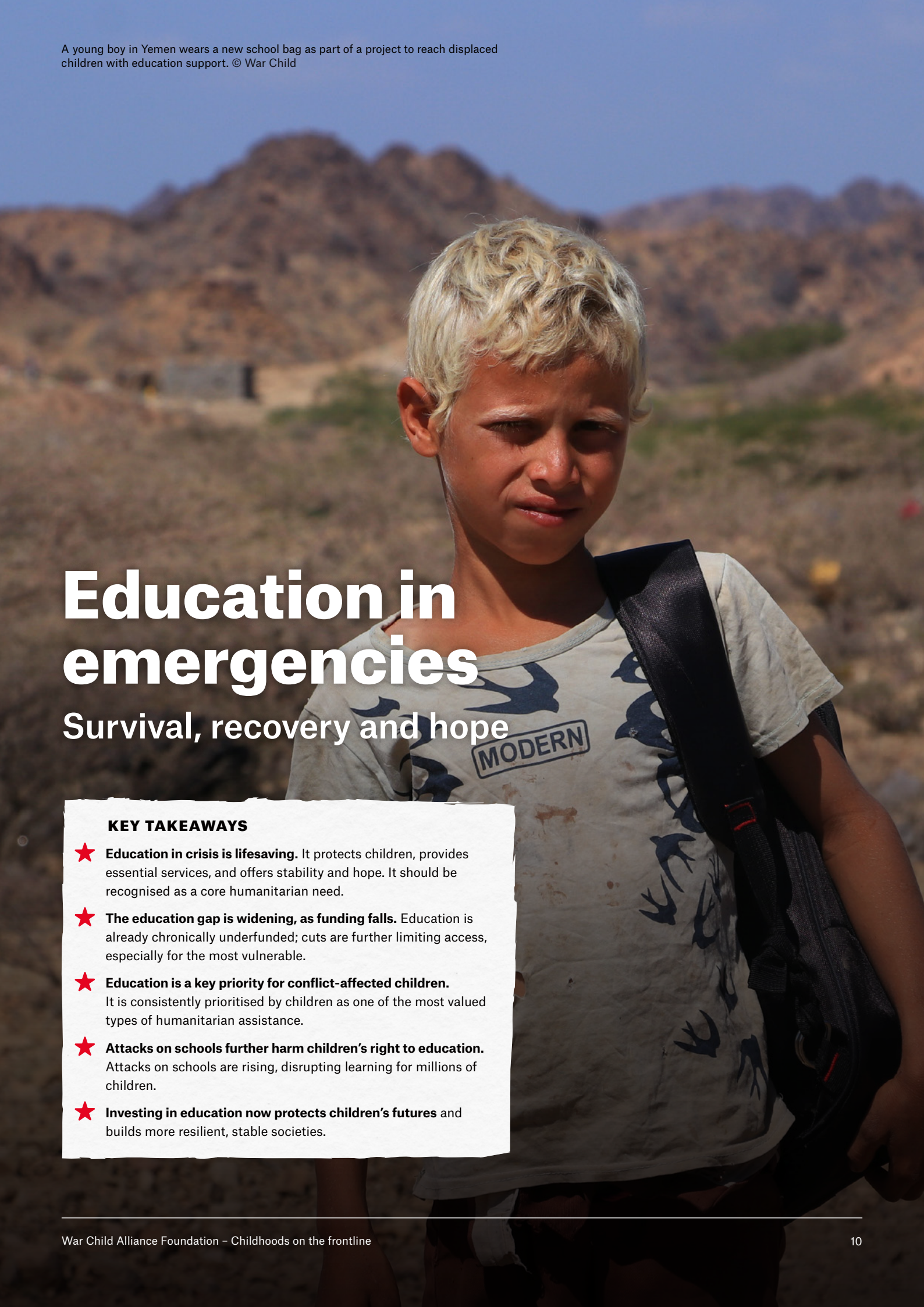
These impacts are strongly gendered. Organisations report that women and girls often experience the earliest and deepest losses, including the closure of safe spaces, reduced psychosocial and case management support, lost livelihoods, and heightened risks of gender-based violence and early marriage. Women are also taking on greater unpaid care burdens and reducing their own food consumption as household pressures increase. One Lebanese organisation observed, **"Cuts to psychosocial and community-based services land harder on women, who were already holding communities together with very little support."** Boys, meanwhile, are increasingly pushed into hazardous labour. Adolescent and young men can fall through protection systems because of assumptions that they are better able to protect themselves.

