unicef
for every child

80 years



SPECIAL ISSUE BRIEF

Childhood at a Crossroads

UNICEF at 80

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Circa 1950, in Castoria, Greece, a displaced child holds a UNICEF-supplied blanket during post-war relief for families uprooted by conflict.

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When the world chose children

On 11 December 1946, in the wreckage of the Second World War, the Member States of the United Nations made a radical choice. They resolved that no one country had the power to solve the challenges facing children. Instead, building a secure future for the young must be a collective effort: *"With the hope of the world resting on the coming generations, the problems of caring for children is international in scope and its solution must be found on an international basis."* [1]

The founding of UNICEF with these words was an act of emergency. Twenty million children in 14 European countries were starving, sick and displaced after the most destructive war in history.[2] UNICEF responded: In just its first four years, the fund fed millions of children not just in Europe but in 58 countries around the world. It vaccinated 8 million children against tuberculosis, and helped rebuild the basic infrastructure of childhood, schools and health centres.[3]

For every child

But just as important as those actions was the principle guiding UNICEF's work. Led by its first Executive Director, Maurice Pate (1947–1965), UNICEF committed

itself to serving children wherever they were, regardless of their nationality, their family's political allegiance or the circumstances into which they were born.

Eighty years on, UNICEF is operating in a world unimaginable in the 1940s. The global population is roughly three times larger, societies are now far more urbanized, and global economic output is fifteen times greater. Regardless, Maurice Pate's moral clarity still stands: UNICEF is *for every child*.

That principle will endure over the next two decades as UNICEF heads towards its centenary.

But much else will change over the next two decades, and at a rapid pace. Developments that once unfolded over generations can now reshape societies within years, transforming how children learn, communicate and engage with the world. At the same time, technological innovations, climate change, demographic shifts, and growing concentrations of economic and digital power are interacting in ways that are difficult to anticipate but need to be governed.

The next 20 years

As a result, the next 20 years may well prove as consequential for children as the previous 80.

The implications for those of us alive today are profound. In a time of rapid and interconnected systemic change, the choices we make today will have an outsized impact on the lives of the children born when UNICEF marks its centenary in 2046.

Our choices could lead children towards two very different futures.

If we choose business as usual, we will continue to treat economic expansion, technological advancement and resource extraction as proxies for progress, while attempting to manage their social and environmental consequences after they appear.

But if we choose to imagine a better future for every child, we will redefine progress quite differently: We will work for the well-being of every child, the health of our planet and a fairer distribution of resources, risks and power.

Which choice will we make?



Following Cyclone Fytia, 20-month-old Fandresena receives a vaccine through a UNICEF-supported mobile clinic serving affected communities in Boeny region, Madagascar.

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From then to now

Over the past 80 years, the international community has built institutions, norms and policies that have led to major improvements in child survival, health, education, protection and well-being. Underpinning this work was the development of the modern architecture of children's rights establishing obligations that governments and institutions increasingly recognized as universal. UNICEF and partners played a vital role in translating these principles into programmes, financing, technical support and political action.

A time of progress

The scale of the improvements to children's lives is hard to overstate. Even if data to directly compare the situation of children in 1946 with that of today are not available, statistics from the past several decades show extraordinary gains in child well-being.

Few indicators illustrate this progress more clearly than the dramatic decline in child mortality, a key priority of UNICEF Executive Director James P. Grant (1980–1995). His Child Survival Revolution in 1982 repositioned child survival as

a driver – not a measure – of development. Progress in subsequent decades justified his determination: In 1990, 1 child in every 11 died before the age of 5. By 2024, that figure had fallen to 1 in 27, or 4.9 million children – a decline of about 60 per cent.[4] At the heart of that improvement were sustained investments in child survival to support proven interventions, such as nutrition, access to safe water, basic sanitation and vaccines.

Indeed, vaccines offer another striking example of progress: In 1980, the percentage of children fully immunized against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (DTP3) stood at just 20 per cent. By 2025, it had risen more than fourfold to 85 per cent, saving millions of lives and making vaccine-preventable diseases far less common than they once were.[5]

Children's nutrition has improved markedly, too. The share of children under-five affected by stunting, a key measure of chronic undernutrition, fell from around one in three children in 2000 to less than one in four by 2024.[6] There have also been substantial gains in rates of breastfeeding, which provides children with the best start in life. And, since the 1990s, UNICEF and partners have worked to ensure that almost 9 in 10 people in the world are using iodized salt, which helps prevent avoidable brain damage.[7]

More and more children are now going to school, especially girls. The percentage of girls enrolled in secondary education more than doubled since the early 1970s from around 32 per cent to 77 per cent in 2024 and now matches the percentage for boys.[8] This transformation has spurred other profound social changes: declines in child marriage, investments in keeping girls safe from violence, and engaging boys in building gender-equal futures.

