

**Investing in Child Protection Amidst
Competing Development Priorities**

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MALAWI 2025/26

Child Protection Budget Brief



Key Messages

1

Systematic challenges to child protection pose a serious socio-economic challenge that threatens to derail human capital formation and productivity in Malawi.

The child marriage rate in Malawi is amongst the highest in the world and the third highest in Eastern and Southern Africa, with 38 per cent of girls entering marriage before reaching the legal age of 18.¹ One in five girls and one in seven boys experience sexual abuse before turning 18.² The economic toll of violence against children (VAC) is staggering, resulting in an estimated annual loss of 4 per cent of Malawi's gross domestic product (GDP).

2

The effectiveness of child protection services is threatened by a critically low recruitment rate of the social service workforce (SSW) in the government system.

Currently, out of 835 Child Protection Workers (CPWs), only 456 are on Government Payroll, and about two-thirds are still working voluntarily, with limited training and support. Without funded CPW posts at the council level, the rollout of child protection case management (CPCM) reforms cannot function. In addition, the absence of a regulatory council to oversee the professional standards and accreditation of the SSW undermines service quality and accountability.

3

Despite increasing by an average of 83 per cent since 2021/22, child protection services in Malawi are grossly underfunded, especially at the district level.

While the 2025/26 direct child protection budget has nearly doubled in nominal terms, from MK909 million in 2024/25 to MK1.7 billion in 2025/26, the direct child protection budget accounts for less than 0.02 per cent of the Total Government Budget (TGB) and 0.01 per cent of GDP. In per capita terms, the allocation translates to MK160 (US\$0.09) per vulnerable child per year.

4

The allocation to the National Children's Commission (NCC) has more than doubled, from MK200 million in 2024/25 to MK500 million in 2025/26. In real terms, the budget has increased by 83 per cent, accounting for an average inflation of 27 per cent, demonstrating the Government's commitment to ensuring the Commission, established in 2024, effectively executes its oversight mandate.

5

Justice for children and care reforms remain grossly underfunded.

Despite the growing number of children without parental care, government allocations for institutional care and reintegration programmes remain opaque and minimal. There is no dedicated budget line for reintegration, and institutional care is often funded through fragmented district-level allocations. Furthermore, allocations to the Malawi Human Rights Commission (MHRC), which is mandated to monitor childcare institutions, follow up on cases, and convene Child Case Review Board meetings, are not distinguishable in the Programme-Based Budgets.



6

The Child Labour Elimination Programme within the Ministry of Labour faced significant execution challenges, as the budget was revised downwards by 25 per cent, as part of the funds were reallocated to other programmes within the Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs). This was compounded by no allocations to the programme in 2025/26, despite its critical role in preventing and managing child labour – currently affecting 38 per cent of children in Malawi. The programme's limited visibility and influence stems from its placement within the Labour Services Department, which restricts its autonomy and access to resources.

7

Decentralisation of child protection budgets is a key priority and part of the Government's pledge under the Bogota Commitment (2024). However, as of 2025/26, 96 per cent of child protection funding remains centralized. Districts are expected to deliver case management with just MK2.5 million per year, and this is fiscally and politically untenable.

8

To enhance the autonomous functionality of the Child Affairs department in District Councils, the Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare (MoGCDSW) has rolled out the Gender Devolution Plan in 2025. The plan and its Management Guidelines are intended to guide fiscal decentralisation for the sector that is primarily centralised (96 per cent).

Recommendations

1

The Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Decentralisation (MoFEPD) should safeguard child protection funding from in-year and mid-year budget reductions, to avoid disrupting programme implementation and compromising child safety and wellbeing.

2

The MoGCDSW is encouraged to leverage the Gender Devolution Plan and its Management Guidelines to progressively advance fiscal decentralisation in line with its pledge under the Bogota Commitment (2024). This will improve resource allocation to child protection programming at the local level by:

- Increasing domestic resource flows to district councils for the implementation of core child protection services, including case management, rehabilitation, and child justice courts.
- Enabling district councils to prioritise and gradually integrate CPWs as a core cadre within District Human Resource Management (DHRM) structures. This will help strengthen the SSW. Considering existing fiscal space limitations, a gradual phased approach to the payroll could be explored.