Funding cuts are also straining **global child protection mechanisms**. Cuts to the UN's MRM on grave violations have reduced field presence and capacity to document violations, while the downsizing of UN peace operations has created gaps that agencies such as the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) cannot adequately fill. This matters because reliable, timely data is essential for accountability, advocacy, policy and effective programming. As monitoring capacity shrinks, more **violations risk going unreported and unaddressed**, leaving children without protection or assistance.

Deprioritisation of child protection

Within this constrained funding environment, child protection is **increasingly being deprioritised**. Targets under the 2025 Humanitarian Programming Cycle fell by more than half, from 25.3 million to 12.1 million children, alongside a nearly 50% reduction in funding. Critical protection interventions risk losing out to sectors perceived as more immediately lifesaving, despite their role in preventing violence, exploitation and long-term harm. The consolidation of multiple protection areas into a single protection cluster may further reduce the visibility and prioritisation of child-specific needs.

Proposed structural reforms could add further pressure. Under the UN80 Initiative, proposals include bringing mandates such as children and armed conflict, sexual violence in conflict and genocide prevention into a single entity, and removing child protection and rule-of-law functions from future peace operations.[20] This could weaken specialised capacity at a time when violations against children remain exceptionally high. Peace operations play an important role in monitoring violations and providing the access, logistics and security needed for child protection work. Reform should preserve dedicated child protection expertise, coordination and accountability mechanisms, and strengthen rather than dilute the Children and Armed Conflict agenda.



A young boy in Yemen wears a new school bag as part of a project to reach displaced children with education support. © War Child

Education in emergencies

Survival, recovery and hope

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Education in crisis is lifesaving.** It protects children, provides essential services, and offers stability and hope. It should be recognised as a core humanitarian need.
- **The education gap is widening, as funding falls.** Education is already chronically underfunded; cuts are further limiting access, especially for the most vulnerable.
- **Education is a key priority for conflict-affected children.** It is consistently prioritised by children as one of the most valued types of humanitarian assistance.
- **Attacks on schools further harm children's right to education.** Attacks on schools are rising, disrupting learning for millions of children.
- **Investing in education now protects children's futures** and builds more resilient, stable societies.

Education is a fundamental human right and, in conflict-affected settings, a lifesaving humanitarian service. As a 'multiplier right', it equips children with the knowledge, skills and agency to access other rights. Schools provide safe, structured environments that can reduce exposure to recruitment by armed groups, trafficking, child labour and gender-based violence. Education can provide lifesaving information and serve as a platform for health, nutrition, protection and MHPSS services, while promoting inclusion, gender equality and social cohesion. Crucially, it provides stability, normalcy and hope for the future, supporting children's immediate wellbeing and longer-term recovery. Its importance is consistently recognised by crisis-affected communities and children themselves,[21] with nearly one in three children identifying education as their top priority in emergencies.[22] **Education should therefore be treated as a core humanitarian service, alongside food, water, shelter and healthcare**.

A growing education gap

Despite its critical role, **access to education in emergencies is deteriorating**. In 2025, an estimated 234 million crisis-affected children and adolescents required support to access quality education, including 85 million who were out of school entirely.[23] By 2026, this had risen to **258 million crisis-affected school-age children, of whom 93 million were out of school**.[24] Refugee children are particularly affected: nearly half of school-age refugee children, around 5.7 million, were out of school in 2024.[25] At the same time, funding is contracting: humanitarian actors have reduced education funding requests by a third, while wider international aid for education is expected to decline significantly. **Growing needs and shrinking resources risk leaving millions more crisis-affected children without access to education**.