Political decisions

All these achievements occurred alongside an extraordinary expansion in global economic output and public capacity. However, neither of these translate automatically into better childhoods. Governments, international institutions, communities and private actors, together, built systems that converted part of those resources into services for children. **Progress depended on political decision to make children a priority.**

Yet despite this progress, the work is far from finished. No child should die of preventable causes. No child should die of malnutrition. And no child should be deprived of lifesaving vaccines, protection or a quality education.

Progress will be challenging at a time when international cooperation is under pressure. Many of the countries with the fastest growing child populations, and the greatest need to invest in children, also have the least capacity and face the highest borrowing costs. In 2025, UNICEF reported that over 40 low-income countries were spending twice as much on debt servicing as they did on health, while nearly 400 million children lived in countries experiencing debt distress.[9] This has deepened a troubling mismatch between where the world's obligations to children are greatest and where the resources to meet them are concentrated.

Centring the rights of the child

Hand in hand with these social and economic developments was the emergence of the modern architecture of children's rights. Over eight decades, this architecture transformed the place of children in international law, public policy and development, establishing obligations that governments and institutions increasingly recognized as universal. In the words of Jim Grant, the child rights architecture represented "an international instrument that entitled children – by definition minors who do not vote – to claim rights, independently of parents and adults."[10]

The adoption in 1989 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) underscored a fundamental shift in how the world understood childhood. From being treated as objects requiring protection, children were instead recognized as holders of rights that formed an integral part of international human rights law and policy. In Article 45 of the CRC, UNICEF was tasked with assisting its implementation, complementing the work of the Committee of the Rights of the Child nominated to review State Parties.

Near universal ratification of the CRC created a common normative framework around which interpretation, measurement, financing and accountability could develop. The result was not simply a stronger system for protecting children, but a different conception of the child within society and the state.

From past to future

As UNICEF turns 80, this historical perspective shows us what collective action can achieve and the conditions that make progress possible. Those lessons guide efforts to reach the children still being left behind today. And they will be essential in the decades ahead, as conflict, demographic shifts, climate change, and technological developments reshape the world in which children grow up.



Friends in Qara Kamar village, Badakhshan province, Afghanistan, enjoying a light-hearted moment together.
© UNICEF/UN0339320/Dejongh

Our world today

The ambitions that inspired UNICEF's founding remain unfinished. While progress has been substantial, it has not been shared equally. Improvements in global and national averages can mask deep disparities between countries and even among children within the same country. Most often, the children left behind are those living in poverty or remote areas, and those facing gender discrimination, exclusion or disability.

Progress does not move every child forward at the same speed. Across a range of indicators, children living in poverty today often face conditions that wealthier children left behind a generation earlier, including in survival, immunization, nutrition and access to safe water.

Progress for children can also conceal areas of stagnation and retreat. For example, vaccine coverage fell back sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving millions of children unprotected against diseases like measles and diphtheria. Determined efforts by governments and health workers in the years since have clawed back much of that loss, but not all. Today, vaccination coverage remains one point below where it was in 2019, just before the pandemic began.[11]

Malnutrition has also seen setbacks. While there have been welcome declines in undernutrition, other issues have emerged. In 2025, obesity overtook undernutrition to become the most prevalent form of malnutrition, affecting one in 10 – or 188 million – school-aged children and adolescents, leaving them at risk of developing life-threatening diseases.[12]

Preventable and treatable diseases continue to kill millions of children and mothers every year. In 2023, 4.8 million under-five children and an estimated 260,000 mothers died, most of them from the same preventable or treatable causes as 80 years ago. For children, leading causes of death included pneumonia, diarrhoea and malaria alongside complications during the neonatal period. For mothers, causes of death included severe bleeding, infection, hypertensive disorders, complications during childbirth and unsafe abortion.[13]

Poverty – a solvable crisis

Despite progress, poverty remains one of the most persistent obstacles to child well-being, denying millions of children the resources and opportunities they need to thrive.

