
WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE TO SUPPORT CHILDREN IN ADVERSITY? RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE FRONT LINES

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Mattito Watson, Catherine Kirk, and Severine Chevrel

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. government's abrupt foreign assistance reductions and rescissions in 2025, combined with the structural realignment of the functions of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) into the Department of State, are reshaping the global policy and financing landscape for children in adversity. Estimates suggest that 2025 U.S. foreign aid for children was significantly cut, including an almost complete elimination of basic education. The contraction has been felt across sectors: HIV/AIDS and services for orphans and vulnerable children, maternal and child health, early childhood development, disability inclusion, and child protection and care. Local civil society organizations report widespread loss of technical staff, abrupt program closures, and damaging impacts on vital social safety nets resulting in direct consequences for children and families.

Stakeholders consulted for this report describe three cross-cutting risks with direct policy relevance for donors, governments, and civil society:

1. **A widening equity gap:** Services are disappearing most rapidly for the hardest-to-reach populations—children with disabilities, children outside family care, and those in conflict-affected contexts, precisely where marginal returns on investment are highest.
2. **Loss of institutional memory and technical depth:** As budgets are cut skilled, local experts are being let go, weakening government-led

systems and the child development, care, and protection workforce necessary for sustainable outcomes.

3. **Erosion of evidence and accountability:** As data systems and websites are taken offline, decades of learning risk being lost, while defunding civil society impairs accountability mechanisms.

In response to these challenges, adaptation is necessary and underway. Consultation with over 200 stakeholders—including technical experts, civil society staff, and people with lived experience—provided a wealth of strategies and possible solutions tailored to the current political and funding environment. This report organizes these recommendations across four pillars.

A: Reimagine Aid Infrastructure to Prioritize Children and Families

- **Shift power and resources to local actors** by channeling increased financial and technical resources directly to national governments and local civil society, strengthening coordination and engagement to inform policy and budgeting, and scaling community-led models by prioritizing and resourcing existing local structures and networks.
- **Balance immediate humanitarian needs with long-term investments in systems**, ensuring resources are channeled through local actors

and strengthening child- and family-sensitive emergency preparedness and early warning systems.

- **Operationalize “nothing about us without us”** by engaging and funding children, youth, and people with lived experience and budgeting for the participation of children, youth, and people with lived experience in the full policy cycle.

B: Empower Governments to Prioritize Children’s Development, Care, and Protection

- **Strengthen local, inclusive, and multi-sectoral systems supporting children and their families** by aligning donor funds with government priorities and strengthening national strategies and multisectoral approaches, integrating donor-funded safety nets into government-owned systems, and strengthening coordination mechanisms at multiple levels.
- **Empower and resource civil society and lived-experience organizations to support accountability** by funding their rights-based advocacy and interventions, strengthening accountability frameworks, and tracking progress.
- **Invest in the social service workforce** through training, supervision, and fair compensation; retaining technical expertise; and leveraging digital tools to extend reach and quality to the last mile.

C: Support Local, Regional, and Global Networks for Coordination and Evidence Exchange

- **Strengthen local coordination mechanisms** from national to community levels to improve efficiency and effectiveness by fostering collaboration across civil society and government stakeholders, supporting community networks,

and enhancing coordination capacity through shared resources, data systems, and digital tools.

- **Sustain and streamline regional and global multistakeholder** collaborative networks so that standards, guidance, and comparative data remain accessible and support countries to use these platforms for peer-learning and to inform national policies and services for children and families.

D: Maximize Funding by Increasing Efficiencies and Mobilizing New Resources

- **Improve efficiencies and reduce costs** through improved collaboration and coordination across civil society, community organizations, and other support networks.
- **Increase domestic financing** for children’s development, care, and protection by using philanthropic funding catalytically to mobilize new funding and increasing multisectoral coordination and interministerial budgeting.
- **Expand innovative and blended finance** instruments and bring in non-traditional funders, growing private sector partnerships to support community-priorities, and conducting evidence-based multimedia and advocacy campaigns.

The costs of retrenchment are already mounting in lost human capital, weakened systems, and diminished U.S. influence. Yet targeted actions—prioritizing local systems, protecting the child and family-focused workforce, and safeguarding evidence—can stabilize services now while positioning partners to rebuild on a stronger, more equitable footing. The recommendations in this report provide practical actions for donors, governments, and civil society to act with urgency and purpose to elevate and respond to the needs of children, despite fiscal constraint.





PART 1: SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Introduction

Over the past 35 years, the U.S. government played a critical leadership role in elevating the needs of vulnerable children and their families through foreign assistance. The whole-of-government Children in Adversity Strategy, first released in 2012, set priorities for government agencies programming foreign assistance to invest in evidence-based practices to support children's development, care and protection. USAID's Children in Adversity team led this effort and coordinated with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Department of State, and other agencies.

The U.S. government's abrupt withdrawal of foreign aid funding in early 2025 had a devastating impact on the protection and well-being of children. Major cuts were made to the foundational areas of support for children and families including programs for nutrition, maternal and child health, and nutrition, and nearly all education programs were eliminated.¹ While the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) is a priority of the *America First Global Health Strategy*, the set-aside for orphans and vulnerable children has been abandoned.² Alongside funding cuts, the current U.S. presidential administration dismantled USAID, transferring remaining functions, awards, and about 6% of directly-hired U.S. government staff to the State Department on July 1, 2025.³ Nearly all of the specialized technical staff that had overseen U.S. government foreign assistance for the development, care, and protection of children were eliminated across multiple agencies.

