



POLICY BRIEF:

Breaking the Intergenerational cycle of poverty

Children are key to breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and disadvantage. Australia's immediate region – the Indo-Pacific – is home to one of the world's youngest populations. If Australia genuinely wants to step-up in the Pacific, we must make children's rights and wellbeing a policy priority.

KEY POINTS

- Australian aid is committed to reducing poverty and inequality, and children should be at the heart of this endeavour.¹ Children make up half of the world's poor² and half of the world's refugees.³ The world's population is becoming increasingly younger, and this youth is disproportionately located in countries experiencing the highest rates of poverty. Half of the population of the Pacific Island countries is younger than 23 years old.⁴ Despite this, less than one quarter of Australia's aid budget directly supports children, defined as people aged 18 years and younger.⁵
- Children experience poverty and inequality differently from adults, due to their different needs, opportunities, and experiences, unique to their stage in life as young dependents. Focusing aid interventions on children achieves holistic, inter-generational impact, and involves working across families, communities, schools, and a range of sectors to improve wellbeing in childhood, laying the foundation for positive outcomes for future life stages and generations.
- COVID-19 is a risk multiplier for children, disrupting their education and amplifying risks of violence, child labour, child marriage and other forms of harm. Education has been particularly affected by COVID-19, with schools still closed for nearly 77 million students, two years into pandemic.⁶ It is clear the harm of COVID-19-induced school disruptions will extend long beyond the life of the pandemic. To mitigate this harm and ensure children's long-term wellbeing, it is imperative to ensure development and humanitarian programs are child-sensitive, especially for the most vulnerable children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop a new, long-term development policy centred on rights-based and transformative approaches to social inclusion, applying a twin track approach that includes dedicated initiatives for gender equality, people with a disability, children and other marginalised groups, while also considering these groups across all programming.
2. Develop a children's strategy for Australia's development cooperation program in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and establish a child rights unit within its organisational structure, to ensure development and humanitarian programs are child-sensitive and attuned to the impact they have on vulnerable children.
3. Introduce a target that at least 80 per cent of aid investments, regardless of their primary objectives, effectively support and protect children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

4. Ensure at least 50 per cent of aid investments in education are targeted at children to address the significant disruptive impact of COVID-19 on access to foundational education.
5. Invest an additional \$58.09 million over three years to end violence against children in the Indo-Pacific region and commit to empowering children and young people to safely participate in decision-making at all levels.
6. Support measures aimed at achieving Universal Child Benefits in the Indo-Pacific, including by improving coverage of social protection systems for children, and providing funding for child benefit payments and child disability payments.

CONTEXT

This brief defines children as people aged 18 years and under, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This definition of the child spans infancy and toddlerhood, early and middle childhood, and adolescence. Each of these life stages requires different types of support – yet each stage plays a role in establishing a child’s future health, growth and neurodevelopment. This long-term impact makes explicitly considering the needs of children when designing aid programs so important.

CHILDREN AND AUSTRALIA’S DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION PROGRAM

Less than one quarter of Australia’s development assistance is focused on children, even though children account for 50 per cent of those living in poverty. The region at the centre of Australia’s aid program – the Indo-Pacific – has one of the youngest populations in the world, yet Australia does not have a strategy for protecting and empowering children through our development cooperation program. The Australian aid policy refers to protecting vulnerable groups, such as women and girls, but does not recognise children as a distinct vulnerable group in their own right.

Life-course health sciences show that early life experiences have significant impacts on lifelong health, underscoring the importance of investing in children and adolescents.⁷ Australia’s aid program would benefit from intentionally considering children in the design and delivery of development and humanitarian projects, including education system strengthening, health interventions, protection programs, and community-based social protection.

Investing in children early on is a smart investment for Australia’s aid budget – it costs less in the long term and helps to set up children for success well into adulthood.

Australia can follow the lead from Aotearoa New Zealand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s child and youth wellbeing strategy, which has been successfully used across the Pacific.⁸

This brief builds on the Resolution on Children and Australian Aid, which was endorsed by Australian NGOs at the 2020 ACFID Annual General Meeting.⁹ Through the Resolution, ACFID members affirmed that

“children must be intentionally considered in the design, implementation and review of international development and humanitarian programs in order to serve the best interests of children, do no harm, maximise their impact and, ultimately, to eliminate intergenerational poverty.”

SITUATION

CHILDREN AND GLOBAL POVERTY: A SMART INVESTMENT

Children are disproportionately affected by poverty. Despite making up one-third of the world's population, they represent half of the world's 1.3 billion people living in poverty. This gap widens with the most extreme disadvantage: nearly one in five children live in extreme poverty, compared to just under one in 10 adults.¹⁰ Approximately 387 million or 19.5 per cent of the world's children live in extreme poverty, compared to 9.2 per cent of adults.¹¹ More than half of the world's refugees are children.¹² In 2020, 59 million children required humanitarian assistance—the largest number of children in need since record-keeping began.¹³

Children experience poverty differently from adults, because of their different needs, driven by their unique growth phases and life stages. The patterns of growth, development, and behaviour that impact on health and productivity in later life are seeded in childhood.¹⁴ Children experiencing marginalisation – including children with disabilities and girls – are particularly vulnerable to poor outcomes in childhood. This early disadvantage compounds existing marginalisation and widens the inequity experienced by marginalised groups into adulthood.