- According to data for 130 countries, 417 million children in low- and middle-income countries are severely deprived in at least two of six key areas – education, health, housing, nutrition, sanitation and water;[14]
- 118 million children experience three or more simultaneous deprivations; and[15]
- More than 19 per cent of children – or almost one in five – live in extreme monetary poverty, surviving on less than $3 a day.[16]

While child poverty is concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, no region or country – no matter how wealthy – is immune. Progress made over two decades proves that this is a problem with known solutions. For example, the United Republic of Tanzania achieved a 46-percentage-point reduction in its severe child deprivation rate between 2000 and 2023, while Bangladesh cut multidimensional child poverty by 32 percentage points in the same period.[17] These countries' progress demonstrates the reality that social protection programmes, cash transfers to families, investment in public services and decent work for caregivers reduce child poverty when applied with political commitment and scale.

Inequality extends beyond monetary poverty. Children can face disadvantage at multiple levels. At the individual level, children with disabilities typically face discrimination and exclusion from essential services. At the group level, some children belong to communities that are marginalized, underserved or excluded. Within countries, opportunities and outcomes can vary sharply depending on where a child lives. And at the national level, children living in countries with limited economic resources and high debt burdens often have access to fewer public services and opportunities than their peers in wealthier countries.

The challenge to rights

Just as the promise of progress for every child remains unfinished, so too does the promise of children's rights enshrined in the Convention of the Rights of the Child.

In recent years, the child rights architecture has been increasingly contested, with child rights "often misunderstood, disregarded, or disputed."[18] The reasons are varied. Some reflect longstanding disagreement over the meaning of childhood, the proper boundaries of state authority and how far international norms should shape domestic choices. Others represent organized efforts to weaken established protections. And some reflect genuine questions about who has authority to define childhood and interpret universal principles across different societies.

Newer issues, such as technology, climate change and intergenerational responsibility, are extending these disagreements into territory the original architecture never anticipated. The challenge now is not only to defend established rights, but also to determine how child rights institutions should adapt as new tensions reshape the conditions of childhood.

A voice for children

Increasingly, children and young people themselves are emerging as defenders of their rights. Through climate movements, litigation and consultations, children have become actively involved in the interpretation of their rights. This represents an important evolution from an architecture built largely by adults on behalf of children towards one in which children themselves are asserting their rights.

Children's right to participation often falls short in practice. A consultation carried out with over 150 children across 17 countries in 2025 found that children repeatedly raised the same concern: adults do not trust them, do not take them seriously, do not act on what they say.[19] The chance to speak is not shared equally: girls, children with disabilities, and those in rural areas, in institutions or on the move are the least likely to be included and heard. Child rights activists also increasingly face repression as civic space narrows.

In response, participation must move beyond consultation towards meaningful influence and accountability. Rights have practical value only when institutions can be challenged, violations can produce consequences and remedies can be reached.



In 2025, heavy rains and flooding in Ucayali region, Peru, disrupted access to essential health services and education.

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Forces shaping our future

As UNICEF prepares for its next 20 years, it looks ahead to an era of rapid and interconnected change. Developments in conflict, demographics, climate change and digital technology will shape every child's life. Research carried out for the 2024, 2025 and 2027 editions of The State of the World's Children, UNICEF's flagship report, set out the scope of some of these changes.

Children in conflict

The challenge to children's rights is nowhere more consequential than in war and conflict. The international community has defined extensive rules intended to protect children from killing, recruitment, sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, abduction and denial of humanitarian access.

Yet in 2025, the most recent year for which data are available, the United Nations' monitoring system verified 38,558 grave violations against children.[20] These include killing and maiming, recruitment and use, abduction, rape and other forms of sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals and denial of humanitarian access. This was the highest number of grave violations since monitoring began 30 years ago.

Government forces were the main perpetrators of these violations. The institutions responsible for enforcement remain constrained when parties to conflict are powerful states, their partners or actors under their protection.

At the same time, the changing nature of conflict is exposing growing numbers of children to new and intensifying dangers. A global retreat from established rules and norms is eroding respect for international humanitarian law, as attacks on essential infrastructure and humanitarian workers multiply.

New technologies are reshaping warfare, too: armed drone use rose by more than 4,000 per cent in just the first four years of this decade, with increasingly sophisticated artificial intelligence (AI) and other technologies making weapons more lethal.[21] In Sudan, 80 per cent of children killed or maimed in conflict in the first 90 days of 2026 were harmed by armed drones.[22]

The frontlines themselves are also shifting into cities and digital spaces. The share of children in conflict zones living in cities has risen substantially, increasing their exposure to explosive weapons and damage to vital infrastructure. Meanwhile, by expanding into the digital sphere, conflict now reaches children through digital surveillance, tracking, data harvesting, violent imagery, propaganda, threats and misinformation.

