



UNICEF Policy Brief

Proven solutions for children

Accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and beyond

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This policy brief is based on a rigorous evidence analysis of actionable, cost-effective public policy solutions that optimize outcomes for children at national scale, commissioned by UNICEF and the Learning for Well-Being Institute in 2024 (forthcoming).



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A core set of policies for every child and government

Despite significant efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) since 2015, progress for children in recent years has stalled, reversed, or been insufficient in many countries and for millions of children. UNICEF estimates that only 1 in 3 child-related SDG indicators have either been met or are on track to be met.¹

Among those indicators where progress has been recorded, structural disparities are likely to be hidden, particularly those linked to exclusion, gender discrimination and inequality. And the challenges facing children are becoming even more complex, given the pressing impacts of climate change across the world, protracted conflicts, demographic change, rapid urbanization, displacement and severely constrained fiscal envelopes, among other issues.

Yet the news is not all gloomy. Since 2000, there have been critical milestones to celebrate:

- A 53 per cent reduction in under-5 mortality in Africa
- 99.9 per cent of polio eradicated
- More than 2 billion people provided access to safely managed drinking water
- A one-third decline in the prevalence of stunting among children under 5
- The under-5 mortality rate reached the lowest level ever recorded globally in 2023

Urgent action is needed to tackle current risks to children

- » More than 300 million children are living in extreme poverty, almost half in conflict settings.²
- » Nearly 5 million children died before their fifth birthday in 2023.³ Globally, 1 in 4 children under 5, or 181 million children, are living in severe child food poverty in early childhood.⁴
- » Around 1 in 3, or 200 million children, are not growing and developing to their full potential due to malnutrition in early childhood.
- » Nearly two thirds of 10-year-olds are estimated to be unable to read and understand a simple text.⁶
- » While overall prevalence of child marriage has declined, an estimated 640 million girls and women alive today were married before their 18th birthday.⁷
- » Adolescent pregnancy remains one of the leading causes of death and disability for adolescent girls, particularly those living in the least developed countries.⁸

We have overcome the seemingly impossible before. We can and must do so again.

As a collective committed to building a prosperous and sustainable future of children, it is important to embrace a paradigm shift in our policy and financing decisions. Children need to be at the center of our societal commitments: their ability to thrive is at the cornerstone of our chance to navigate the current context, build cohesive, sustainable, and inclusive societies and most importantly, realize their rights.

Long-standing learnings from existing national development policies and solid rigorous evidence developed across regions and contexts have given us a clear indication of what works for children. The challenge is how to best support policymakers in how they prioritize these policies and commit to their realization, while addressing challenges that impede investments at scale. In this process, identifying interventions and policies impacting multiple child outcomes can be a game changer for accelerating progress ■



Belize, 2024

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What the evidence tells us

UNICEF has embarked on a journey to highlight evidence-based policy solutions and is working with partners to support their implementation and sustainability. This policy brief underscores examples of policy interventions that influence multiple children's outcomes.

The impact of these policy interventions affects the whole child population as well as the population at large and are a foundation for multiplier effects, such as child benefits, immunization, quality secondary education for girls, and early childhood nutrition and development programmes, particularly in the first 1,000 days. By no means are these the only policies that work, but they are examples of the kind of policies that can generate multiple outcomes and require urgent prioritization and attention by governments.

The impact and scale of these policies are further maximized when they are implemented as government commitments and enshrined in legislation or budgets. These core policies have the potential to be the foundation for multiple beneficial outcomes to communities, societies and economies.

Context-specific measures that streamline administrative and bureaucratic processes are key to effective policy implementation. These include:

- Scaling up community engagement, including young people.
- Accelerating digital improvements to support service delivery, especially in underserved and remote areas, and planning for sustainability by securing long-term funding.
- Integrating new policies within existing systems.
- Building workforce capacity.

The goal for this core set of policies is to reach all children, including the most marginalized and excluded.

UNICEF wants to support a change in paradigm and focus. Governments and donors should ensure that policies generating multiple outcomes are available to all and serve as a foundation for a broader range of policies to maximize the rights and well-being of all children.

