



THE ALLIANCE
FOR CHILD PROTECTION
IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Child Protection in a Resource-Constrained World: From Challenges in Financing to Innovative Solutions



UNICEF/Andrianantenaina

Background Paper for the 2026 Annual Meeting for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action

INTRODUCTION

The number of children affected by today's humanitarian crises continues to rise. Despite their remarkable resilience, these children are among the most vulnerable in the world, facing heightened risks of multiple forms of violence daily. Armed conflict and armed violence, displacement, and climate shocks—and increasingly the convergence of all three—are exposing more children to violence, exploitation, neglect, and abuse. Armed conflict and violence alone now affect around one in five children globally with more than half a billion girls and boys living in or near situations of violenceⁱ.

At the same time, the humanitarian system, tasked with protecting them, is confronting an acute and sudden funding crisisⁱⁱ. As a result, life-saving and life-sustaining child protection programmes are being closed, scaled back, or left severely understaffed, leaving millions of children without the support they urgently needⁱⁱⁱ.

These challenges are unfolding alongside major humanitarian system reforms, including the humanitarian reset and UN80, which are reshaping how responses are prioritised, structured, and resourced^{iv}. In parallel, increasing disregard for international humanitarian and human rights law is narrowing the space for principled action and weakening accountability for violations against children^v. Together, these dynamics are redefining the operating environment for child protection in humanitarian action, underscoring the urgency of re-examining how children's right to protection and well-being can be safeguarded within the emerging reality.

Yet even as this space for protection narrows, child protection actors at all levels continue to respond and adapt^{vi}. Across diverse contexts, child protection actors are adjusting delivery models, reprioritising limited resources, strengthening community-based approaches, and seeking new ways to sustain child protection outcomes in the face of unprecedented constraints. Innovation, partnerships, and in some cases, difficult trade-offs are increasingly emerging across child protection in



humanitarian action as actors seek to sustain core child protection supports and services under mounting limitations. Understanding how child protection actors are responding to the current moment, including what is being preserved, what is being lost, and what is being reconfigured, is essential to ensuring that children's protection remains at the centre of humanitarian response, even in an increasingly resource-constrained and politically complex operating environment.

THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM FACES AN ACUTE FUNDING CRISIS

Despite the ever-increasing needs, the humanitarian system is experiencing an acute funding crisis. The 2026 Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) appeals for approximately US\$23 billion to assist 87 million people, representing the lowest proportion of people reached in over a decade, despite continued growth in the number of those in need of humanitarian assistance^{vii}. This follows a trend of successive reductions in humanitarian appeals, with recent GHOs targeting less than half of the people assessed as being in need.

For some major humanitarian donors, lower funding is driven more by political and strategic choices than by a lack of money. For others, real budget pressures have limited their ability to maintain or increase humanitarian funding or to help make up for the gaps left by others. In practice, many donors fall somewhere between these two ends of the spectrum. Together, this has created a system-wide funding gap that no single donor or group of donors has been able to close, with humanitarian appeals shrinking even as needs continue to grow^{viii}.

Within this environment, hyper-prioritisation has narrowed responses to the most immediate, life-saving needs, excluding large numbers of people facing serious but less visible risks^{ix}. Child protection in humanitarian action, a historically underfunded sector^x, has been particularly affected. Across contexts, funding cuts have led to the suspension, scale-down, or closure of child protection programmes, frequently without transition planning, undermining the continuity of care and protection for children at risk^{xi}.

INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN AND HUMAN RIGHTS LAW UNDER ATTACK

The global legal and normative framework intended to protect children in humanitarian crises is under severe strain. Increasingly, major powers are openly violating established international laws and norms. Every time such violations happen with impunity, it paves the way for others to follow, feeding a downward spiral of disregard for international humanitarian and human rights laws that are essential for protecting children in crises. This erosion of norms undermines decades of progress in holding perpetrators accountable for grave violations against children.



UNICEF/Sánchez

Armed conflict and violence have intensified and expanded geographically with more countries in armed conflict than at the end of World War II^{xii}, directly contributing to a sharp rise in violations against children.