Humanitarian action is a huge focus for UNICEF. In 2025, UNICEF responded to 414 emergencies in 101 countries and territories, reaching tens of millions of children with healthcare, nutrition, immunization, education, protection, and safe water and sanitation.[23] UNICEF has committed to sharpening its humanitarian focus, "prioritizing the most vulnerable children, investing in preparedness and anticipatory action, and strengthening the systems that protect children before crises escalate,"[24] according to Executive Director Catherine Russell. There has been a continuing evolution in localization – or the strengthening of capacities in national and local systems to meet children's needs in emergencies. The 2026–2029 Strategic Plan commits to a "focus on localization to enhance resilience, social cohesion and sustainable outcomes."[25]

RECOMMENDED RESPONSES

- **Strengthen accountability for grave violations** against children and use political, diplomatic and financial leverage to secure compliance with international humanitarian and human rights law.
- **Update protections for children to address how conflict is changing**, including explosive weapons in populated areas, drones, AI and the extension of conflict into digital spaces.
- **Establish protection of children and the systems essential to their survival as a non-negotiable red line:** stop attacks on children, schools, hospitals and water systems; protect humanitarian access; and ensure education and other essential services continue through conflict.

Demographic shifts

Demographic change will transform childhood by 2050. The global child population will remain near 2.3 billion, but growth will be concentrated in Eastern and Southern Africa, West and Central Africa and South Asia.[26] Meanwhile, children will form a smaller share of every region as the proportion of people aged 65 years and over rises from 1 in 10 to 1 in 6.[27] Three in five children will live in cities, bringing the urban child population to 1.3 billion.[28] Migration will remain significant: in 2020, 281 million people were international migrants, including 36 million children.[29]

These demographic shifts could unlock a dividend or overwhelm public services and deepen inequality and crises in learning, skills and employment. While 1.2 billion young people will enter the labour market, only 420 million jobs are expected to be created.[30]

The outcomes depend on choices made now.

Governments must invest across childhood: strengthening education, teacher training and pathways to employment; building shock-responsive social protection, including paid parental leave and universal child benefits; and ensuring inclusive reproductive, sexual and maternal health services.

They must create child-friendly cities, sustain equitable rural services and protect intergenerational fairness. Migration can also be a source of opportunity, expanding prospects for children and young people while helping societies meet changing labour and skills needs.

As societies age, children must not fade from political attention. Demographic change can become a source of shared prosperity or deeper division. That's why investing in children should be seen as an investment in the future.

RECOMMENDED RESPONSES

- **Secure a "Child Guarantee"** – a minimum floor of social protection and essential services – backed by law, public budgets and sustained investment, including access to education, healthcare, nutrition, water and sanitation, housing and income support for families.
- **Adopt a "Children First" fiscal rule** requiring child-impact assessments of major budgets and protecting essential spending on children during fiscal adjustment, debt crises and austerity.
- **Secure a pathway to economic participation** for all children through enforceable national targets for education, connectivity and skills.

Climate change

Climate change is already affecting childhood and the danger is growing. In the 2050s, compared to the 2000s:

- Nearly 14 times more children will be exposed to extreme heatwaves;
- More than three times as many children will be exposed to extreme river floods; and
- Nearly twice as many children will be exposed to extreme wildfires.[31]

These hazards threaten children with malnutrition, disease, injury and displacement. They damage schools, health systems and water supplies and disrupt learning and development. The poorest children – most exposed and least able to adapt – will bear the heaviest burden. Without urgent action, climate change could undo decades of progress in child survival, health, education and protection.

The choices made today will define the world children inherit.

Climate risks must be embedded in local planning, resilient schools and health centres, national adaptation plans and climate strategies. Children also need climate education to navigate and help shape a changing world. Governments must accelerate renewable energy and other measures to cut emissions by 43 per cent by 2030, while restoring ecosystems, managing land sustainably, reducing pollution and improving waste management.[32]

Yet success cannot be measured by emissions alone, but by whether children can breathe clean air, learn safely, stay healthy and thrive. Child-centred climate action puts future generations at the heart of every environmental, economic and development decision.

RECOMMENDED RESPONSES

- **Build climate-resilience and preparedness into essential services** by a defined target date, prioritizing schools, health centres, water systems and social protection in the highest-risk regions.
- **Create child-responsive climate safety nets** that automatically trigger financial support, nutrition assistance and education continuity when disasters strike.
- **Establish a global Child Climate Investment Guarantee** that directs a minimum share of climate, adaptation and loss-and-damage finance to child-focused systems and programmes.