Cuts in these areas not only shrink direct programming but also destabilize multilateral initiatives that relied on U.S. contributions to unlock matching resources from other governments and philanthropic partners. Following the U.S. foreign aid cuts, several other countries followed in announcing reduced aid budgets, including France, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The result is a contraction in available resources at precisely the moment when children's needs globally are escalating as a result of the climate crisis, escalating conflicts, and other humanitarian emergencies.⁴ The abrupt withdrawal



of resources has left partner governments and civil society scrambling to meet needs with diminished capacity, threatening decades of progress in safeguarding children's rights and well-being. The cuts and subsequent disruption has been estimated to have cost over half a million children's lives in one year alone.⁵

Investing in the protection, care, and development of vulnerable children is both a moral and economic imperative. Early interventions in education, health, nutrition, and child protection and care consistently deliver high returns on investment by reducing future social welfare costs, increasing lifetime earnings, and fostering social stability.⁶ Conversely, under-investment results in higher rates of poverty, crime, unemployment, exploitation, and health crises, each demanding far costlier responses later. Positioning child well-being as a driver of national development makes a strong fiscal case for sustained and expanded investment, even under budget constraints. While the U.S. Congress passed nearly level funding for education, child development and protection, maternal and child health, and nutrition for fiscal year 2026 in February 2026, there remain concerns on whether and how funds will be spent and the capacity of the Department of State to execute these programs given massive loss of expertise.

In response to these dramatic shifts, Georgetown University's Collaborative on Global Children's

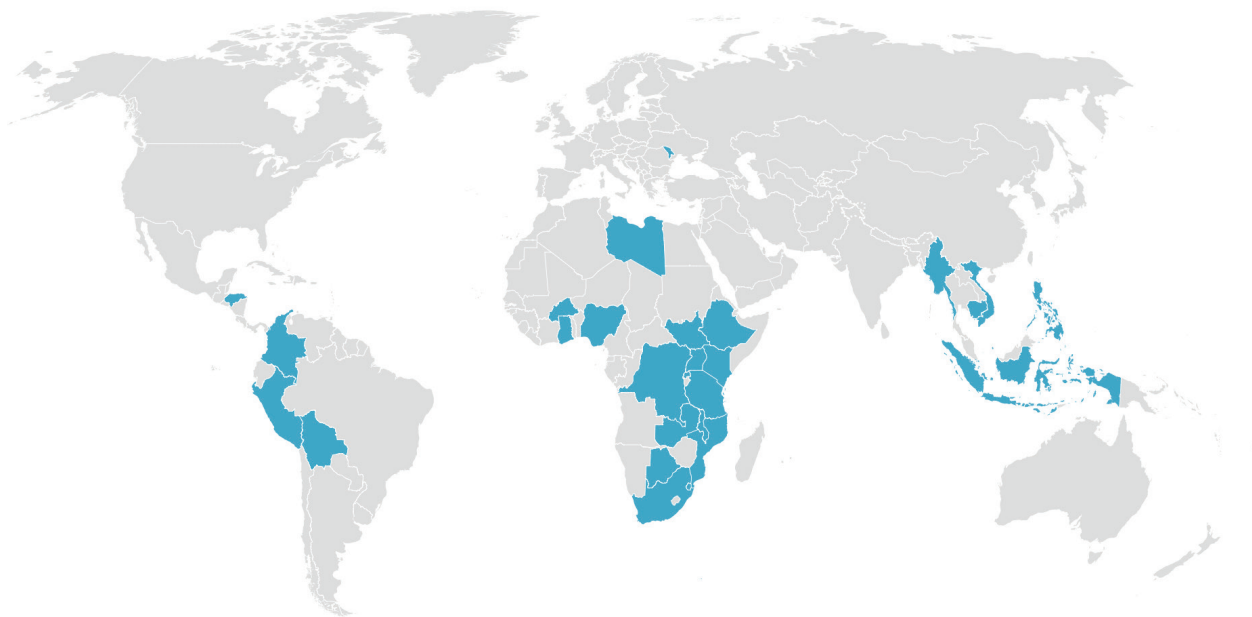
Issues mobilized to [safeguard knowledge](#) and examine how the U.S. government's decisions affect vulnerable children and their families. As part of the [Children in Adversity Project](#), this report summarizes collective recommendations developed through consultations with civil society organizations and persons with lived experience who are on the frontlines of responding to the needs of children and families, alongside governments. An accompanying report, "[A Legacy of Care: Historical Perspectives and Lessons from 35 Years of U.S. Government Support to Children in Adversity](#)," details the history and lessons learned from the U.S. government's efforts to strengthen children's development, care, and protection.

Methodology and Approach

A two-stage process was used to capture the immediate impacts of recent U.S. government foreign aid cuts on children and families and provide a set of recommendations on how to best elevate children's development, care, and protection within this new funding-scarce environment. First, between March and April 2025, approximately 45 discussions were held with key experts and advocates (12 donors, 11 networks, seven multilaterals, six international non-governmental organizations [NGOs], and nine child development, care, and protection experts, academics, and people with lived experience) identified through the networks of



COUNTRIES REPRESENTED IN FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS WITH LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS AND PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE



former USAID staff members. These conversations explored the immediate impacts of the funding cuts and potential pathways for collective action.