3

The Government is strongly encouraged to reinforce child protection as a shared multisectoral responsibility among Ministries, Departments, and Agencies. Beyond the MoGCDSW, Line Ministries, Department and Agencies (MDAs) with statutory child protection mandates (Justice/ Judiciary, Labour, Education, Health, and Malawi Human Rights Commission) should include explicit, costed child protection sub-programmes in their medium-term expenditure frameworks (MTEFs) and report on execution to NCC. This whole-of-Government approach would foster coordinated planning, budgeting, and implementation of child protection interventions and gradually increase domestic investments in child protection across sectors.

4

The Government is encouraged to elevate Child Labour Elimination services as a standalone Department under the Ministry of Labour, to help improve the programme's visibility, increase autonomy, and access to resources that enable better services to address child labour in the country.

Reinforce child protection as a shared multisectoral responsibility among Ministries, Departments, and Agencies.

Introduction

This budget brief analyses child protection spending trends in Malawi's 2025/26 budget and offers recommendations for improving the financing of child protection services. The analysis builds on previous child protection budget briefs and is informed by Government Budget Documents from 2021/22 to 2025/26, including the programme-based budget (PBB), financial statements, detailed budget estimates, and ceilings for Local Councils from the National Local Government Finance Committee (NLGFC).

In line with previous briefs, the analysis categorizes child protection budgets into direct and indirect (Table 1). Direct budgets refer to interventions that are deliberately aimed at prevention and response to abuse, neglect, and other forms of violence against children, whereas indirect budgets refer to interventions that contribute to the attainment of child protection objectives but are not primarily designed for this purpose. Due to data limitations, the brief largely focuses on direct child protection budget lines.



TABLE 1

Child Protection Budget Lines Considered in the Analysis

MDA	Vote	Direct CP Budget Lines	Indirect CP Budget Lines
● Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare (MoGCDSW)	320	Child Rights and Protection Services	Early Childhood Development (ECD)
		Probation and Rehabilitation Services	Disability mainstreaming
		Parenting Services	Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP)
		Family and Child Welfare Services	Resilience, livelihoods, and nutrition
● Office of the Chief Justice	070	Child Justice Courts	N/A
● Ministry of Labour	370	Child Labour Elimination	N/A
● Ministry of Education (MoE)	250	N/A	Complementary Basic Education
● Local Councils	900	N/A	Early Childhood Development (ECD)
● Malawi Human Rights Commission	430	N/A	Human Rights Promotion
		N/A	Human Rights Protection
● Malawi Police Service	341	N/A	Preventive Policing
		N/A	Detective, Investigative, and Prosecution Services
● National Registration Bureau (NRB)	344	N/A	Civil Registration and Vital Statistics

Source: Government Budget and Financial Documents, 2025/26



Context and Overview of Child Protection in Malawi

Malawi has made notable progress in strengthening its child protection architecture. The Government, through the Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare (MoGCDSW), formally operationalised the National Children's Commission (NCC) in September 2024. The institutionalisation of the NCC is a critical step towards effectively fulfilling its oversight mandate to monitor, coordinate, and advocate for child rights at all levels, ensuring that child protection services are guided by evidence, equity, and inclusivity. Complementing the NCC is the establishment of the National Coordination Committee on Child Rights and Welfare, tasked with providing strategic direction and ensuring coordination among all stakeholders. Efficiency also requires that the NCC mandate is reflected in sectoral plans and medium-term expenditure frameworks (MTEFs). MoGCDSW

has also progressively strengthened the District Child Protection Committees (DCPCs) to enhance intersectoral collaboration in providing community-based responses, identifying vulnerable children, developing local protection plans, and raising awareness.

The Government of Malawi launched the National Strategy to End Child Marriage (2024–2030) in October 2024, reaffirming its commitment to safeguarding the future of girls and young women. The strategy sets out an ambitious target to reduce child marriage rates from the current 38 per cent to 20 per cent by 2030, focusing on three strategic pillars – keeping girls in school, transforming harmful social norms, and strengthening legal protections.