Technology and AI

Technology and artificial intelligence are changing childhood at extraordinary speed. Despite mobile broadband now reaching more than 95 per cent of the world's population, 2.2 billion people remained unconnected in 2025, including many children.[33] As technology transforms learning, work and public services, it has the power to expand opportunity or deepen disadvantage.

AI offers new possibilities to improve children's learning, health and protection, but it also brings serious risks to privacy, safety, non-discrimination and inclusion. While children are over three times more likely to be users of AI systems than their parents or caregivers, many AI technologies are not designed with

children in mind. Generative AI adds further risks including algorithmic bias, lack of transparency, unpredictable outputs and highly persuasive AI-generated disinformation. Children without meaningful digital access risk being excluded from the skills and opportunities of the future, while those who are online face misinformation, exploitation, privacy violations and threats to their well-being.

Whether AI and digital technology become forces for greater equality or greater division will depend on choices made today to embed children's rights, perspectives and safety in AI governance, while expanding equitable access and digital skills.

The defining challenge of the AI era is not whether children can keep pace with technology, but whether technology will be governed in ways that widen opportunity, narrow inequality and help every child reach their full potential.

RECOMMENDED RESPONSES

- **Make meaningful digital access a basic right,** ensuring affordable, high-quality connectivity for every child as essential infrastructure for learning and participation.
- **Create a Child AI Compact** that will require AI systems to be designed, tested and monitored against child-rights standards before deployment.
- **Make child safety a design requirement** by placing responsibility on technology companies to make platforms and products safe by design and by default.



A young person participates in the inaugural Children's Film Festival Ghana in 2026, a platform for stories that reflect children's experiences, voices and rights.
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The choices we face

The past 80 years show that international institutions, public policy and collective action can generate extraordinary improvements in children's lives. But will they go on delivering over the next 20 years in an era that may see rising conflict, technological change, environmental stress, demographic divergence and geopolitical fragmentation?

Meeting this moment will require a modern architecture of children's rights — one that preserves the universal principles of the CRC while being agile in the face of rapid change, adaptable to new risks and inclusive of different realities and voices. Above all, this must mean giving children and young people a seat at the table, with real influence over the laws, policies, technologies and investments that will shape their lives and futures.

What must change

For UNICEF, we look back not simply to celebrate what was achieved, but to understand what must change if the next generation of institutions is to remain fit for the next generation of children.

For the international community, the question must be how best to carry over the principles established over the past 80 years into a world in which the conditions of childhood are being rewritten.

UNICEF at 80 posits central questions: What must be preserved, what must change and what new forms of solidarity will be needed if we are to go on delivering on the promise of children's rights for the century ahead?

Our answer must return to the choices that brought UNICEF into the world: A commitment to prioritize the needs of children and to work collectively and globally for every child.

As Jim Grant said in 1994, the vital years of childhood deserve a "first call" on our societies' resources and capabilities: "A child has only one chance to develop, and the protection of that one chance therefore demands the kind of commitment that will not be superseded by other priorities. There will always be something more immediate, there will never be anything more important."[34]

Key facts

Progress for children

Birth registration:

- The world has seen a steady increase in birth registration levels over the last 15 years, reaching 77 per cent in 2023. Progress has also been made to close the registration gap between the poorest and richest children, particularly in Central and Southern Asia, where the poorest children were over 2.5 times less likely to be registered in 2008, compared to about 1.5 times today.

Child mortality and life expectancy:

- The world has made huge improvements in child survival: in 1990, 1 child in every 11 died before the age of 5. By 2024, the figure had fallen to 1 in 27.
- In 1950, global life expectancy was just 50.8 years (68.2 years in Western Europe; 53.5 years in Latin America and Caribbean; 47.4 years in East Asia; 43.5 years in the Middle East and North Africa; 41 years in the rest of Asia; and 37.9 in sub-Saharan Africa).
- By the 2000s, global life expectancy had risen to 68.1 years – the European level of half a century earlier. It stood at 79.7 years in Western Europe, it was 72.6 years in Latin America and Caribbean and 74.7 years in East Asia, 70.1 years in the Middle East and North Africa, 65.9 years in the rest of Asia, and 52.1 in sub-Saharan Africa.