Children are particularly vulnerable to the worsening impacts of climate change, and will bear the brunt of the climate crisis. The greatest killers of children — malnutrition, diarrheal disease, and malaria — are being exacerbated by the changing climate and undoing the development gains that have been made. The consequences of climate change threaten children's rights to health, life, food, water and sanitation, education, housing, culture, and development, among others.

Adolescents have unique and additional health needs to other children. These needs include mental health support, and support for sexual and reproductive health, including menstrual health. Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death for girls aged between 15 and 19 years globally, and babies of adolescent mothers face higher risks of low birth weight, preterm delivery, and severe neonatal conditions.¹⁵ Adolescent pregnancy and childbearing often leads girls to drop out of school, impacting their own future education and employment opportunities.

The World Bank cites early investments in children as one of the smartest investments a country can make to minimise intergenerational poverty. For example, every USD 1 invested in reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health generates USD 20 in benefits.¹⁶ Simply increasing preschool enrolment to 50 per cent for children in low- and middle-income countries could result in gains of USD 15 to USD 34 billion in lifetime earnings.¹⁷

CHILDREN IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

The Indo-Pacific region has one of the youngest populations in the world, with half of the population aged under 23 years. Indicators of child wellbeing in the Pacific and Timor-Leste are close to the lowest in the world. The highest rates of child stunting outside sub-Saharan Africa are found in Timor-Leste (50.2 per cent) and Papua New Guinea (49.5 per cent). The region also has alarming rates of violations of children's rights, particularly violence against children.

Before COVID-19, seven in 10 children in the Pacific experienced violent discipline at home, and one in 10 adolescent girls in the region experienced sexual violence.¹⁸ Pre-pandemic, UNICEF estimated violence against children cost the region around USD 160 billion per year, or two per cent of the region's entire GDP.¹⁹ COVID-19 has exacerbated this situation limiting access to support services at a time when the rates of violence and abuse were increasing.²⁰ Healthy, and happy children are more likely to become educated, healthy, and happy adults ready to participate actively in their communities. Upholding children's right to live free from violence, will not only protect children now, but set them up for fulfilling lives in adulthood.

CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Children and adolescents with disabilities are often more marginalised. The Lancet medical journal reports that 290 million children and adolescents worldwide have epilepsy, intellectual disability, vision impairment, or hearing loss. Many more children have other physical and mental disabilities. Compared with children without disabilities, children with disabilities are:

- 34 per cent more likely to be stunted
- 25 per cent more likely to experience wasting
- 25 per cent less likely to receive early childhood education
- 42 per cent less likely to have foundational reading and numeracy skills
- 49 per cent more likely to have never attended school

“All children have a right to be protected from violence which has long-lasting social, health and economic consequences, including higher school drop-out rates, worse job prospects, and a higher risk of mental illness and chronic diseases in later life. We must urgently invest in services and support that address the factors that place children with disabilities at heightened risk of violence and abuse, including caregiver stress, social isolation and poverty.”²¹

Professor Jane Barlow, University of Oxford, UK

CHILDREN AND COVID-19

COVID-19 is often considered a pandemic of adults. Indeed, medically speaking, the direct health impacts of COVID-19 have been most severe among the elderly. When it comes to the broader social impacts of the pandemic, however, children are among the most affected. World Vision estimates that pandemic-related malnutrition could result in 13.6 million more children suffering from wasting, 2.6 million more children suffering from stunting, and 283,000 more deaths for children under the age of five, on top of pre-COVID-19 levels.²² By restricting children to the home, lockdown measures have left children more at risk of violence, abuse, neglect, forced labour and forced early marriage, while reducing access to information and already underfunded health, legal, and protection services. COVID-19 has also affected the mental health of children.

The gendered effects of COVID-19 are evident in the rising rates of child marriages, teenage pregnancies, and school dropouts. As a result of the pandemic's economic fallout, child marriage and the rate of girls being sexually exploited have increased, with girls being married off or encouraged to have transactional relationships to benefit their families.²³

Almost 77 million children are still out of school, more than 18 months after the pandemic began. This significant disruption could have a permanent impact on children's learning, with up to 10 million children forced out of school altogether, and up to 72 million children falling into 'learning poverty'.²⁴ (According to the World Bank, learning poverty occurs when one is unable to read and comprehend simple text by the age of ten.)

Schools are a vital source of academic, social, and reproductive rights education, but are also a place of safety and visibility for children.²⁵ School closures makes it difficult for teachers to account for children during lockdown and to identify early warning signs of harm or absenteeism, especially for girls who have a reduced chance of returning to learn once they are married or working.

"...the COVID-19 crisis has a woman's face. The pandemic is worsening already deep inequalities facing women and girls, erasing years of progress towards gender equality."

– Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary-General

The UN Secretary-General has called COVID-19 "a crisis with a woman's face", noting the gendered impacts of the pandemic.²⁶

However, this pandemic also has a child's face, because children are the hidden victims, bearing the brunt of the aftershocks of COVID-19 while largely being left out of national recovery plans.

CHILDREN AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

Australia has legal obligations to implement the Convention on the Rights on the Child. This includes taking measures to respect, protect and fulfil child rights within the framework of international cooperation. On considering Australia's fifth and sixth periodic reports, the Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended the Australian Government "adopt a child rights-based approach in respect of its trade agreements and development aid policy and programs, with the rights of children and their engagement included in program design, delivery and evaluation."²⁷ The Australian Government has yet to implement this recommendation.

THE WAY FORWARD: PUTTING CHILDREN AT THE HEART OF AUSTRALIAN AID

A 'NEXT GENERATION' AID PROGRAM

To break the intergenerational cycle of poverty, the Australian Government should develop a next-generation development and humanitarian assistance program that prioritises children as a distinct group, alongside women and people with a disability. Children should be intentionally considered in the design, delivery, and evaluation of aid programs. As Australia invests in children, it is important to consider the long-term benefits as well as the cost of ignoring significant developmental phases in the life continuum that are unique to childhood.

DFAT already has a strong track record in child safeguarding, integrating a 'do no harm' approach across aid investments to ensure there are no negative impacts to children. DFAT has zero tolerance of child exploitation and abuse and its Child Protection Policy requires all delivery partners to identify, mitigate, manage or reduce risks to children associated with aid programs. This provides a good starting point for mainstreaming the consideration of children across the aid program. However, DFAT must go beyond a 'do no harm' approach that protects children, to a 'do good' approach that benefits and empowers children to reach their full potential. This requires a change in mindset to act in the best interests of the child, rather than just protecting them from harm.

A Child Rights Unit within DFAT would provide a strong central focal point for realising this goal. The unit would be accountable for children's rights and lead their mainstreaming across Australia's aid program, similar to how the Gender Equality Branch seeks to mainstream the consideration of gender equality and women's empowerment across aid investments. The Child Rights Unit should lead the development of a children's strategy for the aid program, with child-specific metrics, targets, and benchmarks. The unit should also assess and track the overall wellbeing of children in Australia's priority countries and crisis settings, to ensure children's needs are identified and addressed.

Adopting a rights approach to assessing, implementing, and measuring development outcomes would go a long way towards realising children's rights and wellbeing. One effective and important method for centring children's rights is by involving children in developing the priorities and policies of Australia's aid program. This involvement can happen through consultation, directly and through partnerships, and would ensure Australia's aid investments are directly informed by the needs of people affected by their operations.

INVESTING IN THE BUILDING BLOCKS: HEALTH AND EDUCATION

Childhood is a critical time in an individual's development. What happens during this period has a direct impact on a person's health, education attainment, and other outcomes in adulthood. Children's health and education

are the building blocks for development, and should be a central focus in a rebalanced aid program.

Investing in good child health is particularly important in the first five years, and comprehensive maternal and child health (including childhood immunisation and quality nutrition) are vital. The Indo-Pacific region suffers from extremely high rates of poor child health, including the world's highest rates of stunting – as the largest donor in the region, Australia has a responsibility to address child undernutrition. Australia should commit to a long-term, signature child nutrition program to effectively reduce child stunting in the region.

Children's education must also be a priority, particularly due to the devastating effects of COVID-19. While though education provides life-long benefits, only a small proportion of Australia's education aid spending directly targets children. In 2018, for example, just 23 per cent of Australia's aid spending on education was targeted at children. As the world emerges from COVID-19, education appears similarly deprioritised: according to the World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF, less than three per cent of post-pandemic government stimulus packages have been allocated to education.²⁸ This situation makes Australia's leadership even more important, as education is a fundamental building block underpinning all human development.

GROWING MOMENTUM FOR CHILD-FOCUSED DEVELOPMENT

By focusing more deliberately on children in our development cooperation program, Australia would be joining a growing number of donors pioneering child-sensitive development. Aotearoa New Zealand has a child and youth-friendly aid strategy. For tracking its aid funding and impact on vulnerable groups, the Canadian Government established policy markers which include children's and young people's issues.²⁹ In 2020, Sweden integrated the Convention on the Rights of the Child into domestic law, so that the Convention guides all policymaking, including international development assistance.³⁰ Children in All Policies 2030 was launched in April 2021 with the support of the WHO, UNICEF and The Lancet, to ensure children are prioritised to see sustainable development and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.³¹ Multiple donors and agencies, including the European Union, UNICEF and the World Bank have developed child impact assessment tools to ensure their aid investments are sensitive to the needs of children, and to assess the potential impact of development projects on children and adolescents.

There is an opportunity for the Australian Government to join this movement by creating a 'next generation' aid program that protects and empowers children and works in partnership with them and their communities.

ENDNOTES

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- 2 <https://ophi.org.uk/multidimensional-poverty-index/global-mpi-2018/#t3>
- 3 <https://www.unhcr.org/en-au/figures-at-a-glance.html>
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