Reaffirming the commitment to safeguarding
the future of girls and young women.

Malawi continues to strengthen its national case management system (CMS), guided by the National Child Protection Case Management Framework. This provides a standardized process for early identification, assessment, referral, management and monitoring of children at risk of violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. MoGCDSW has made significant strides in integrating the CMS within other sectors, including health, education, social protection, and justice, enabling a more coordinated and holistic response to child protection.

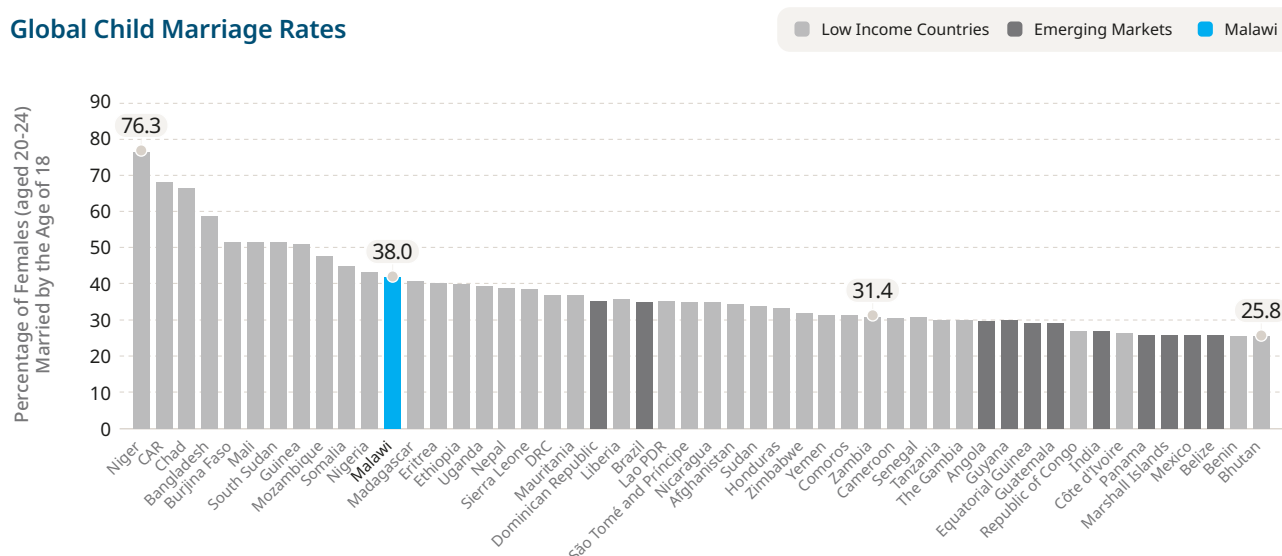
Despite these gains, child protection violations—including violence against children (VAC) and child labour—remain widespread and deeply entrenched challenges in Malawi. One in five girls and one in seven boys experience sexual abuse before age 18.³ Additionally, child labour remains high, at 38 per cent. Of concern, reporting mechanisms for cases of VAC, particularly sexual violence, remain underutilized due to stigma, fear, and limited access to support services. These violations pose a serious socio-economic challenge that threatens to derail human capital formation, productivity, and ultimately Malawi's developmental aspirations outlined in the country's vision, Malawi 2063. For instance, the economic toll of VAC to Malawi is currently estimated at an annual loss of 4 per cent of GDP.⁴

Child marriage rate in Malawi is amongst the highest in the world and the third highest in Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) (Figure 1). Despite laws prohibiting child marriage, many children continue to be married before the age of 18. Statistics show that approximately 4 out of 10 children enter marriage before reaching the legal age.⁵

Limited capacity of the Social Service Workforce (SSW) has created human resources gaps, particularly at the district level. Currently, out of 835 Child Protection Workers (CPWs) countrywide, only 456 are on Government Payroll, and about two-thirds are still working voluntarily, with limited training and support. On average, one paid CPW serves approximately 32,151 children, compared to Health Surveillance Assistants (HSAs) who are at a similar grade, yet serve approximately 1000 people (1 HSA to 250 households). This workload also compromises the quality of care given to the children at risk and survivors of violence. Additionally, the absence of a regulatory council to oversee the professional standards and accreditation of the SSW further undermines service quality and accountability. This gap leaves front-line workers operating without standardized guidance, compromising the effectiveness of child protection interventions.