Following these consultations, the collaborative convened eight structured two-hour focus group discussions from May to September 2025 to gather deeper insights from local civil society organizations and people with lived experience on the front lines. In total, 94 people across 29 countries—including 59 participants across 45 local civil society organizations, 15 participants across 12 organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) or disability inclusion-focused organizations, and 20 youth and persons with lived experience—were consulted. These sessions examined the operational and human consequences of funding reductions, identified urgent service gaps, and generated early ideas to address priority needs and maintain momentum in child protection, care, and development despite the changing landscape. Input from a variety of technical experts, including the members of the Children in Adversity Project, contributed to the recommendations, suggesting strategies on how to pivot toward new ways of working. The draft

recommendations were shared and revised following three public stakeholder consultations held in October and November 2025 and organized in conjunction with three global networks: Better Care Network, Early Childhood Development Action Network, and the INSPIRE Working Group. These consultations reached nearly 200 additional stakeholders and technical experts. Findings were organized into four key themes and formed the basis of the recommendations outlined in this report. Anonymized excerpts from the discussion included here are taken from discussion notes and are not verbatim quotes.

Findings on the Impact of Funding Cuts on Children’s Development, Care, and Protection

Impacts of Foreign Aid Cuts on Children and Families

The U.S. government’s abrupt and severe funding cuts disrupted essential support services that

many families rely on, including education, health care, nutrition support (including malnutrition treatment), economic development opportunities for caregivers, social services, and social protection programs such as food aid.

The abrupt nature of cuts did not give governments or organizations time to plan and prepare for transition to local structures and move away from dependency—which is a transition, that if it were planned, is good—but now the damage that has been done will take generations to repair.

– NGO representative

Children experiencing adversity—such as those facing poverty, displacement, stigma, and exclusion due to disability, family separation, or violence—were the hardest hit. During the consultations, stakeholders reported interrupted health services, children no longer able to attend school, children being spontaneously returned to unsafe environments with no support due to reductions in social services, and children with disabilities abruptly losing access to vital services and treatment such as seizure medication. There were also stories of cuts to assistive technology programs, which left essential equipment intended for distribution to children with disabilities abandoned in warehouses because overburdened health systems lacked funds for training and distributing these resources. Reductions in family strengthening, foster care, and family reintegration initiatives heightened the risk of children being placed in residential care, reversing previous gains in care reform. As front-line workers continue to lose funding, the continuity of care that once protected children from neglect and abuse is collapsing and the safety net is shrinking—creating conditions that participants feared would lead to a return of cycles of trauma, exploitation, and family separation.

Impacts on Organizations and Governments

U.S. government foreign aid cuts have sent shockwaves through governments and local civil society organizations across Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. Local civil society organizations reported widespread layoffs and cuts to programs, including closures of community services, early childhood development centers, catch-up classes, HIV outreach services, and disability-inclusive programming. In Uganda, long-standing health and gender-based violence programs for children and families have closed, while in Moldova, refugee-focused learning centers and psychosocial support spaces have been dismantled. Participants reported an overwhelming feeling of broken trust as they faced governments and communities without the resources they needed to deliver on previously agreed commitments. OPDs reported feeling particularly vulnerable. After years of committed advocacy and fighting for equity, funding shortfalls are diminishing their influence.

The visibility and influence of organizations of persons with disabilities has shrunk, and grassroots advocacy has been undermined.

– OPD representative

Without USAID's steadfast and catalytic support, many disability coalitions stand to lose far more than just funding—they risk losing their collective voice.

– OPD representative





The strain on governments is equally severe. Many faced major funding shortfalls, including the loss of critical workforce capacity and data systems previously supported by USAID and other U.S. government foreign assistance. In Ghana, local organizations report reductions in sexual and reproductive health services for young people due to cuts to UNICEF and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) sub-grants, while child well-being committees and district-level child protection structures have become inactive due to funding losses.⁷ These funding gaps have contributed to fractured coordination systems, weakened referral networks, and loss of organizational and technical capacity in case management, care reform, and other areas of expertise. There are real risks of backsliding, as weakened government systems lead to a resurgence of privately funded residential care and orphanages, while efforts to professionalize and recognize the social service workforce risk reverting to transactional, undervalued roles for social workers and unskilled actors. Local civil society organizations are justifiably concerned about being sidelined by governments, which may impact government accountability and transparency in fulfilling their role as duty bearers for children's rights.

Amid this crisis, both civil society and governments are attempting to adapt, finding ways to do more with less. Some organizations are experimenting with local resource mobilization and shared service delivery, while others are forming coalitions to advocate for sustained investment in children's well-being. Without new resources, however, the progress made in child protection, care reform, early childhood development, and disability inclusion will continue to unravel. As governments and funders weigh tradeoffs of limited resources, stakeholders are already reporting that children with disabilities are being left out.

Donors do not see a return on investment or value for money in supporting these children. But, this [cost-effectiveness case] is not the case that works for supporting children with disabilities as we are overcoming systemic barriers that are going to take time to undo.

— NGO participant



PART 2: RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations identify priority actions to sustain and strengthen evidence-based interventions, mitigate further backsliding, and reimagine the foreign assistance architecture so it prioritizes children and families, strengthens local and national systems that protect their well-being, and enhances synergies across local, regional, and global networks that drive learning and accountability. Recommendations are accompanied by a series of illustrative strategies to implement and examples from organizations driving efforts forward.

These recommendations emphasize rebuilding and protecting systems that keep children and families' well-being at the center of policy, governance, and service delivery. In many instances, the recommendations reinforce long-standing priorities that were already being operationalized, but that remain unrealized or need additional support to ensure their sustainability. In this period of shrinking aid and rising isolationism, limited resources must be strategically prioritized to both sustain proven interventions and identify innovative approaches that deliver more effectively for children and families.