In the most recent reporting period, the United Nations verified over 41,370 grave violations against children during 2024, the highest number ever recorded. Violations include killing and maiming,

recruitment and use by armed forces and groups, abduction, sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, and the denial of humanitarian assistance.

The denial of humanitarian assistance is sharply increasing, rising from 5,205 verified incidents in 2023^{xiii} to more than 7,900 in 2024^{xiv}, with further increases expected in 2025. Children are disproportionately affected when humanitarian access is constrained, as interruptions to services such as health care, education, and child protection services exacerbate existing risks and vulnerabilities.

These trends reflect a broader erosion of respect for International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law, weakening accountability mechanisms and normalising harm to civilians, including children.

HUMANITARIAN ARCHITECTURE REFORMS AND A CHANGING OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

Triggered by the funding crisis, the humanitarian system is undergoing significant reforms, including the humanitarian reset and UN80^{xv}.

As part of the humanitarian reset, the cluster system has undergone a process of simplification, resulting in the consolidation of the Child Protection Area of Responsibility (together with GBV and Mine Action Areas of Responsibility) into one Protection Cluster. If not managed carefully, this could pose a risk to dedicated child protection coordination at the country level, including jeopardising the critical platform for country based technical child protection support and child protection specific troubleshooting.

At the same time, an increasing number of countries are being placed on a trajectory to transition out of international humanitarian coordination not because humanitarian needs have significantly declined, but because funding cuts and prioritisation decisions are reshaping global response plans. The 2026 Global Humanitarian Overview's "hyper-prioritised" planning categorised up to 11 response operations as transitioning away from the international system, driven by funding realities rather than changes on the ground^{xvi}. This creates particular risks for child protection: as formal coordination mechanisms, funding streams, and technical support structures are scaled back without robust hand-over planning, critical child protection services are at risk of major disruption, even where children's exposure to violence, exploitation, and neglect remains high.



UNICEF/Jospeh

IMPACT ON CHILD PROTECTION PROGRAMMING

Evidence from child protection practitioners across more than 50 humanitarian contexts indicates that funding cuts are already having immediate and severe effects on children and the services intended to



protect them^{xvii}. Programme closures and scale-downs are leaving children without access to case management, psychosocial support, family tracing and reunification, legal assistance, community-based prevention interventions, and other critical child protection services.

In some contexts, abrupt service disruptions are associated with increased exposure to child labour, child marriage, recruitment by armed groups, sexual exploitation and trafficking, as well as severe mental health distress, including suicidal ideation. These impacts are particularly acute for children experiencing intersecting vulnerabilities, including those with disabilities, children on the move, and children separated from their families^{xviii}.

Child protection outcomes depend on a wide range of professionals, including caseworkers, community facilitators, supervisors, technical advisors, programme coordinators, and managers. Frontline staff are essential for identifying risks and engaging directly with children and families, while technical and managerial staff provide the supervision, guidance, quality assurance, and coordination that make safe and effective responses possible. Reductions in both frontline capacity and technical support are limiting the ability of actors to deliver quality child protection programming and to uphold the Child Protection Minimum Standards. Over time, these pressures risk eroding investments in child protection systems strengthening and reversing progress toward nationally led and sustainable responses.

CROSS-SECTORAL IMPACTS AND THE EROSION OF CHILDREN'S PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Funding reductions across the humanitarian system are disrupting programmes across multiple sectors that are essential to children's protection and well-being. Education, food security, health, nutrition, WASH, amongst others, are being scaled back or closed in a range of crisis-affected settings, including integrated programmes that previously contributed to preventing and mitigating child protection risks^{xix}. The scale back and closure of education services across humanitarian contexts is particularly damaging^{xx}, as schools and learning spaces often provide not only learning but also structure, supervision, psychosocial support, and early identification of children at risk^{xxi}.