FIGURE 1

Global Child Marriage Rates



Source: UNICEF and The Child Marriage Data Portal⁶

Size of Child Protection Spending

The budget for direct child protection programmes has nearly doubled in nominal terms, from MK909 million in 2024/25 to MK1.7 billion in 2025/26 (Figure 2). After adjusting for average inflation, this represents roughly a 50 per cent real⁷ increase, not a true doubling. The increase is mostly driven by two MoGCDSW programmes and the operationalisation of the National Children's Commission, rather than expansion of district frontline services. For context, the budget for Child Rights and Protection Services increased from MK369 million in 2024/25 to MK898 million in 2025/26 while that for Probation and Rehabilitation Services increased from MK174 million to MK350 million.

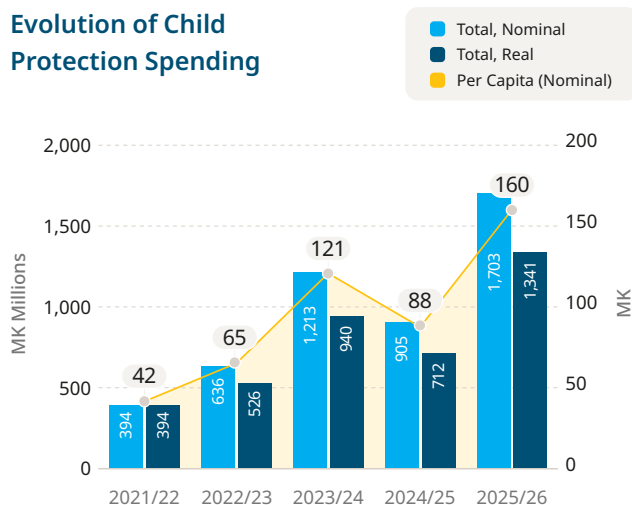
As a result, the per capita child protection budget has reached a record MWK160 (US\$0.09) in 2025/26, increasing by 1.8 times from MK88 (US\$0.05) in 2024/25. Despite the increase, child protection services remain grossly underfunded and lagging far behind spending on basic social services like health, education, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).



Child protection spending is tiny and volatile as a share of the total government budget (TGB), at 0.02 per cent in 2025/26 and almost negligible as a share of GDP, at 0.01 per cent (Figure 3). Limited fiscal space remains a key constraint to sustaining investments in child protection, underscoring the need to maximize efficiency of available resources while exploring mechanisms to innovatively diversify domestic and external sources of funding in the medium-term expenditure framework (MTEF).

FIGURE 2

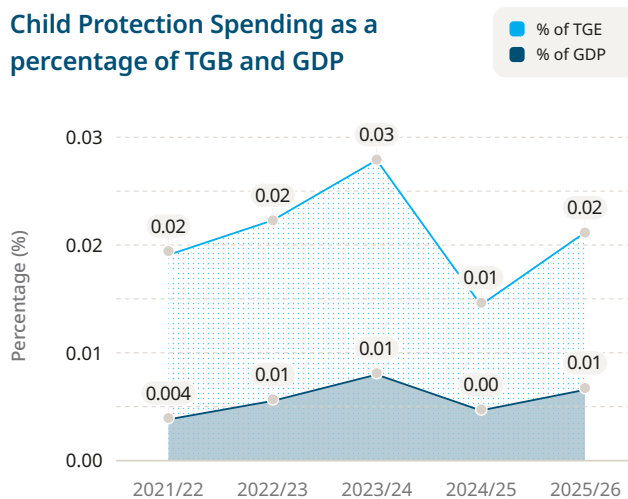
Evolution of Child Protection Spending



Source: Government Budget and Financial Documents, 2021/22-2025/26

FIGURE 3

Child Protection Spending as a percentage of TGB and GDP



Source: Government Budget and Financial Documents, 2021/22-2025/26

Investments towards ending child marriage could potentially accrue US\$500 million in annual demographic gains.