Impact of aid cuts

Education in emergencies was already chronically underfunded, historically receiving less than 3% of humanitarian aid. **Recent cuts have deepened the crisis**. More than $1 billion in education funding was withdrawn in 2025, leading to the cancellation of hundreds of programmes across dozens of countries. UNICEF estimates that further announced cuts could leave an additional **6 million children out of school by the end of 2026**, almost a third of them in humanitarian contexts.[26] The impacts are already being felt through school and learning centre closures, reduced teacher numbers and salaries, shortages of essential learning materials, higher dropout rates, and cuts to services supporting children.[27]

Attacks on education are also rising sharply. In 2024–2025, 8,566 attacks on education facilities were recorded globally – more than 40% higher than in 2022–2023.[28] Schools have been attacked, damaged and used for military purposes, while students and teachers have also been targeted.[29] These attacks not only destroy infrastructure but also cause psychological trauma and disrupt learning for extended periods, sometimes permanently denying children their right to education.

The combined effects of funding cuts and insecurity disproportionately impact the most vulnerable children, including refugees, displaced children, children with disabilities, marginalised communities and girls. Loss of access to education increases exposure to early and forced marriage, recruitment by armed actors and other harmful coping strategies, while reducing future economic opportunities. **Over time, disrupted education drives higher dropout rates and poorer learning outcomes and widens inequality**.

Voices of children and young people in Kyangwali and Bidibidi

Education emerged as one of the **sectors most severely affected by aid cuts across Kyangwali and Bidibidi**. Young people reported that reduced support for school fees, learning materials, teachers, examinations and menstrual hygiene supplies has increased absenteeism and dropout rates, while teacher shortages, overcrowding and inadequate materials have reduced education quality. Wider economic pressures are compounding these impacts: food insecurity affects attendance and concentration, boys are increasingly pushed into casual labour, and girls face greater risks of school dropout, early marriage and teenage pregnancy. Orphans, children with disabilities and those from the poorest households are particularly affected.

Young people however consistently identified **education as their strongest pathway to self-reliance and a better future**. In both settlements, and among refugee and host-community youth, investment in education was seen as the top priority for protecting young people's futures and strengthening community resilience. Participants called for renewed support for school costs and learning materials, teachers and safe learning environments, alongside targeted assistance for children most at risk of dropping out.

When education fails, societies suffer

The costs of disrupted education extend far beyond individual children. Lost education undermines future livelihoods and economic growth, widens inequality, and can weaken social cohesion and resilience. In conflict settings, being out of school can also increase children's vulnerability to exploitation and recruitment by armed groups, particularly when combined with poverty, insecurity and limited livelihood opportunities. Conversely, safe and inclusive education can provide protection, opportunity and a sense of belonging, while reducing inequalities and exclusion and strengthening social cohesion – factors that are important to preventing violent conflict and supporting longer-term recovery and peace.[30] **Investing in education in emergencies is therefore an investment not only in children's futures, but in more resilient, stable and prosperous societies**.



A family in Afghanistan receive cash assistance to protect their children from risks such as early marriage and child labour. © War Child

Mental health and psychosocial support

Healing invisible wounds

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Mental health needs are significantly higher in conflict settings,** yet this is where access to support is weakest.
- **MHPSS is essential for humanitarian action, but systematically underfunded.** Cuts are dismantling services and referral systems and undermining local capacity.
- **Children and caregivers are particularly affected,** leading to increased risks of lasting distress, harmful coping strategies and other protection concerns.
- **Investing in MHPSS strengthens children, families and communities,** while supporting recovery, social cohesion and more effective humanitarian response.

Mental health and psychosocial needs are particularly acute in humanitarian settings. Globally, one in eight people, and one in seven adolescents, lives with a mental health condition, such as depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder.[31] This rises to an estimated **one in five people in conflict-affected settings**.[32] Exposure to violence, displacement, loss and instability can cause profound and lasting psychological and social distress. These impacts can extend across generations, weakening individual wellbeing, family and community support structures, and social cohesion, and undermining long-term recovery.