First, aid infrastructure must be reimagined by shifting power and resources to local actors, balancing emergency relief with sustained, long-term system investment, and upholding the principle of “nothing about us without us” to ensure meaningful participation by children, families, and communities. **Second, governments need to be empowered to prioritize children’s development, care, and protection** by strengthening local, inclusive, multisectoral systems; resourcing local civil society

and organizations of people with lived experience to support and hold governments accountable; and investing in a capable, motivated workforce to deliver quality services. **Third, sustained progress depends on strengthening coordination and learning** across local, national, regional, and global levels, establishing or expanding local mechanisms to improve efficiency and improving synergies across regional and global platforms for collaboration, evidence-based advocacy, shared learning, and accountability. **Finally, this moment calls for maximizing efficiencies and diversifying funding** through collaboration, increasing domestic financing, and mobilizing innovative and non-traditional resources to ensure long-term sustainability and equitable support for every child.

The decimation of USAID and foreign assistance has been devastating for children and families. Yet we must promote continued coordination and solidarity across the sector, while working to reshape and rebuild an aid system that responds to the needs of children.

A: Reimagine Aid Infrastructure to Prioritize Children and Families

Reimagining foreign assistance for the future means putting children, families, communities, and local actors—especially those facing adversity—at the heart of how aid is designed, delivered, and sustained. The current global aid architecture is often fragmented, reactive, and overly centralized, leaving local actors under-resourced and communities vulnerable when crises hit.





Reimagine Aid Infrastructure to Prioritize Children and Families

Past Limitations	Pivot to the Future
Bilateral donors, funders, and international organizations made decisions in consultation with national stakeholders.	Shift power and resources to national and local actors.
Humanitarian and development sectors were often siloed, with limited ownership and decision-making by local stakeholders.	Balance emergency relief with the necessary long-term investment in local systems necessary for children and families to prevent, prepare for, and navigate crises.
People with lived experience and marginalized populations—including children, young people, families, and persons with disabilities—were consulted but not systematically included in program development and implementation.	Adhere to the principle of “nothing about us without us” in the design, implementation, and monitoring of all initiatives.

A.1: Shift Power and Decisions to National and Local Actors

Power imbalances in foreign aid have been long understood and challenged, from critiques of neocolonialism to the more recent decolonizing aid movement. USAID set its first target for channeling more resources to local organizations in 2010⁸ and continued to evolve its approach to a “journey to self-reliance” and “localization strategy” under subsequent administrations.⁹ Despite making progress, overall, these efforts failed to achieve a shift of power to national and local actors, and children have only benefited from a small proportion of total aid, particularly in humanitarian contexts.

The sudden cuts and unpredictability of funding forced organizations and communities to be resourceful and act in solidarity for survival, with communities showing their resilience in continuing to care and protect their children. The decimation of the U.S. government foreign aid architecture in the immediate term further undermined efforts to shift power to local actors by defunding thousands of local NGOs and causing entirely preventable harm to children, including death.¹⁰ Nevertheless, philanthropic and other donors have the opportunity to continue to create structures and practices that shift power to national and local actors and ensure children are not left behind.

SUSTAINABILITY OF INVESTING IN LOCAL COMMUNITY STRUCTURES

In Uganda, [Child's i Foundation](#) has long recognized grandmothers as a vital part of the solution through kinship care, supporting them as primary caregivers for children who would otherwise be at risk of separation. The local organization established grandmothers' peer support groups that connected caregivers, strengthened social support, and enabled access to group savings and loans, supported by financial literacy training and practical guidance to help families stay safely together. Following funding cuts, these grandmothers, already caring for extended family members, continued to provide practical care and mutual support through their own networks, sharing resources, checking in on one another, and working with local organizations to support at-risk children and households in their communities. Child's i has continued to work alongside other civil society organizations and local government structures to strengthen this approach, reinforcing kinship care, improving caregiver support, and building more coordinated community-based responses that keep children within families wherever possible.

FACILITATING DIRECT FUNDING TO LOCAL ACTORS

Platforms like [EPIC-Africa](#) are making it easier for philanthropy to connect with local civil society actors while also strengthening the organizational capacity of their members. Led by Africans, EPIC-Africa maps local civil society organizations and their capacities to facilitate connections with philanthropy.

Some funders, such as [Firelight Foundation](#), have developed successful models for channeling funding to local community-based organizations to implement their solutions in their communities, strengthening community child protection systems from the bottom up.

Previous efforts have fallen short of achieving this transformation, and new ways of working are urgently needed. Donor resources must reinforce and scale community-led models of care and support existing community structures rather than introducing external models and undermining local efforts. This approach includes supporting recognized elders such as grandmothers, parent associations, youth groups, and local faith-based organizations, as well as community-driven support mechanisms like group savings and loans.

Communities have been caring for one another long before the arrival of foreign aid and will continue to do so long afterward. These cultural and community systems have been a critical lifeline for sustained care for children and families following the sudden U.S. government withdrawal of funding support.

Financial and technical resources must be directed to national governments and local civil society organizations that deliver frontline services. Local



civil society—including NGOs, community and faith-based organizations, and associations of persons with lived experience—provide essential support to vulnerable children and their families, who lack political power. They need to be actively engaged to inform policy development, service design, delivery and accountability, and budgeting. The historical constraints to direct funding, such as high perceived risk and limited organizational capacity to manage large grants, can be overcome through leveraging Global South-led platforms, pooled funding models, and more adaptive grant-making approaches.