Low investments in child protection are undermining Malawi's potential to unlock transformative economic and social gains that are crucial in accelerating Malawi's Development. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) highlights a strong macro-economic rationale of ending child marriage in a 2020 study that showed that ending child marriage alone could potentially result in nations accruing 1.05 per cent in annual per capita real GDP growth⁸, while the World Bank (2018) indicates that investments towards ending child marriage could potentially accrue US\$500 million in annual demographic gains. Thus, accruing these benefits requires sustained political will, strategic financing, and cross-sectoral coordination to ensure child protection is one of the core pillars of national development.

Allocations to indirect child protection spending have surged from MK81 billion in 2024/25 to MK205 billion in 2025/26—a 153 per cent increase largely driven by a significant 1,154 per cent rise in funding for preventive policing under the Malawi Police Service (Table 2). While this increase signals growing investment in safety-related interventions, the absence of apportionment makes it difficult to specifically determine the level of investment in child protection, as most indirect child protection programmes from the Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) are not distinguishable in the Programme-Based Budgets. The Government is therefore encouraged to leverage the institutionalisation of the NCC to enhance financial resource tracking across all MDAs, including the Malawi Human Rights Commission, to strengthen the visibility of child protection programmes across all levels.

TABLE 2

Trends in Indirect Child Protection Spending, Million MK

MDA	Programme/Sub-Programme	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
● MoGCDSW	ECD	12,328	1,277	16,146	20,879	24,972
	Disability mainstreaming	548	519	55	580	1,639
	SCTP	24,284	22,137	12,453	29,889	34,993
	Resilience, livelihoods and nutrition	39	35	102	153	80
● MoE	Complementary Basic Education	28	82	542	463	300
● Local Councils	ECD	-	-	-	-	350
● Malawi Human Rights Commission	Human Rights Promotion	242	285	218	505	632
	Human Rights Protection	210	413	125	941	874
● Malawi Police Service	Preventive Policing	23,150	23,616	67,037	10,445	130,997
	Detective, Investigative and Prosecution Services	10,876	2,704	1,803	2,365	4,961
● NRB	Civil Registration and Vital Statistics	2,430	7,179	5,534	14,857	4,691
Total		74,136	58,247	104,015	81,076	204,487

Source: Government Budget and Financial Documents, 2021/22-2025/26

Composition of Child Protection Spending

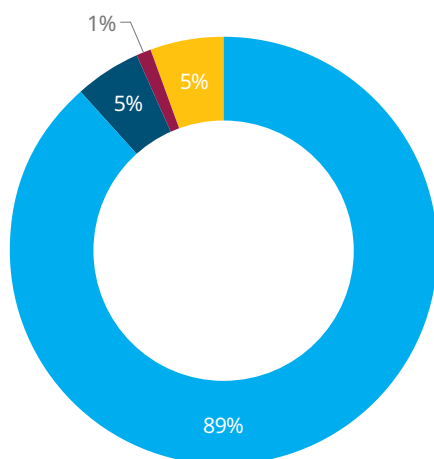
Between 2023/24 and 2025/26, the bulk of child protection budgets was channelled through the MoGCDSW, representing a share of 89 per cent (Figure 4). The remaining 11 per cent was distributed across three entities: the Office of the Chief Justice (5 per cent), primarily for child justice courts; District Councils (5 per cent) for delivering frontline child protection services at the local level; and the Ministry of Labour (1 per cent) to

support delivering child labour elimination services. The concentration of funding within MoGCDSW highlights a critical gap in multisectoral engagement— although child protection remains an inherently cross-cutting issue – and severe underfunding of frontline district-level services - undermining the effectiveness of national child protection systems.

FIGURE 4

Composition of Child Protection Budgets by MDA, Average 2023/24 to 2025/26

MoGCDSW Office of the Chief Justice MoL District Councils



Source: Government Budget and Financial Documents, 2023-25



89% of child protection budgets are channelled through the MoGCDSW, highlighting a critical gap in multisectoral engagement.

There was no budgetary provision for Child Labour Elimination Services in 2025/26.