Nutrition:

- The percentage of children under-five with stunting – an indicator of poor nutrition – declined from about one third (33.1 per cent) in 2000 to under one quarter (23.2 per cent) by 2024.
- Exclusive breastfeeding has increased steadily over the past two decades – from 34.9 per cent in 2000 to 47.4 per cent in 2024 – giving millions more infants the healthiest possible start in life.
- Iodized salt is one of UNICEF's victories: severe endemic goitre and congenital iodine-deficiency syndrome – historically called cretinism – were virtually eliminated in much of Western Europe and North America by the 1930s, yet most of the rest of the world had no large-scale salt-iodization campaigns until the 1990s. UNICEF and partners helped to drive iodized-salt coverage up from under 20 per cent of households in low and middle-income countries in the early 1990s to 89 per cent of the entire global population using iodized salt by 2020, preventing avoidable brain damage and transforming child development at global scale.

Water sanitation and hygiene (WASH):

- Unsafe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) remains one of the leading global causes of preventable deaths among children under five, but UNICEF has played a leading role in supporting low- and middle-income countries to improve services.

- Between 2000 and 2024, a quarter of the world's population (2.2 billion people) gained access to safely managed drinking water and one third (2.8 billion people) gained safely managed sanitation – despite a global population increase from 6.2 billion to 8.2 billion in the same period.
- As a result, the burden of diarrhoeal disease has fallen dramatically from 2.6 million deaths in 2000 to 1.5 million in 2019. Among children under five, diarrhoeal deaths dropped from 1.1 million in 2000 to 381,000 in 2019.

HIV:

- At the peak of HIV infections in the mid-1990s, treatment for HIV among children, adolescents, and pregnant and breastfeeding women was non-existent.
- Since then, there has been major progress in scaling up treatment and reducing both HIV infections and AIDS-related deaths.
- Over half (55 per cent) of children living with HIV were receiving antiretroviral therapy treatment in 2024.
- AIDS-related deaths among children fell from 210,000 in 1994 to 75,000 in 2024, while child HIV infections reduced four-fold from 480,000 to 120,000 in the same reference period.

Harmful practices:

- Child marriage has continued to decline globally. Today, one in every five young women aged 20 to 24 years was married as a child compared to nearly one in four 10 years ago.
- The practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) is also declining. In the mid-1990s, almost half of adolescent girls in the countries where FGM is an issue had been subjected to the practice, compared to one third today.

Protection against disease:

- The percentage of children fully immunized against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (DTP3) soared from just 20 per cent in 1980 to 85 per cent in 2025.

Education:

- The percentage of girls enrolled in secondary education has more than doubled since the early 1970s from around 32 per cent to 77 per cent in 2024 and now matches the percentage for boys.

Child labour:

- The percentage of children aged 5 to 17 years in child labour and hazardous work halved from 16 per cent (246 million) in 2020 to 7.8 per cent (138 million) in 2024.

Social Protection:

- Social protection is a proven instrument for reducing child poverty and protecting families from life-cycle and widespread shocks. There has been notable progress in global social protection coverage since 2015. As of 2023, for the first time, more than half of the world's population (52.4 per cent) was effectively covered by at least one social protection benefit (SDG indicator 1.3.1), up from 42.8 per cent in 2015.
- Social protection coverage for children rose modestly, from 22.1 per cent in 2015 to 28.2 per cent in 2023, with the largest gains in Asia and the Pacific (increasing from 14.3 per cent to 22.4 per cent), Africa (9.2 per cent to 15.4 per cent), and the Americas (49.6 per cent to 54.9 per cent).

Persistent challenges

Poverty:

- 850 million children live in multidimensional poverty, lacking access to education, health, housing, nutrition, water and sanitation.

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH):

- Despite progress, 634 million children still lacked safely managed drinking water in 2024, 1 billion lacked safely managed sanitation, and 489 million lacked basic hygiene services.
- Each year, around 381,000 children under-five continue to die from diseases that could have been prevented with safe WASH.

Climate:

- Almost every child is now exposed to at least one climate hazard, such as coastal floods, drought and heatwaves.
- Nearly half the world's children (1.1 billion), face at least three such hazards and 4 million children are now exposed to at least six hazards.
- The climate crisis is not a single event in their lives: for millions of children, it is a complex and dangerous cascade of multiple and overlapping hazards that overwhelms the capacity of unprepared social services and undermines the resilience of families and communities.
- Intense droughts, for example, can devastate crops and worsen food insecurity. Dry vegetation left behind by a drought can fuel wildfires that, in turn, exacerbate air pollution and leave the land vulnerable to flash floods. These floods can destroy infrastructure such as homes, schools and hospitals, displace communities and spread waterborne diseases.
- These effects can create a vicious cycle: destroyed homes can lead to displacement, which can result in a lack of shelter, depriving children of protection from additional impacts and making them even more susceptible to future hazards.
- Disrupted education can have lifelong consequences, making it harder for children to build a stable future and break free from hardship.