> Globally, one in eight people, and one in seven adolescents, lives with a mental health condition, such as depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder.

A critical but neglected sector

MHPSS is an **essential component of humanitarian action**. It supports outcomes across child protection, education, health, nutrition and livelihoods sectors.[33] It can strengthen resilience, learning and community cohesion, while contributing to peacebuilding, by helping to rebuild trust and support reconciliation and violence prevention.[34] MHPSS should therefore be integrated across humanitarian responses, rather than treated as a standalone intervention.

Despite its importance, MHPSS was **chronically underfunded** even before recent aid cuts. Governments allocate, on average, around 2% of health budgets to mental health, with children and adolescents receiving only a small share.[35] International funding is similarly limited: in 2019, child and family MHPSS received just 0.31% of ODA and 1% of private development finance.[36]

Impact of aid cuts

The recent cuts have pushed an **already fragile MHPSS system into crisis**, reducing access to treatment, prevention and community-based support while undermining other humanitarian interventions. A 2025 survey of 131 programmes across 32 countries found that 750,000 people – around three-quarters of beneficiaries – immediately lost access to mental healthcare; nearly three-quarters of mental health staff lost their jobs; and 75% of those receiving treatment lost access to essential medication.[37]

The cuts are **weakening entire MHPSS systems**, not just individual services. Referral pathways, outreach, supervision and community networks are being disrupted, while the loss of trained staff and local expertise erodes longer-term capacity. This threatens efforts to build sustainable, locally led MHPSS systems that can support communities beyond the immediate emergency.

Voices of children and young people in Kyangwali and Bidibidi

Young people consistently reported that reductions in humanitarian assistance have had a significant impact on their psychosocial wellbeing. Respondents in both Kyangwali and Bidibidi reported **rising stress, anxiety and emotional distress** linked to food insecurity, poverty, unemployment, reduced educational opportunities and uncertainty about the future. Family conflict and growing household responsibilities are compounding these pressures, while some participants in Bidibidi also raised concerns about trauma, hopelessness and suicide among young people.

At the same time, **psychosocial support has been scaled back**, including counselling, safe spaces for youth, children and women, sports and other community activities that provide emotional support and social connection. Young people called for renewed investment in these services, alongside peer and community-based support, highlighting the important role of teachers, faith-based organisations, community leaders and youth groups in supporting wellbeing and identifying those needing additional care.



16-year-old Umomubana receives psychosocial support in Uganda after being orphaned by war in Sudan. © War Child

The consequences for children

The **consequences for children are immediate and long-lasting**. Already facing conflict, displacement and instability, many children are being left to cope with severe psychological distress without adequate support. Prolonged exposure to adversity, violence and uncertainty can lead to toxic stress – a sustained and overwhelming activation of the stress response system that can disrupt healthy brain development and negatively affect cognitive, emotional and social development. Without protective relationships and appropriate support, toxic stress can impair learning, memory, emotional regulation and physical health. These impacts often continue into adulthood.



12-year-old Isma receives psychosocial support in a refugee settlement in Uganda after fleeing conflict in Sudan. © War Child

Caregiver mental health is equally important to child wellbeing and protection. Parents and caregivers experiencing high levels of stress may struggle to provide consistent care, emotional support and protection for children during crises. Improving caregiver wellbeing contributes directly to children's safety, development and recovery by creating more stable and nurturing environments, thereby lowering the risks of neglect, violence and harmful coping behaviours. **Community-based psychosocial support** can reinforce these protective effects by easing family stress and fostering healthier relationships and coping patterns.

Healing invisible wounds

Mental health needs are rising rapidly – especially in conflict-affected settings – while funding and services are declining. Without urgent investment in MHPSS, millions of children and families will be left to cope with invisible wounds alone. The risks extend further. Without adequate support, children are more vulnerable to other forms of violence and negative coping mechanisms. The consequences are not only individual – they affect entire communities and can persist across generations.