The child protection budget at MoGCDSW has been distributed in such a way that Probation and Rehabilitation Services received the largest average share of the child protection budget, averaging 29 per cent (MK367 million) between 2023/24 and 2025/26 (Table 3). The NCC was the second-largest funded (21 per cent), followed by Child Rights and Protection Services (19 per cent), Family and Child Welfare Services (14 per cent), and parenting services at 6 per cent. At the lower end of the funding spectrum, child justice courts and district councils each received just 5 per cent of the total budget.

Child labour elimination remained the most underfunded child protection programme, receiving a meagre 1 per cent of total child protection funding between 2023/24 and 2025/26. In 2025/26,

Government did not provide any resources to the sub-programme, despite its critical role in preventing and managing child labour—currently affecting 38 per cent of children in Malawi. In a context of rising poverty, inflation, and economic shocks, the absence of investment undermines efforts to meet SDG target 8.7 by 2025. The programme's limited visibility and influence stems from its placement within the Labour Services Department, which restricts its autonomy and access to resources. To strengthen institutional capacity and unlock sustainable financing, the Government is urged to upgrade the Child Labour Unit into a standalone department, enabling it to lead strategic interventions and coordinate multisectoral action more effectively.

TABLE 3

Composition of Child Protection Spending by Programme, in Millions MK

MDA	Vote	Direct CP Budget Lines as per PBB	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26	3-Year Average	% Average
MoGCDSW	320	Family and Child Welfare Services	217	113	208	179	14%
		Child Rights and Protection Services - Exclude NCC	148	177	398	241	19%
		National Children's Commission (NCC)	93	200	500	264	21%
		Probation & Rehabilitation Services	576	174	350	367	29%
		Parenting Services	50	60	100	70	6%
Office of the Chief Justice	070	Child Justice Court	61	54	74	63	5%
Ministry of Labour	370	Child Labour Elimination	3	34	0	12	1%
Local Councils	900	District Councils	65	69	74	69	5%
Total			1213	880	1703	1,265	100%

Source: Government Budget and Financial Documents, 2023/24-2025/26

Within the 2025/26 child protection allocation to MOGCDSW, the largest budget increase has been to the National Children's Commission (NCC), more than doubling, from MK200 million in 2024/25 to MK500 million in 2025/26. However, most of this budget is intended for administration and operations for the operationalisation of the Commission.

The effective functionality of key child protection programmes and services like Child Justice Courts and case management services, particularly at

the local level, remains predominantly supported by development partners like UNICEF. The current investments towards the child justice courts programme are largely centralised, averaging MK63 million between 2023/24 and 2025/26, leaving district councils with constrained funding. This limited domestic financing undermines the availability and effectiveness of legal safeguards essential for the probation, rehabilitation, and protection of children—particularly in underserved communities where most children live.

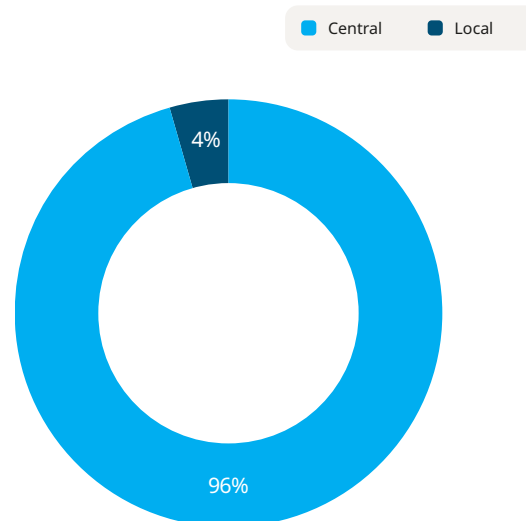
Decentralization and Equity of Spending in Child Protection

Between 2023/24 and 2025/26, the bulk—95 per cent—of direct child protection spending has been centralised, with just 5 per cent allocated to district councils (Figure 5). At an average allocation of MK69 million, the allocation to district councils represents approximately MK2.5 million per district council per year. This allocation has been outpaced by growing local demand, especially given the scale and complexity of child protection issues at the community level—including case management, child abuse response, and reintegration services.