These cross-sector disruptions are compounding risks for children by weakening protective environments and increasing reliance on harmful coping strategies. When education is interrupted, children are more likely to be drawn into child labour, early marriage, recruitment by armed groups, and other forms of exploitation^{xxii}. At the same time, reductions in food assistance and basic services are heightening

children's exposure to child labour, sexual exploitation, trafficking, recruitment by armed groups, and child marriage, while cuts to health funding are constraining access to essential mental health and psychosocial support. Together, these pressures are intensifying psychosocial distress among children and caregivers and undermining gains made through integrated, multisectoral humanitarian programming.

CONCLUSION

The current humanitarian context is defined by escalating needs, acute funding constraints, weakened respect for legal and normative frameworks, and significant shifts in the humanitarian architecture. Together, these dynamics are profoundly reshaping the environment in which child protection in humanitarian action operates, placing children at heightened risks while putting immense pressure on the systems designed to protect them, which often are already overwhelmed.

Within these constraints, child protection actors continue to adapt—drawing on evidence, experience, and collaboration, to sustain critical services, strengthen protective environments, and mitigate harm where possible. While innovation and new ways of working cannot compensate for the scale of unmet needs or replace political and financial commitment to children's rights including their right to protection, they can help preserve essential protection outcomes, improve efficiency and equity, and inform more strategic use of limited resources. A deeper understanding of the current landscape in which child protection actors operate can therefore support more focused, principled, and context-appropriate approaches to protecting children in a resource-constrained world.



Suggested citation: The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, Child Protection in a Resource-Constrained World: From Challenges in Financing to Innovative Solutions (2026).

© The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action.

For more information on the Alliance's work and joining the network, please visit www.alliancecpha.org or contact us directly: info@alliancecpha.org.

Endnotes:

-
- ⁱ <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/stop-the-war-on-children-security-for-whom-2025>
- ⁱⁱ <https://alliancecpha.org/en/advocacy-resource-pack/positioning-child-protection-humanitarian-action-amid-funding-cuts>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://alliancecpha.org/en/brief-global-impact-funding-cuts-children>
- ^{iv} <https://alliancecpha.org/en/advocacy-resource-pack/positioning-child-protection-humanitarian-action-amid-funding-cuts>
- ^v <https://alliancecpha.org/en/technical-materials/impact-un80-humanitarian-reset-funding-cuts-caac-agenda>
- ^{vi} <https://alliancecpha.org/sites/default/files/An%20Overview%20of%20the%202025%20Annual%20Meeting%20for%20Child%20Protection%20in%20Humanitarian%20Action.pdf>
- ^{vii} <https://humanitarianaction.info/document/global-humanitarian-overview-2026>
- ^{viii} <https://apnews.com/article/un-switzerland-humanitarian-aid-ocha-funding-e764d76f3a5adcd861899a3b0be66ab3>
- ^{ix} <https://www.concern.net/press-releases/un-humanitarian-overview-reveals-millions-people-risk-being-left-behind-2026>
- ^x <https://alliancecpha.org/en/technical-materials/unprotected-special-edition-analysis-funding-child-protection-armed-conflict-2021-and-2022>
- ^{xi} <https://alliancecpha.org/en/brief-global-impact-funding-cuts-children>
- ^{xii} <https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-of-worlds-children/2025#download>
- ^{xiii} <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2024/384>
- ^{xiv} <https://docs.un.org/en/s/2025/247>
- ^{xv} <https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/en>
- ^{xvi} <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2025/12/11/abrupt-transitions-global-humanitarian-overview-pushes-dangerous-trend>
- ^{xvii} <https://alliancecpha.org/en/brief-global-impact-funding-cuts-children>
- ^{xviii} <https://alliancecpha.org/en/brief-global-impact-funding-cuts-children>
- ^{xix} <https://alliancecpha.org/en/brief-global-impact-funding-cuts-children>
- ^{xx} <https://e1.nmcdn.io/assets/ggheie/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Futures-Cut-Short-FINAL.pdf>
- ^{xxi} <https://alliancecpha.org/en/child-protection-humanitarian-action-and-education-emergencies>
- ^{xxii} <https://e1.nmcdn.io/assets/ggheie/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Futures-Cut-Short-FINAL.pdf>