> It is overwhelmingly women who skip meals, girls are pulled out of activities first, and women take on additional unpaid care as formal services contract. Cuts to psychosocial and community-based services land hardest on women, who were already holding communities together with very little support.
>
> *Representative of a local organisation, Lebanon*

Maximising impact

Localised, evidence-based and integrated approaches

This rapidly changing humanitarian landscape requires adaptive and innovative ways of working. It is now more important than ever that available resources are used effectively. This means moving away from fragmented, short-term and siloed responses towards approaches that are **locally led, integrated, evidence-based, conflict-sensitive and focused on prevention as well as response**. If these approaches are adopted, interventions can become more sustainable and child rights can be better protected.

Local leadership and partner-driven implementation

The international humanitarian community has made clear **commitments to localisation**. The Grand Bargain, now endorsed by 71 signatories, commits donors and humanitarian organisations to strengthen local leadership and channel more resources and decision-making to national and local actors in crisis-affected countries.[38] The rationale is well established: local actors can respond rapidly, operate at lower cost, navigate access and language barriers, draw on community trust and provide continuity from emergency response through recovery. Locally led responses can therefore be faster, more contextually appropriate and more cost-effective.

Continuity is the most consequential of these advantages. Because local actors remain long after international response winds down, they close the gap between emergency relief and longer-term development. This is especially important for services like education, protection and MHPSS, where interrupted services can cause lasting harm. Local actors are therefore central to an effective humanitarian-development-peace nexus, making investment in them a question of effectiveness as well as equity.

Despite these commitments, local and national organisations have been disproportionately affected by recent funding cuts. Evidence since 2025 points to severe funding losses, programme closures and staff reductions.[39] Longstanding inequalities in humanitarian financing have increased their vulnerability: local organisations receive little funding directly and often depend on smaller, shorter and more restricted grants. As funding has contracted, international organisations have also reduced partnerships and funding to local actors, **passing cuts further down the humanitarian system**.[40]

War Child's partners that contributed to this report had one clear message in response to these pressures: **how funding is provided matters as much as how much is provided**. Short, restricted and unpredictable grants disrupt programmes and referral systems and weaken frontline organisations. Their priority is **flexible, predictable, multi-year funding that covers core costs and is channelled directly to local actors**. Continuity, not expansion, is the priority: interrupting established programmes does more damage than never having started them.



War Child works in Colombia to support communities affected by armed conflict with child protection, education and psychosocial support. © War Child

Voices of national and local organisations

Local and national organisations from Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Jordan described how the **localisation agenda is being undermined by the funding cuts**. Rather than shifting power and resources towards local actors, they report that it is an operational risk that is being pushed downwards. Grants are getting shorter, budgets are shrinking and compliance requirements are becoming more burdensome, but expected outcomes remain unchanged. As one Lebanese organisation explained, **"Projects that were on a one-year cycle become three months… and that creates insecurity for your whole team."**

Partnerships are also becoming more transactional. In Jordan, one coordinator reported that now **"we just buy services,"** whereas previously relationships were built on partnership. Local actors also warned that the behaviour of international agencies is actively undermining localisation: such as international organisations registering under local names to capture 'local partner' funding, abrupt programme closures that trigger community anger, and compliance burdens that are becoming increasingly complex, adding further strain to stretched administrative staff.