A.2: Balance Emergency Relief with the Long-term Investment in Systems Necessary to Prevent and Navigate Crises

Children and families are facing a polycrisis—conflicts, epidemics, climate change and natural disasters, displacement, deepening economic inequality, and political instability. The need to respond to humanitarian crises is growing, but diverting resources away from the systems needed to prevent further crises is shortsighted. Donor funding has often fragmented humanitarian and development responses despite, in many cases, serving the same children, families, and communities. As crises are becoming continually more protracted and climate change is affecting communities across the world, this divide becomes even more problematic.

Estimates indicate that less than 2% of global humanitarian funding reaches local actors directly.¹¹ Humanitarian funding has flowed disproportionately to large international NGOs. Coordination structures have historically been top-down, sidelining local organizations and undermining existing government systems that have the trust, contextual knowledge, and long-term commitment essential for sustainable recovery and resilience. This imbalance has undermined local ownership and limited investments in national child protection and care systems, particularly in fragile and crisis-affected contexts.

Mainstreaming child protection means systematically integrating child safety, well-being, and rights across all humanitarian and development policies, programs, and operations—rather than confining them to a standalone specialty—so as to prevent harm and maximize positive, rights-based outcomes for children. Today, mainstreaming children's development, care, and protection across sectors will be a key strategy to ensure children's needs are met. While this approach comes with risks of dilution, constrained resources necessitate a focus on identifying strategies for successful integration.

By channeling more resources through local structures and supporting multilateral platforms that intentionally draw upon and build local capacity, donors can help ensure that humanitarian and development funding alike contribute to stronger, more equitable systems that keep children in the center. This approach will meet immediate needs and also strengthen the systems that protect children long after crises subside.

LOCALIZING HUMANITARIAN FUNDING

The [Resilio Fund](#) launched in 2025 by Legatum is pooling donor resources to channel funds directly to locally-led NGOs that provide microgrants to community-led initiatives to respond to crises. This approach aims to more quickly mobilize resources to the communities that respond to crises. By putting the resources in the hands of these community actors, Resilio Fund aims to scale localized, sustainable solutions.

PREPARING AND RESPONDING TO CLIMATE CHANGE

The [Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood](#), in partnership with UNICEF and Save the Children, has been mobilizing its network members and broader early childhood development stakeholders to better recognize the links between climate change and early childhood development and to integrate approaches that strengthen preparedness and response. The network has produced advocacy tools and other resources, such as the [Most Vulnerable to the Most Valuable](#) report and [Resilient Futures](#) youth photovoice project, to generate action across sectors.

A.3: Adhere to the Principle of “Nothing about us without us” in the Design, Implementation, and Monitoring of All Initiatives

The principle of “nothing about us without us” is rooted in the conviction that policies, programs, and services must be designed with the full participation of those directly affected. In the context of child development, care, and protection, this principle calls for the active inclusion of children, youth, families, and individuals with lived experience in shaping the systems that impact their lives. Culture and identity shape the ways in which care is given, and when persons with lived experience are trusted to set their own priorities, solutions are more likely to be accepted and sustained. True capacity strengthening means enabling—not directing—local leadership and ensuring that organizations of persons with lived experience have the resources, technical support, and authority to act. Centering people with lived experience in every stage of programming recognizes their agency and capacity to co-create, focusing on services that address real needs rather than donor assumptions and priorities. Children, young people, families, and organizations of persons with disabilities bring essential insights into both the barriers they face and the assets they can leverage, increasing accountability and relevance in program design, implementation, and monitoring. Evidence

increasingly shows that when affected communities are meaningfully involved in decision-making, outcomes are more sustainable and equitable.¹²

There are well-established best practices to guide the engagement of persons with lived experience, including providing adequate safeguards, so that engagement does not lead to harm, retraumatization, or exploitation. These practices include embedding informed consent, privacy protections, and referral pathways into all engagement, along with equipping facilitators with training in trauma-informed practice, child protection, and inclusion.

In addition to these best practices, resources need to be provided directly to networks and organizations led by persons with lived experience, enabling them to set community priorities and engage in policy and program design. Governments and programs also need to budget for necessary accommodations to enable meaningful participation, which could include, for example, staff training for safeguarding, sign language interpretation, printing communication materials in alternative formats, and flexible transport reimbursements to accommodate appropriate, safe transportation. One additional consideration in engaging children directly is tailoring approaches to their developmental level so they can meaningfully contribute their perspectives.

ENGAGING CHILDREN IN HUMANITARIAN POLICIES AND PROGRAM DESIGN

The Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution partnered with researchers and non-profit organizations to publish a series of case studies¹³ on participatory approaches for engaging young children in the design of early childhood programs and policies in humanitarian contexts. The case studies feature examples from Bangladesh, Colombia, and Turkey, leveraging creative methodologies such as photovoice and art.

ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH CARE EXPERIENCE

The [Kenya Society of Care Leavers](#) developed guidance¹⁴ for policymakers, practitioners, faith-based organizations, mass media, and volunteers on how to engage young people who have aged out of the care system.

The [Global Social Service Workforce Alliance](#), in collaboration with the Associação Brasileira Terra dos Homens (Brazil), Miracle Foundation (India), Child's i Foundation, and the Association of Care Leavers (Uganda), with technical support from Child Frontiers and funding from the Martin James Foundation, has implemented a [multinational, multiyear project](#) to learn from and amplify the knowledge and expertise of young people with lived experience of care, their families, and social workers serving vulnerable children to develop a range of new training and advocacy tools to strengthen the social service workforce in support of family-based care.