1. Invest in early childhood development: nutrition, stimulation and care

Every child has the right to the best start in life. This includes the right to good nutrition and stimulation, responsive care and early learning, health and a safe environment. These rights provide young children with a firm foundation for growth and development, nurturing their bodies and brains during this critical period of their life. As children thrive, economies grow, nations and communities prosper, and a more sustainable and peaceful future is possible.

There has been important progress for young children in recent decades. Between 1990 and 2020, the prevalence of children under 5 with stunted growth has declined by 45 per cent and the number of children with stunting by 110 million. However, millions of children around the world are not receiving adequate nutrition, stimulation and responsive care, are missing out on health care and learning opportunities, and are exposed to unhealthy food environments, violence and stress. Due to these and other threats, 1 in 3 – or 200 million children under 5 – are still suffering from undernutrition (stunting or wasting), while 136 million children aged 5–10 years suffer from overweight and obesity. Moreover, 29 per cent of children aged 3–5 years are not developmentally on track.

This double burden of malnutrition is largely driven by a double failure of food systems. On one hand, food systems are failing to provide young children with nutritious, safe and affordable diets, contributing to high levels of undernutrition. On the other hand, caregivers and families are increasingly exposed to harmful marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages, high in sugar, salt and fats that contribute to increasing levels of childhood overweight from early childhood.

Despite overwhelming evidence on the transformative effects of investments in early years, recent reviews of government spending across diverse income contexts show that public expenditure allocated to children is simply too little, too late.⁹ In other words, grossly inadequate, far too late in the life course, which deepens the burden for investments in later years, and highly unequal across income contexts.

Multiplier effects

With the steady declines in child mortality over the last three decades, we have in our hands the future of the largest cohort of surviving children in the history of humankind. We need to ensure that every child enjoys the right to thrive, the right to grow and the right to reach their full potential. By focusing on the first 1,000 days, we have an unprecedented opportunity to contribute not only to the growth and development of millions of children but also to the overall development of human capital, particularly among the most vulnerable: the youngest, the poorest and those left behind by unfair development and humanitarian crises.

Research and programmatic evidence are clear on the benefits of interventions to prevent malnutrition and promote early stimulation and responsive care, supporting children to grow up in healthy, safe environments.¹⁰ For instance, early and exclusive breastfeeding protects newborns from life-threatening illnesses and supports optimal growth and brain development. Breastfed children are less likely to be overweight or obese and are at a lower risk of developing diabetes later in life. Parental policies are associated with higher breastfeeding rates, lower child mortality and malnutrition in early life, improved early brain development and school readiness, and enhanced physical and mental well-being among breastfeeding women. These policies must: 1) provide paid parental leave; 2) promote workplace nursing facilities and paid breastfeeding breaks for nursing mothers; 3) implement parenting and caregiver programmes to prevent all forms of violence against children and women; and 4) ensure employment protections, facilitate access to childcare in or near workplaces and provide protections for informal workers. It is essential to implement these critical policies at scale to realize their extraordinary potential.

Call for action

- » Protect breastfeeding by providing mothers and families with timely and quality breastfeeding counselling and support services, ensuring access to paid maternity benefits and parental leave, mandating nursing facilities in the workplace and paid breastfeeding breaks for nursing mothers, and enforcing legislation to regulate the promotion of breastmilk substitutes in line with the International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes.
- » Promote good nutrition through food, health and social protection policies, programmes and services to ensure that all children – particularly those living in or at risk of child food poverty – have access to and consume nutritious, safe and diverse foods. These include nutritious and affordable complementary foods for young children; fortified foods and food supplements for children at risk of malnutrition; and therapeutic foods for children with severe malnutrition.
- » Support responsive care through parenting policies, programmes and services that facilitate paid parental leave and male caregiver engagement in childcare; free or affordable childcare options for working parents; and free or affordable quality early learning and care programmes for all young children, including children affected by climate and humanitarian crises, to enhance young children's psychosocial development and school readiness. This also includes caregiver programmes that support safe and healthy environments for children, free of violence and discrimination and helping children access other vital health and other services.