For frontline organisations, the consequences are immediate and existential. Referral systems have broken down as specialised partners are defunded, advocacy has declined under fear of losing funding or registration, and decades of investment in training the workforce have been lost overnight. Many organisations now speak of self-funding simply to survive. As one Yemeni partner warned, **"A decline in support does not mean a decline in needs."**

Applying evidence-based approaches

In humanitarian and crisis settings where resources are limited and overstretched, evidence-based approaches and methods are increasingly essential to **ensure meaningful and measurable impact**. Interventions based on research and data can demonstrate effectiveness rather than simply assuming that an intervention works. By prioritising interventions that are proven to be effective and grounded in scientific evidence, organisations can avoid ineffective or duplicative approaches, make more efficient use of scarce resources, and ensure that critical services reach those most in need. In MHPSS, for example, the use of scientifically validated methods is vital to avoid reinforcing trauma or distress. Adopting conflict-sensitive approaches, meanwhile, can help to reduce the risk of unintended harms, especially in sensitive sectors such as MHPSS, child protection and gender-based violence. Furthermore, evidence-based approaches are essential to **increasing accountability towards affected populations**, as they enable organisations to demonstrate the effectiveness of their interventions and adjust programmes where necessary.

Integrated action is more effective and efficient

Child protection, education and MHPSS are interconnected needs, and should be addressed in a **mutually reinforcing manner**. Education provides safety, structure and hope while creating an entry point to protection and MHPSS services; child protection identifies and supports children at risk; and MHPSS strengthens children's and caregivers' ability to cope and recover. Better mental health meanwhile can improve learning, attendance and retention, while education and protection provide stability and reduce exposure to harm. Together, **these services form a protective system in contexts of violence, displacement and uncertainty**.

Integration should however extend beyond these areas. Protection, education and MHPSS should be **considered across the whole humanitarian system**. Children's risks are shaped by interconnected factors including poverty, health, disability, family circumstances and exposure to violence, making fragmented responses less effective. Evidence demonstrates that siloed approaches are insufficient, particularly in complex crises where integrated responses are needed to address both immediate needs and underlying vulnerabilities.[41] This is particularly important for children with multiple vulnerabilities, including unaccompanied children, children with disabilities or medical needs, and children in institutional care or detention, who may otherwise fall between services.

As resources have become ever more restricted, such integrated approaches have become more essential. Integrated, people-centred programming can help limited resources achieve greater impact by connecting services, strengthening prevention, and ensuring that vulnerable children are identified and referred to the support they need. Conversely, funding cuts, fragmented programming and reforms that weaken specialist capacity or coordination risk undermining these connections. In a constrained funding environment, integration is not an optional extra: it is **central to protecting outcomes, reaching the most vulnerable and making effective use of scarce resources**.

Putting integrated approaches into practice: the War Child Care System

War Child is developing an integrated, evidence-based Care System that aims to improve outcomes for children affected by conflict. This system will bring together child protection, education and MHPSS interventions within a continuum of care, from prevention to specialised support. A research-to-practice cycle uses evidence, monitoring and community feedback to test and refine interventions, while delivery through local and international partners supports adaptation to different contexts. The model illustrates how integrated, evidence-informed approaches can strengthen support for children, caregivers and communities while promoting localisation and more sustainable humanitarian responses.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Protect children's rights and essential services

Treat child protection, education and MHPSS as essential, mutually reinforcing components of humanitarian response. Uphold international humanitarian and human rights law, protect children from grave violations, and preserve the services and accountability mechanisms needed to realise their rights.

Government and multilateral policy- and decision-makers should:

- **Protect specialised child-focused mandates and expertise in humanitarian and UN reform.** Reforms should strengthen, not dilute, dedicated child protection capacity and the Children and Armed Conflict agenda, while safeguarding specialist capacity for education in emergencies and MHPSS.
- **Remove barriers to education for the most vulnerable children.** Prioritise measures that keep refugees, displaced children, girls, children with disabilities and other marginalised groups in education, including reducing financial barriers and addressing drivers of dropout such as poverty, child labour and early marriage.
- **Protect education from attack and military use.** Strengthen legal, policy and accountability measures to protect schools, learners and teachers and maintain safe access to education during conflict.

Bilateral and multilateral donors should:

- **Protect funding for monitoring and accountability mechanisms.** Sustain the MRM and other systems that document grave violations, and generate reliable protection data and support evidence-based advocacy and response.
- **Protect essential child-focused services during funding prioritisation.** Ensure funding reductions do not disproportionately affect child protection, education and MHPSS or undermine the specialist capacity and systems needed to deliver them.