B: Empower Governments to Prioritize Children's Development, Care, and Protection

Governments are ultimately responsible for ensuring that every child can grow up safe, healthy, and supported. Achieving this requires more than policies and plans; it demands accountability, sustained investment, and meaningful partnerships with the people and organizations closest to children's lives. As foreign assistance fluctuates, it is crucial that national governments are empowered to prioritize child well-being. This means building inclusive,

multisectoral systems that link education, health, social protection, social welfare, and justice sectors; recognizing and resourcing local civil society and organizations of persons with lived experience to support and hold governmental institutions accountable; and investing in a skilled, motivated, and coordinated workforce capable of delivering quality services at scale. At the foundation of these efforts lies the urgent need to increase domestic financing for children's development, care, and protection, ensuring that progress is both resilient and self-sustaining. Together, these actions strengthen governments' mandate and accountability and reaffirm a collective commitment to ensuring that every child can reach their full potential.

Empower Governments to Prioritize Children’s Development, Care, and Protection

Past Limitations	Pivot to the Future
Siloed approaches to children and families’ needs within distinct sectors with often limited coordination and communication.	Strengthen local, inclusive, and multisectoral systems supporting children and their families.
Governments supported and held accountable by bilateral and multilateral donors and international organizations.	Recognize and resource local civil society and organizations of persons with lived experience to support and hold governments accountable.
Governments reliant on foreign aid to support an adequate workforce, with limited coordination across sectors and between the formal and informal workforce.	Support increased public investments in an adequate, competent, and coordinated formal and informal workforce to deliver on priorities across sectors for children’s development, care, and protection.

B.1: Strengthen Local, Inclusive, and Multisectoral Systems Supporting Children and Their Families

Coordination to provide services for vulnerable children and their families across ministries and between national, subnational, and local levels is weak in many countries. Siloed funding and fragmented service delivery dilute impacts and leave gaps in systems of development, care, and protection for children. Strengthening holistic and integrated services for vulnerable children and their families requires governments to take genuine ownership across sectors. This should have a particular focus on local cross-sectoral approaches to strengthen systems from the bottom up. This means that community councils, municipalities, subnational authorities, and national ministries share responsibility for planning, financing, and monitoring child and family-focused services and outcomes. Ownership is not simply about managing donor-funded programs. It is about embedding externally-funded services into national and local coordination, service delivery, and staffing infrastructures, as well as budgets, so they can be sustained over time. By aligning priorities and budgets from the community level upward, governments can ensure that the needs of the most marginalized children and families are consistently met, even when foreign aid fluctuates. Some governments have been actively strengthening policies, service delivery, and coordination mech-

anisms; building the capacity of the social, health, education, and other allied workforce; and conducting costing exercises. However, these efforts cannot succeed overnight, and the abrupt cuts to foreign aid are likely to result in a backsliding of previous gains in system capacity.

To preserve essential gains, stakeholders must continue to prioritize efforts that empower governments to strengthen integrated multisectoral systems for children’s development, care, and protection. Key elements are national, subnational, and local strategies and policies; an adequate and capacitated workforce (see recommendation B.3); coordination mechanisms (see recommendation C.1.); and standards for quality service delivery. These should be supported by cross-sectoral approaches and tools such as integrated case management and referral mechanisms, as well as nationally-owned administrative data systems for monitoring children’s development, care, and protection and tracking progress toward improved well-being and development outcomes. This needs to be accompanied by costing exercises and investment cases to inform dedicated budgets for children’s development, care, and protection. Efforts should also include supporting governments to embed child and family-focused services across all relevant sectors into national and local budgets, staffing, and policies.



STRENGTHENING LOCALLY COORDINATED AND GOVERNMENT-LED CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

In Ghana, the [Integrated Social Services](#) (ISS) approach aims to improve the delivery of social services across the country by strengthening intersectoral collaboration among social welfare, social protection, health, labor, education, and justice actors at the decentralized district and national level. Falling within the broader scope of the decentralization in Ghana, the initiative helps address multidimensional poverty and vulnerability, with a strong focus on promoting linkages between health, child protection, sexual and gender-based violence, social protection, education, youth employment, and justice services.

INTEGRATING CHILD WELFARE SERVICES INTO LOCAL GOVERNMENT PLANS AND BUDGETS

In Odisha, India, with the support of [Changing the Way We Care](#), district child protection officers have been working with district magistrates to deliver training to equip village and community development block-level officials to integrate child welfare activities into their Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) and to allocate and use their 5% untied funding. (Panchayat are rural local self-government structures at the village and community development block levels; a block level is a subdivision of districts.) Recently, in one district, 74 out of 149 Gram Panchayats have completed their plans. In another district, the annual child welfare allocation was increased from INR 7.9 million to INR 9.3 million, and in a third, support was provided to 25 vulnerable adolescent girls to aid their education.¹⁵

Looking forward, newer ways of working must focus on aligning donor funding with government-led priorities. These investments should strengthen cross-sectoral national strategies and systems for children's development, care, and protection. Increased investment is needed in national, interministerial coordination grounded in whole-child and family-centered approaches. Donor-funded social safety nets for children and families should be progressively integrated into national budgets and financed by national governments. These efforts could be supported through

government-led co-case management approaches implemented in partnership with local civil society stakeholders. Digital tools should be strengthened to support national, subnational, and local monitoring and analysis of interventions and inform government decision-making. Examples include dashboards to monitor policy implementation and ensure alignment with best practices and global standards. Data could also be used to determine the cost-effectiveness of systems-strengthening approaches (compared to interventions that target specific groups) and increase equity and inclusion.