2. Scale up child benefits to reduce poverty and yield wider social and economic benefits

Globally, there are more than 300 million children living in extreme poverty, struggling to survive on less than US\$2.15 per day. Children comprise more than half of those living in extreme poverty, while their share of the global population is 31 per cent. Moreover, nearly 1 billion children live in multidimensional poverty and are deprived of their most basic rights in areas such as health, nutrition, education, water, sanitation or housing. This situation continues to be further exacerbated by conflict, economic distress and climate change. This challenge is universal and a pressing concern not only in low-income contexts but also in middle- and high-income contexts.¹¹

Poverty can significantly diminish children's aspirations and life opportunities, which results in significant levels of unrealized human potential, with long-term implications for children, their families, their communities, and the societies and economies in which they live.

Despite the concerning scenario, there are also critical opportunities. Ending child poverty is a policy choice, where child benefits have been recognized as one of the critical policies that can move the needle in the right direction.

Child benefits, or regular cash benefits paid to children and their families, put resources and choice in the hands of families to improve the lives of their children. They make possible for households to both address immediate needs and invest in the future of their children. Access to child benefits has been shown to be critical to minimizing the need for families to make impossible choices in moments of distress, such as deciding between supporting their children or investing in economic interventions. Moreover, a child benefit is a scalable policy that can readily be deployed. It is administratively simple and efficient, and can be progressively expanded by age.



Malawi, 2024

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Multiplier effects

There is a comprehensive and growing body of evidence demonstrating the transformational impacts of child benefits.¹² Cash transfers including child benefits have long been the focus of the most rigorous, impact assessments and evaluations across multiple regions and contexts. Their role in reducing child poverty, thus alleviating the poverty burden on households both in absolute and relative terms, is clear. At the same time, they also contribute to a wide range of social and economic goals.

As a cornerstone of a child-sensitive social protection system, child benefits provide predictable income security, enabling households to plan for the future. They have been shown to effectively remove economic barriers to accessing nutrition, education, and healthcare services, while helping to prevent child labor and child marriage. They are also critical investments to addressing gender inequality and preventing violence, while enhancing opportunities for adolescent girls, children on the move and children with disabilities. Longer term, they can contribute to increased productive capacity and earnings with broader economic benefits in local economies.

Additional and complementary evidence as shown in Figure 1 is also pointing to the important associations of countries that have implemented child benefits as a policy and critical child and family outcomes. In complement with impact evidence, this provides an important case for financing and implementation at scale.

Despite overwhelming evidence and experience across diverse contexts showing the transformative potential of child benefits to eliminate child poverty, huge coverage gaps remain – approximately 1.8 billion children below age 18 currently have no access to social protection.¹³

Call for action

- » Progressively expand child benefits to all children, ensuring payments are made in a frequent and regular manner, last over time, and are of sufficient value to maximize impact.
- » Support governments, working jointly with key partners, in doubling current coverage and ensuring 1 billion children have access to child benefits by 2030.
- » Prioritize, protect and expand national and international investment in child benefits, including national social protection medium-term financing strategies to identify sources to expand and meet coverage targets by 2030.
- » Ensure quality and inclusiveness of child benefits, with programmes addressing the needs of children, including during shocks.
- » Promote linkages to other services in health, education, and nutrition together with the critical role of the social service workforce.
- » Address gender inequality and ensure disability inclusion.

FIGURE 1

Outcomes by cash benefit status

Universal child benefits or no programme anchored in legislation, 2018 or latest year