Recommendation 2

Fund better, and fund more

Protect and increase investment in child protection, education and MHPSS. Funding should be sufficient, flexible, predictable and multi-year to maintain critical services, strengthen resilience, and prevent greater humanitarian needs and costs in the future.

Government and multilateral policy- and decisionmakers should:

- **Embed child protection, education and MHPSS in humanitarian financing and planning.** Recognise their contribution to immediate protection, prevention and resilience, and ensure they are adequately reflected in humanitarian response plans and transitions to longer-term recovery and development.

Bilateral and multilateral donors should:

- **Ringfence predictable, multi-year funding for child protection, education and MHPSS.** Avoid funding reductions that disrupt essential services or leave children without continuity of care, learning and support.
- **Provide flexible funding that sustains services and the systems behind them.** Fund not only frontline activities, but also the staff, teachers, supervision, safeguarding, referral pathways and community-based systems required for safe, quality and continuous support.
- **Prioritise continuity and prevention alongside immediate response.** Maintain proven services – including case management, education, MHPSS, family tracing and reunification, and community-based support – to prevent needs and protection risks from escalating and to reduce higher downstream costs.

Recommendation 3

Put local actors at the centre of responses

Translate localisation commitments into greater leadership, decision-making power and resources for local and national actors. Their proximity, contextual knowledge and long-term presence are critical to effective, accountable and sustainable support for crisis-affected children and communities.

Government and multilateral policy- and decisionmakers should:

- **Accelerate implementation of existing localisation commitments,** increasing the leadership and decision-making role of local and national actors in humanitarian planning, coordination and response.
- **Remove structural barriers to local leadership and funding,** including disproportionate compliance, reporting and partnership requirements that restrict direct access to resources.



A young girl in Gaza stands outside the tent her family now lives in after being displaced by violence. © War Child

Bilateral and multilateral donors should:

- **Increase direct, equitable and flexible funding to local and national actors,** including adequate core costs and multi-year support that strengthens organisational capacity and enables continuity.
- **Invest in sustainable local systems and expertise,** including community-based child protection, education and MHPSS capacity, referral networks, and the local institutions and community actors that support children and caregivers.
- **Share rather than transfer risk.** Ensure contracting, compliance and funding arrangements do not push disproportionate financial and operational risks onto local partners, particularly during funding reductions.
- **Honour existing commitments and deliver predictable funding.** Ensure funds are disbursed in a timely manner, and avoid approving and then freezing grants, exposing local partners to reputational and financial risks.

Recommendation 4

Invest in integrated, inclusive and evidence-based responses

Break down sectoral silos and invest in approaches that address children's interconnected needs. Responses should be integrated, preventive, inclusive, evidence-based and conflict sensitive to improve outcomes and make best use of limited resources.

Government and multilateral policy- and decisionmakers should:

- **Integrate child protection, education and MHPSS across humanitarian policies and services,** by strengthening coordination and referral pathways between schools, health services, protection systems and community-based support.
- **Prioritise prevention alongside response,** addressing underlying drivers of vulnerability – including poverty, exclusion, family stress and exposure to violence – before risks escalate into greater harm.
- **Design policies and services around those most at risk,** ensuring children facing multiple and intersecting vulnerabilities – including displaced and refugee children, girls and children with disabilities – can access coordinated support.

Bilateral and multilateral donors should:

- **Fund integrated rather than siloed responses,** enabling partners to combine child protection, education, MHPSS and other relevant support around the needs of children and families.
- **Invest in evidence, learning and adaptation,** requiring proportionate monitoring and accountability while supporting partners to test, adapt and scale effective approaches and identify unintended harm.
- **Prioritise inclusive and conflict-sensitive programming,** ensuring funding reaches children facing the greatest barriers and that interventions are designed to avoid exacerbating inequalities, tensions or protection risks.

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Cover photo: A young girl in Gaza sits outside the tent her family now lives in after being displaced by violence. © War Child

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