STRENGTHENING LOCALLY COORDINATED AND GOVERNMENT-LED CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

In Cambodia, the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth (MoSVY) and the Ministry of Interior developed and are implementing the Child Protection Sector Strategic Implementation Plan¹⁶ to:

- strengthen ownership and leadership at commune, district, province, and national levels, leading to enhanced accountability and system capacity;
- improve systematic coordination such that actions of donors and NGOs are aligned with the plan; this will help MoSVY and the Ministry of Interior to efficiently utilize their scarce human resources, which are otherwise pulled in various directions by demands from different donors and NGOs;
- develop a common program vision, goal, and purpose among diverse actors on strategic priorities and spending, leading to increased coherence of interventions in the sector;
- expand the fiscal space by creating evidence of better planning, efficient use of resources, and better results to make the case for greater funding for child protection from the Ministry of Economy and Finance;
- improve monitoring, evidence generation, and reduced duplicative reports with One Plan, One Report; and
- enable the Cambodian government to achieve long-term systemic change and sustainability through a strengthened bottom-up child protection system.

The implementation of this sector plan was supported through standard operating procedures, a strengthened government and civil society social service workforce, co-case management between government and civil society frontline workers (see recommendation B.2), and an online child protection information dashboard¹⁷ to track progress.

B.2: Recognize and Resource Civil Society and Organizations of Persons with Lived Experience to Support and Hold Governments Accountable

Civil society organizations play a vital role in supporting governments and holding them accountable for children’s development, care, and protection. When adequately funded and empowered, civil society acts as independent monitors of public commitments—tracking budget allocations, service delivery, and outcomes at both national and community levels. Through citizen-led budget monitoring, social audits, and participatory policy reviews, civil society provides critical feedback

loops between governments and the populations they serve.¹⁸ Organizations of persons with lived experience—such as associations of caregivers, young people, and persons with disabilities—bring local insights and legitimacy to oversight processes, ensuring that programs reflect real community needs (see recommendation A.3).¹⁹ Evidence from the Global Partnership for Social Accountability shows that countries that institutionalize civil society participation in policy design and monitoring achieve higher transparency scores and better service equity outcomes.²⁰ Sustained collaboration between governments and civil society therefore not only enhances public trust, but also helps align

HOLDING GOVERNMENTS ACCOUNTABLE TO ADDRESS VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

[The BRAVE Movement](#) holds governments accountable for protecting children from violence by turning public commitments into measurable expectations grounded in evidence, survivor leadership, and coordinated advocacy. BRAVE uses data such as violence against children surveys to expose gaps between promises and reality, amplifies the voices of survivors and young people to apply sustained political pressure, and mobilizes civil society to demand legal reform, adequate financing, and strengthened cross-sector systems. By keeping violence against children visible on national and global agendas, the movement sustains pressure on governments to move beyond rhetoric and deliver real, system-level change.

PROMOTING GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT IN VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

The first [Violence Against Children Ministerial](#) was held in Bogota, Colombia in November 2024. Both the ministerial and the global pledges are critically important as a high-level political platform that sustains global momentum to prevent and respond to violence against children, particularly amid significant cuts to U.S. government foreign assistance. By convening governments, survivors, civil society, and donors, the ministerial reinforces shared commitments, elevates national ownership, and anchors accountability within country systems rather than external funding alone. It provides a space for governments to reaffirm policy reforms, align financing across sectors, and leverage diverse resources—including domestic budgets, multilateral funding, and philanthropy—to mitigate the impacts of reduced U.S. government support. In doing so, the Violence Against Children Ministerial helps keep violence prevention and child protection firmly on political agendas and supports continuity of action even in a constrained global funding environment.

national systems with the principles of inclusion, efficiency, equity, and responsiveness critical to child well-being.

To preserve essential gains, stakeholders must continue to support local civil society and organizations of persons with lived experience to hold governments accountable for their commitments and pledges to children, such as commitments to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as well as pledges under the Sustainable Development Goals, the Global Ministerial on Violence Against Children, the Tashkent Decla-

ration, and the Global Care Reform Campaign. Governments should continue to convene and coordinate donors and civil society, including organizations led by persons with lived experience, to uphold their ultimate responsibility for the welfare of children in their countries. Governments should be supported to foster on-the-ground collaboration through frequent, transparent communication and engagement with local civil society; identify gaps in services for children in adversity and their families, including those caused by foreign aid cuts; and collectively strategize how to bridge these gaps.

INVESTING IN LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY NETWORKS TO SUPPORT COORDINATED COMMUNITY-LED RESPONSES AND STRUCTURES

In Cambodia, local civil society stakeholders have played a critical role in filling service gaps for vulnerable children and families.

Through the [3PC](#) and [Family Care First](#) networks, co-case management was established between local government and civil society frontline workers to support community-led responses and structures in alignment with the Child Protection Sector Strategic Implementation Plan mentioned above. Progressively, co-case management between local civil society and government frontline workers increased government-led coordination and capacity to support children and families holistically. Investments in the government and civil society's social service workforce, along with the adoption of the Strategic Plan for Training the Social Service Workforce and a National Training Curriculum, have also been essential to ensuring coordinated service provision to children and families.

This approach was accompanied with the costing of evidence-based support and services, externally funded and delivered through government-supported community structures and workforce in partnership with local civil society, which helped drive increased commune- and provincial-level public allocations.

In addition, Family Care First supported the association of young people with lived experience of the care system to advocate for care reform and inform policies and services.

Looking forward, newer ways of working must focus on accelerating innovation and expanding donors' investments in local associations of people with lived experience and in civil society's advocacy and interventions that hold governments accountable to protect and support the rights of all children, including those who may be less visible, such as children with disabilities, LGBTQI+ children, and other vulnerable and marginalized groups. Shared performance indicators across national, regional, and global accountability frameworks should be strengthened to help translate resources into measurable improvements in children's lives. Data and evidence should be regularly collected and shared as a public good to track national, subnational, and local progress and gaps with global standards to inform solutions to meet these standards.