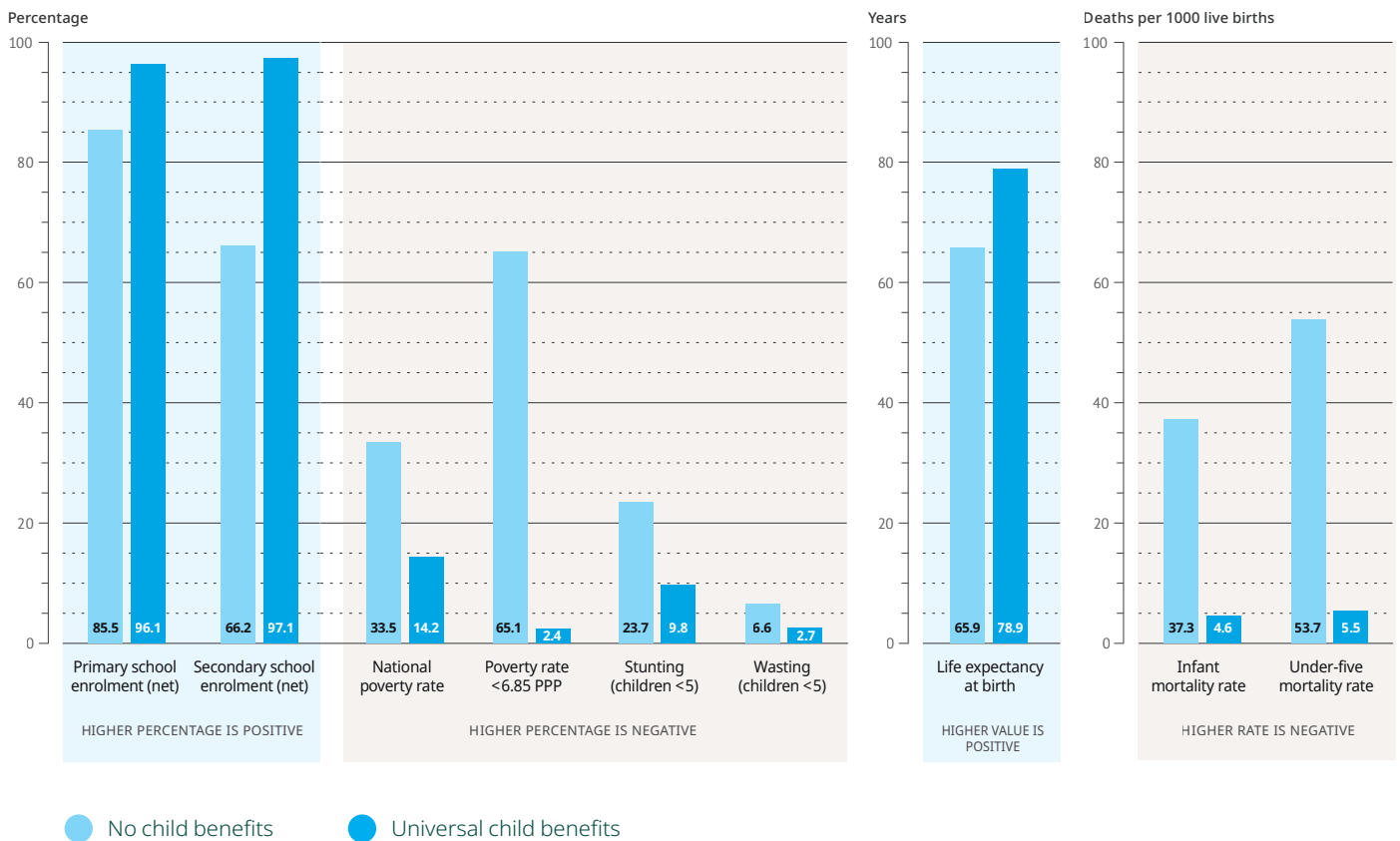


Figure 1 illustrates some of the highlighted and referenced evidence on the impact of cash benefits. The charts show lagged association between policy decisions made in 2018 and child outcomes averaged between 2019 and 2021, with three-year averages used. The association is based on mean differences by classification. Data cover 24 countries with universal child benefits, across all income groups.

Source: UNICEF and the Learning for Well-Being Institute, *Accelerating Progress for Children Now and Preparing for the Future: A policy solutions report*, forthcoming 2024.

3. Expand immunization funding to protect lives and health

Immunization is one of the greatest achievements of public health. Over the past 50 years, immunization has saved 150 million children's lives – one life saved every 10 seconds, every day, contributing to 40 per cent of the global reduction in infant mortality (50 per cent in Africa). Implementation of the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) has been essential in transforming access to vaccination worldwide, from less than 20 per cent global coverage in 1974 to 85 per cent in 2024.