Limited decentralisation is contributing to huge service delivery gaps in case management, survivor support, diversion and reintegration, and enforcement of child marriage bans, which are all local functions. In addition, while capacity exists, a major challenge is that, despite being low, funds do not reach where they need to go. Exacerbating the situation is the absence of an objective formula to determine allocations across and within districts. Fostering accountability bodies such as the Malawi Human Rights Commission (MHRC) and the National Children's Commission (NCC) within decentralised structures would strengthen oversight, ensure funds are transparently allocated, and enforce compliance with child protection standards.

FIGURE 5

Composition of child protection spending by administration level, 3-year average (2023/24 – 2025/26)



Source: Government Budget and Financial Documents, 2021/22–2025/26

The rolling out of the Gender Devolution Plan and its Management Guidelines to all 28 district councils is a progressive step to enhance fiscal decentralisation and autonomous functionality of child protection frontline services, under the recently established Social Welfare Directorate. The Ministry is leveraging this progress to ignite lobbying towards separating cost centres for gender and social welfare to enhance fiscal autonomy and ensure gradual increases in funding within the sectors. As the Ministry rolls out the devolution plan, it is encouraged to ensure social service workforce is strengthened in line with the devolved functions and needs at district level.

The Ministry has successfully devolved MK350 million in 2025/26 for the rehabilitation of ECD centres in 5 district councils⁹. While this investment signals a positive commitment to local service delivery, the absence of standardized implementation guidelines poses a risk to budget efficiency and accountability. MoGCDSW is encouraged to collaborate with the National Local Government Financing Committee (NLGFC) to ensure the disbursement of the funds is guided by the Inter-Governmental Fiscal Transfer to ensure equity of spending while ensuring indicators are effectively updated in the Programme-Based Budgets (PBB).

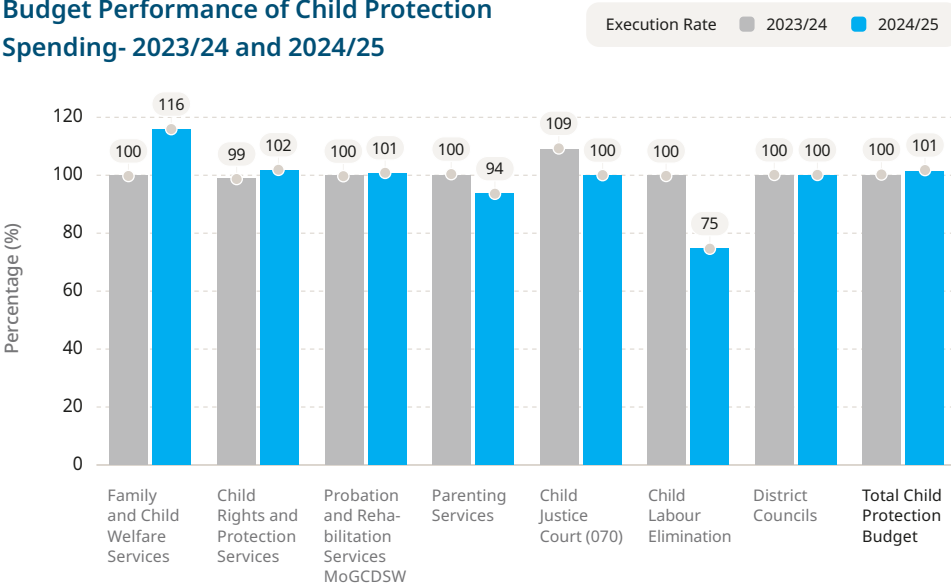
Budget Credibility and Execution

Between 2023/24 and 2024/25 fiscal years, the overall child protection budget registered a minimal nominal adjustment of 1 per cent, which falls within the ± 5 per cent threshold recommended by the Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability (PEFA) frame-

work for assessing budget credibility (Figure 6). This stability suggests that the child protection sector has maintained a relatively predictable funding trajectory, which is essential for planning and continuity of services.