Conflict, disasters and displacement:

- In 2025, 45.3 million children were forcibly displaced by conflict and violence – nearly three times the number recorded in 2010.
- Children are affected disproportionately. Although they make up only 29 per cent of the global population, they account for 39 per cent of refugees and 40 per cent of internally displaced people, and face serious risks to their safety, health, education and well-being.

Survival and development:

- Nearly 5 million children under 5 still die each year, mostly from preventable causes, while malnutrition, poor sanitation and weak early childhood development continue to hold children back.
- It is concerning that progress on the reduction of child mortality has been slower in the SDG era than it was in era of the MDGs.

Life-course burden:

- Children and adolescents already face a double burden of risks that affect both their survival and their long-term well-being.
- Survival risks remain urgent and undernutrition persists, while early-life risks continue to shape children's health and well-being into adulthood.
- Meanwhile more children than ever before are overweight and living with chronic conditions, including non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and mental health challenges.
- In 2024, an estimated 59,269 adolescents aged 15–19 died by suicide, and NCDs already account for the majority of adolescent disease burden in every UNICEF region outside Africa and South Asia.
- Yet most countries remain poorly equipped to prevent risks, detect problems early, or provide age-appropriate care.

Nutrition: Child food poverty and wasting

- Child food poverty is the inability to access and consume a nutritious, diverse diet during early childhood. Globally, one in every three children experiences severe child food poverty, surviving on diets consisting of two or fewer food groups and deprived of the nutrient-rich foods essential they need for healthy growth and development, as well as lifelong opportunities.
- Wasting (low weight for height) remains one of the most persistent forms of child malnutrition, underscoring the need for greater investment in prevention, early detection and treatment.

HIV:

- Children are being left behind, disproportionately, by the HIV response.
- 37 per cent do not know their status, compared to 12 per cent of adults.
- Only 55 per cent receive antiretroviral therapy, compared to 78 per cent of adults.
- Globally, adolescent girls accounted for 71 per cent of all new HIV infections among adolescents aged 15-19 years in 2024.
- Early diagnosis and timely treatment could prevent an estimated 75,000 AIDS-related deaths each year.

Education:

- While access to primary education increased substantially from 72 per cent in 1970 to 9 in 10 (90 per cent) in 2018, this has not translated to equivalent gains in learning.
- More than half of all children in low- and middle-income countries (53 per cent) cannot read or understand a simple paragraph by the age of 10.

Ending violence:

- Different forms of violence, harmful practices, lack of birth registration, conflict and displacement continue to threaten children's health, safety, identity and rights.
- Around two in every three children worldwide experience regular violent punishment by caregivers.
- More than one in five adolescent girls aged 15-19 who have ever been married or had a partner have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from their partner in their lifetime.
- These numbers have remained largely unchanged in recent decades.
- Digital technologies are amplifying these risks, while also creating new pathways for violence, abuse and control.

Gender equality:

- Gender disparities become more pronounced during adolescence, as norms and expectations begin to shape girls' time, mobility, schooling, health and transitions to adulthood.
- In the world's least-developed countries, girls aged 10–14 are twice as likely as boys to spend at least 21 hours a week on household chores and care.
- These inequalities continue into later adolescence and young adulthood: globally, adolescent girls and young women aged 15–24 are more than twice as likely as their male peers to be out of education, employment or training.
- Girls' participation in school, work and social life is also affected by their menstrual health and hygiene, with more than 10 million adolescent girls aged 15–19 missing out on these activities during their last menstrual period across 41 countries with data.

Social protection:

- Despite global gains, social protection coverage among children remains low overall: an estimated 1.4 billion children aged 0–15 lack social protection.
- Among 0–18-year-olds, coverage drops to just 23.9 per cent, leaving 1.8 billion uncovered and vulnerable to poverty, malnutrition, inequality, and lasting adverse impacts.
- Regional disparities are stark: social protection coverage stands at just 14.2 per cent in the Arab States, 15.4 per cent in Africa (falling to 12.9 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa), and 22.4 per cent in Asia and the Pacific (dropping to 9.0 per cent in Eastern Asia). This contrasts sharply with coverage of 76.6 per cent in Europe and Central Asia (and an average that exceeds 90 per cent in Europe alone). As a result, Asia and the Pacific and Africa account for the vast majority of uncovered children (764.8 million and 492.8 million, respectively).
- Gender gaps also persist, with women trailing men in both effective coverage (50.1 per cent versus 54.6 per cent) and working-age comprehensive legal coverage (28.2 per cent versus 39.3 per cent).