From saving children's lives and reversing the trend of life-threatening diseases to protecting the world from a pandemic, immunization continues to be a critical tool that allows children to walk, play and learn today, while also generating multiple impacts on their futures prospects. We can build on what works by learning from the loss of routine immunization coverage in some countries during the pandemic, investing in pandemic preparedness and response, developing new vaccines, and expanding vaccination coverage, particularly for zero-dose children. For example, the new malaria vaccine promises to be a game-changer, especially in sub-Saharan Africa where malaria claims about 600,000 lives every year, most of them infants. A new tuberculosis vaccine, expected to be available by 2029/30, will curb the disease's high mortality in low- and middle-income countries. Vaccines against respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and group-B streptococcus (GBS) are also primed to lower newborn mortality.

Multiplier effects

Studies estimate that US\$21 can be reaped for every US\$1 invested in immunization. If countries achieve the SDG 2030 target for immunization of 90 per cent coverage for infants, 1.4 million more lives could be saved every year, amounting to about 51 million deaths averted between 2021–2030.

The benefits go beyond child survival. By 2030, up to 24 million households could be protected from falling into poverty by avoiding catastrophic payments due to vaccine-preventable diseases. Vaccines also protect against cancers and could

reduce the use of antibiotics and resultant antimicrobial resistance. Immunization is also an important entry point for broader health-care services.

Government action is required to ease the financial burden of immunization on households. Countries in which households pay less than 30 per cent of the total cost of their health care have lower poverty rates than countries with higher private costs. The same is true for infant mortality and under-five mortality rates, as well as school enrolment rates, stunting and wasting. When health care is highly subsidized or free at the point of service, child outcomes are consistently better.

Call for action

- » Governments to provide sustainable and sufficient financing for vaccines and immunization services – including capacity to implement – to reach 90 per cent immunization coverage and halve the number of zero-dose children (from 14.5 million children in 2019 to below 6.5 million children by 2030).
- » Donors and development partners to commit to increasing investment in immunization and primary health care, including in Gavi, the Vaccine alliance.
- » Vaccine manufacturers and developers to commit to distributive manufacturing and ensure equitable access to new products to combat new and emerging health threats such as COVID and mpox.
- » Communities, governments, the private sector and the media to meaningfully engage in immunization advocacy and evidence promotion to boost trust in both routine immunization and new vaccines.

4. Ensure quality secondary education for adolescent girls to boost life-long economic prospects and social progress

A staggering 119 million girls,¹⁴ many of whom are adolescents, are out of school worldwide. Although globally there is near gender parity in primary school enrolment, the divergence between boys and girls steadily widens up the age range: nearly 1 in 4 girls aged 15–19 globally are not in education, employment or training compared to 1 in 10 boys. And millions of girls who are in school, especially secondary school, are at risk of dropping out because of violence, harmful gender norms, humanitarian crises, and insufficient services for their health and well-being. When girls reach secondary school age, pressures to earn an income, start a family, or work at home can take priority because of poverty and prevailing gender norms and beliefs about girls' role in society. Even when girls complete school, which is increasingly the case in middle- and high-income countries, sometimes even at higher rates than boys, they often struggle to transition safely to employment. Stigma and discrimination, stereotypes and violence continue to hold girls back. Roughly 1 in 4 adolescent girls is at risk of violence by a partner in her lifetime, and girls are at similarly high risk of child marriage.¹⁵ Girls often face different challenges than boys and are significantly influenced by gender norms.

Research estimates that girls' limited educational opportunities and barriers to completing education cost countries between US\$15–30 trillion in lost lifetime productivity and earnings.¹⁶ Conversely, less than US\$2 per day invested in a girls' secondary education can yield a return of up to 10 per cent in a country's economic growth.¹⁷ A sustained investment to ensure quality of education across the lifecycle can be transformational.



Rwanda, 2024

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Multiplier effects

Helping girls access, enroll in and complete quality secondary education is a huge boost for them, their families, societies and economies. Girls who complete secondary education tend to be healthier, earn more, can choose when and whom they marry, and provide better health care and education for the next generation. Investing in girls' education is to invest in a country's growth and economic prosperity: every extra year a girl stays in school can increase her future income by 10 per cent and a child of a mother who can read is 50 per cent more likely to live past age 5. Unfortunately, there is an education-employment paradox, in which higher-learning outcomes do not necessarily translate into labor market outcomes for girls.¹⁸ Simultaneously, investments in removing barriers to girls' access to education must be made to ensure that girls complete their education, and that their learning is relevant and of high quality.