FIGURE 6

Budget Performance of Child Protection Spending- 2023/24 and 2024/25



Source: Government Budget and Financial Documents, 2021/22-2025/26



While the aggregate budget remained stable, credibility is being achieved partly by basically raiding politically weak sub-programmes at mid-year. For instance, allocations to child labour elimination were revised downwards by 25 per cent while the budget for parenting services programme was adjusted downwards by 6 per cent, as part of the funds were reallocated to other programmes within the MDAs. On the other hand, the budget for the family and child welfare services programme was adjusted upwards by 16 per

cent to strengthen case management services and community-based care initiatives. These internal shifts underscore the importance of flexible budgeting mechanisms to allow responsive reallocation based on performance data and emerging needs, while still maintaining overall budget credibility. However, going forward, Treasury should consider ringfencing a small subset of high-risk child protection lines, such as the NCC, child affairs, just to mention a few; to protect them from the risk of mid-year reallocations.

Child Protection Financing

Child protection programmes budgeted through the National Budget (on-budget) are primarily financed through domestic resources. This reflects government commitments to safeguarding the welfare of children, particularly those vulnerable to abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence. The Government has shown its commitment to upholding children's rights by aligning with key international and regional frameworks, notably the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. At the national level, this commitment is reflected in the Child Care, Protection and Justice Act (2010) and the National Children's Policy. To operationalise these frameworks, the Government has further developed key implementation tools, including the Ministry's Strategic Plan (2025–2030), the National Plan of Action for Vulnerable Children (2022–2026), and the National Strategy on Child Protection (2022–2026).

However, core statutory functions remain heavily donor funded. These flows are largely off-budget and at risk of volatility, which exposes the justice chain, child protection case management system, and social service workforce to funding shocks. For instance, amongst the off-budget donor funding, UNICEF, provides technical assistance and pilot funding for child-friendly justice systems and social service workforce development, as well as through the EU-Ireland-funded Social Protection for Gender Empowerment and Resilience (SP-GEAR) programme. UNICEF and Save the Children also support



child protection systems strengthening, including training for frontline workers and the development of case management tools. Feed the Children integrates child protection into its nutrition and education programmes, helping to identify and support children at risk. Other organizations, such as World Vision Malawi and Plan International Malawi, are active in promoting community-based child protection mechanisms, raising awareness on child rights, and preventing harmful practices such as child marriage and child labour.

In 2024, Malawi signed to the Bogota Commitment and reaffirmed its pledge to ensure sustainable domestic financing, innovative partnerships, and stronger accountability systems, inter alia. The Government recognises that chronic underfunding, fragmented budgets, and reliance on donor funding risk leaving millions of children behind, undermining human capital and long-term development. Amongst the key Bogotá pledges the Government committed to:

- **Institutionalise child protection budgets** across ministries and sectors, with costed strategies, tracking tools, and accountability systems.
- **Strengthen time-bound commitments and decentralise resources** to empower local councils and improve service delivery.
- **Advance systemic reforms** by updating national policies, expanding the social workforce, training frontline actors, and ensuring meaningful child participation
- **Secure sustainable domestic financing and leverage innovation and partnerships** with philanthropy and private capital to close funding gaps and align resources with government systems.

In 2024, Malawi signed the Bogota Commitment, pledging to secure sustainable domestic financing and close funding gaps.

Citations

[1, 2, 3, 5] Multiple Cluster Indicator Survey (2019/20).

[4] Cost of Inaction Study, UNICEF 2022.

[6] <https://childmarriagedata.org/country-profiles/> and <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>

[7] Nominal values refer to current values that have not been adjusted for inflation, while real values refer to values which have been adjusted for inflation and provide a more accurate representation of purchasing power over time.

[8] International Monetary Fund, 2020: <https://share.google/yVRhdzeUhmZEUAlKn>

[9] Lilongwe, Blantyre, Nkhosokota, Zomba and Mzimba.



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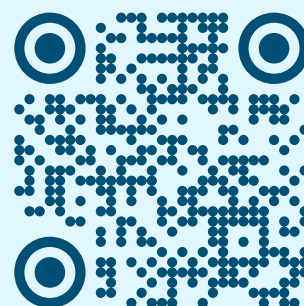


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