Looking ahead

Child rights leadership:

- UNICEF will keep children at the centre of the post-2030 agenda, ensuring that future global priorities are shaped around children's rights, needs and voices.

Systems strengthening:

- UNICEF will continue to help governments build stronger health, education, WASH, nutrition, protection, and social protection systems that can reach children at scale and withstand future crises.

Financing for children:

- UNICEF will continue to mobilize public, private, domestic, and innovative financing to protect social spending and expand investment in children, especially in fragile and resource-constrained settings.

Future-ready response:

- UNICEF will continue to generate and use data, evidence, innovation, responsible digital technology and humanitarian-development expertise to respond to climate shocks, conflict, displacement as well as old and emerging risks through 2046 – its 100th anniversary.

Evolution of UNICEF

1946 The General Assembly creates the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund on 11 December to help children in the wake of World War II.

1946 Maurice Pate serves as first Executive Director on the condition that UNICEF serve "all children of ex-enemy countries", establishing the fundamental principle that UNICEF works for every child.

1947 UNICEF's first shipments of milk, cod-liver oil and other supplies are delivered to children. UNICEF receives its first private donation and sees the establishment of its first National Committee. To this day, UNICEF relies on millions of supporters all over the world.

1949 Within its first few years, UNICEF feeds 4 million children in Europe, launches similar feeding programmes in China, and vaccinates more than 1 million children against Tuberculosis.

1950 The General Assembly extends UNICEF's mandate for another three years, marking UNICEF's transition from temporary post-war relief towards long-term assistance for children around the world.

1953 The General Assembly makes UNICEF permanent, extending its life without a time limit. Recognizing UNICEF's role in "the protection of the child," the General Assembly renames the agency as the United Nations Children's Fund, while retaining the well-known acronym 'UNICEF'.

1957 UNICEF launches community-focused nutrition programmes, underlining the importance of nutrition in its work.

1961 UNICEF's focus expands to include children's education.

1965 UNICEF is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its role in "liberating hundreds of millions of children from ignorance, disease, malnutrition and starvation ...".

1970 UNICEF promotes basic services and "Health for All", promoting community-based health, nutrition, water, sanitation and other essential services.

1979 In the International Year of the Child, UNICEF leads major relief and rehabilitation operations across Kampuchea, now Cambodia.

1982 Under the leadership of Executive Director James P. Grant, UNICEF launches its Child Survival Revolution, repositioning child survival as a driver – not a measure – of development.

1989 The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is adopted by the United Nations. It establishes a comprehensive and legally binding framework for children's rights worldwide, with UNICEF serving as the leading UN agency to support its implementation and advocacy.

1990 UNICEF convenes the World Summit for Children, bringing together heads of state to rally around the cause of children and adopt the Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children.

1994 UNICEF and UNESCO develop and distribute School-in-a-Box.

1995 At the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China, world leaders renew their commitment to the rights of women and girls.

1998 UNICEF adopts a rights-based approach to programming, placing human rights principles at the centre of its work.

2004 UNICEF and partners organize a rapid humanitarian response to the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami.

2005 UNICEF launches the "Unite for Children, Unite against AIDS" campaign.

2010 UNICEF leads the international response in Haiti after an earthquake that displaces more than a million people from their homes.

2012 UNICEF hosts the first Forum of the Global Partnership on Children with Disabilities.

2020 UNICEF plays a key role in the UN's global vaccine response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2021 UNICEF releases its policy guidance on artificial intelligence for children.

2025 Amid a funding squeeze and geopolitical instability, the Future Focus Initiative consolidates functions and offices to position UNICEF to achieve the targets of the 2026-2029 Strategic Plan.

For more on UNICEF's history, go to www.unicef.org/who-we-are/history

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Cover photo: In 2025, 12-month-old Arohi Islam received timely malnutrition treatment through a UNICEF-supported community nutrition programme in Bangladesh. © UNICEF/UNI787938/Satu

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.

As UNICEF's compass, the **Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti** seeks to understand where children are today, anticipate what lies ahead, and steer a strategic course to ensure the realization of the rights of every child. Through its leadership in the generation and analysis of official statistics and through research, standards, foresight, strategy, planning, programme oversight and performance, UNICEF Innocenti works across UNICEF to strengthen organizational effectiveness and with governments and other partners to achieve better and safer results with and for children.

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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.

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80 years

choose
a *brighter* future
for children