Recent research shows a clear distinction between countries with shorter and longer compulsory school periods. Across nine areas of child well-being measured – especially net enrolment rates – outcomes for children are better with longer compulsory education period (Figure 2). This is especially true for girls: one of the best ways to end child marriage is to keep girls in school. Investments in girls' learning – and their pathways to employment – require simultaneous investments to ensure their protection from violence and safety, provide them with quality education and learning, broaden their skill sets (such as green and transferable skills) and facilitate their access to mentors, as well as investments in girls' safety and protection from violence. These measures help equip girls with the confidence needed to navigate their future successfully.

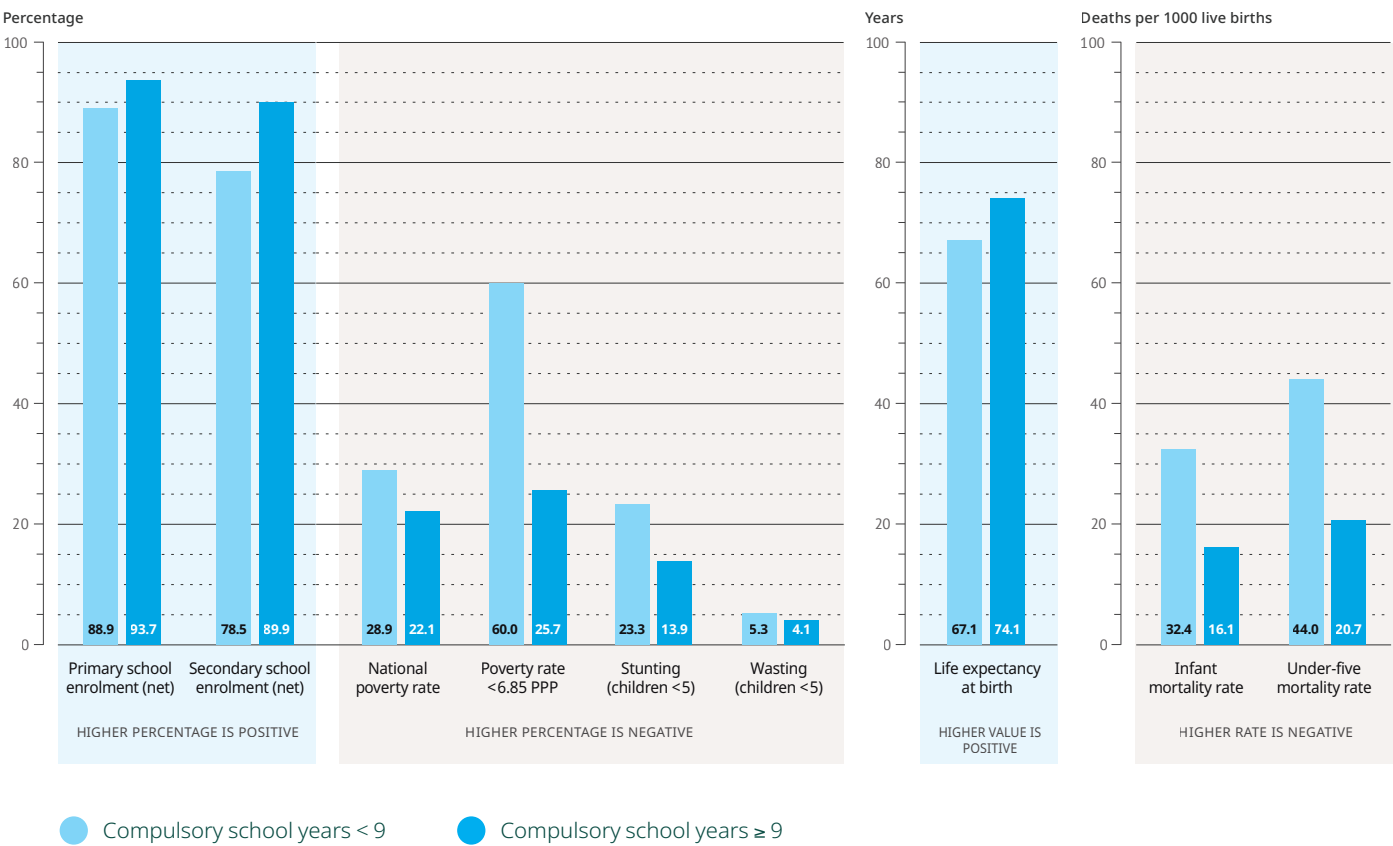
Call for action

Prioritize, finance and implement evidence-based targeted and multi-pronged interventions that increase girls' completion of quality secondary level education, including:

- » Tackling the gender-related financial barriers to secondary level education, such as support for access to learning and education opportunities; sanitation and hygiene for girls, such as menstrual health and separate WASH facilities; and support for learning materials, including textbooks, digital access and more.
- » Implementing legal and policy reforms to support access to quality secondary education for adolescent mothers and pregnant girls, young women who become married before age 18, and those returning to education after early employment.
- » Prioritizing the support and reintegration of adolescent girls into school following climate disasters and in humanitarian contexts.
- » Addressing gender-based violence that impedes girls' access to learning through accessible survivor services and evidence-based violence prevention programmes in homes, schools and communities including those tackling discriminatory gender norms.
- » Supporting multiple learning pathways for adolescent girls to learn the skills required to transition from learning to earning, including access to transferable skills such as communication and digital skills. It further includes providing adolescents with access to reproductive health services, encouraging girls' agency and aspirations, such as pursuing employment in higher-paying occupations, and using proven approaches like mentoring to address occupational segregation.¹⁹
- » Scaling up child and family benefits through cash transfer programmes and other social protection initiatives to reduce financial barriers to education for girls, including parental leave for working adolescent mothers and childcare.

FIGURE 2

Outcomes by length of compulsory schooling
Number of compulsory school years, 2018



Source: UNICEF and the Learning for Well-Being Institute, *Accelerating Progress for Children Now and Preparing for the Future: A policy solutions report*, forthcoming 2024

Conclusion

At the current rate, most SDGs for children will not be met by the 2030 deadline. The reasons include not only fiscal constraints, but also inadequate prioritization of policies that have high impacts on multiple SDGs, such as the examples in this brief. Because hundreds of millions of children are falling behind, acceleration to scale is vital including focusing on the most impactful policy and programmatic interventions, particularly those with multiplier effects. Governments should commit to these policies in the coming years and put their sights on setting ambitious targets to help them reach the SDGs. These include, but are not limited to:

- Reaching the almost 15 million zero-dose children missing out on any vaccination.
- Enrolling the nearly 86 million adolescent girls estimated to be out of school and ensuring their access to quality learning.
- Doubling child benefit coverage and ensuring 1 billion children have access to benefits by 2030.
- Reaching at least 300 million children and women with nutrition, stimulation and care services for early childhood development.

Now is the moment, at the end of 2024, to put these policies in place for the next five years. Waiting longer will mean that we not only miss the 2030 deadline, but also that millions of children will miss out on their rights and futures. As governments plan for the 2025 fiscal year, they should pay close attention to the child-related policies advocated here and ensure that they have the requisite funding and support to reach every child ■

The moment to prioritize children and scale up policy solutions is now

The solutions proposed by this policy brief are examples of interventions championed by UNICEF and partners since the start of Agenda 2030. Despite their importance, evidence shows that they are not always universally applied, and their multiplier effects are therefore not being gained. There are many other crucial policy solutions required to fulfil children's rights and well-being. For example, quality primary education for all children is still imperative, to set a basis for learning from adolescence into adulthood. Protection against violence, exploitation and abuse is critical for children's safety, development and socio-emotional well-being. Broader maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health care remains vital to save children's and mother's lives and protect their well-being. WASH interventions are critical for their health, nutrition and hygiene. And there are many others.

This brief presents compelling evidence that investing in these four policies can unlock benefits for child well-being across sectors. These policies act as multiplier effects, accelerating progress now with lasting benefits into the future. UNICEF calls on governments to integrate these policies into their public welfare strategies and ensure they are adequately resourced to reach every child in every community.



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