B.3: Invest in an Adequate, Motivated, and Competent Workforce

Reduction of U.S. foreign assistance has accelerated the erosion of human capital within national systems for child development, care, and protection. Both local organizations and government departments report losing a substantial amount of their workforce, who possessed years of institutional memory, technical expertise, and trusted community relationships. This expertise cannot be quickly replaced.²¹ The resulting brain drain will be a critical detriment toward the continuity, quality, and accountability in essential services for children, particularly in fragile or low-resource settings. These cuts exacerbate an already under-resourced workforce despite the evidence that countries with adequate and well-supported workforces

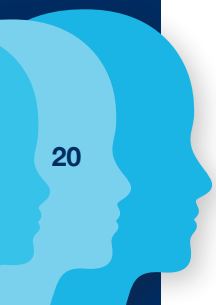


demonstrate stronger outcomes in family preservation, resilience, and effective violence prevention and response.²² The result is a growing mismatch between policy ambition and implementation capacity. Competitive compensation, performance-based incentives, and accredited training opportunities are essential to retain skilled social workers, child protection workers, health workers, teachers, and other frontline workers within national systems. With the erosion of the formal workforce, the burden to protect and care for vulnerable children and their families has fallen on an already stretched thin community workforce that has continued to support children and families despite limited to no support. Supporting and strengthening the community workforce is a priority, as well as a strategic investment in the most adaptive, cost-effective, and context-specific service delivery system available.

Donors and governments must co-resource a fit-to-purpose, motivated, and coordinated formal and informal workforce as part of core support and social sector planning. Embedding professional development and retention schemes into sectoral strategies for child development, care, and protection will be a key strategy for the sector to survive. In the context of ongoing aid reductions, protecting this workforce and expertise is both a moral and economic imperative: an investment in human capital that secures future generations' capacity to thrive.²³ Increasing government investments and collaboration with universities and higher education institutions can strengthen and grow the workforce—especially frontline social service workers—to fill the gap left by foreign assistance reduction.

AN INVESTMENT CASE FOR STRENGTHENING THE SOCIAL SERVICE WORKFORCE

In Kenya and Zambia, investment cases for strengthening their social service workforce for child protection showed that long-term investments yield high returns in child well-being, social stability, and economic growth. In Kenya, the investment case highlighted that for less than 0.15% of the country's total national budget, the government of Kenya can prevent and respond to violence against children, which affects 9.15 million children and costs 4.89% of GDP. Informed by the investment case, the Kenyan Public Service Commission recently approved the hiring of over 650 social service workers in the State Department for Children Services, the majority of which are child protection case workers. In Zambia, the investment case highlighted that for less than 1% of the total budget, government can prevent and respond to violence against children, which affects 4.1 million children and cost Zambia 9.12% of GDP in 2021.²⁴ As a result of advocacy using this data, the minister for community development and social services made a public pledge to recruit 5,000 social welfare officers by 2027. Accordingly, the Public Service Management Division (PSMD) developed, finalized, and presented to the cabinet for approval a comprehensive proposal for the recruitment and deployment of 2,600 new social welfare officers in 2026, aiming to strengthen child protection services nationwide.



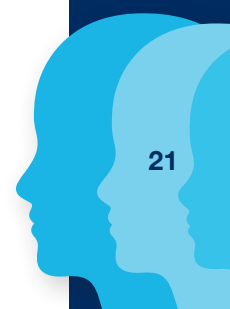
Looking forward, we must recognize, expand, and support the community workforce, whether voluntary or paid, as a strategic and recognized investment to ensure sustainability and resilience. This should include training, supportive supervision, and financial support. Alliances with local organizations, faith-based groups, and youth-led and other persons with lived experience-led networks need to be explored to sustain services through resource-sharing. Focused investments in emerging digital tools should be considered to facilitate training and ease the workload of front-line workers.

C: Support Local, Regional, and Global Networks for Coordination, Evidence Repositories, and Knowledge Exchange

Sustained progress for children’s development, care, and protection depends on the strength of the networks and systems that connect local, national, regional, and global actors. The fragmentation caused by recent foreign assistance cuts has

revealed how essential coordination and shared learning are to achieving lasting impact. Local coordination mechanisms, such as community child protection committees or subnational coordination mechanisms, are often the first line of response during crises and the foundation for long-term system strengthening. Yet, many of these structures have weakened due to reduced funding and the loss of a trained workforce. At the same time, regional and global multistakeholder networks remain critical for driving evidence-based policy and practice, technical learning, and collective advocacy. However, these networks and structures are now facing funding constraints that threaten their ability to convene, coordinate, hold countries accountable, and sustain evidence repositories essential for policy and program decision-making.²⁵ Preserving and strengthening these collaborative structures—particularly those that have leadership from the Global South—will enable the child development, care, and protection community to continue generating and applying evidence that informs best practice globally, accelerates learning, holds stakeholders accountable, and improves outcomes for children and families everywhere.

Support Local, Regional, and Global Networks for Coordination, Advocacy, Evidence Repositories, and Knowledge Exchange	
Past Limitations	Pivot to the Future
Local coordination mechanisms were not always formally recognized and often disconnected from subnational and national mechanisms.	Establish or expand local coordination mechanisms, from the community to national levels, to improve efficiencies and effectiveness.
Global, regional, and multistakeholder collaborative networks and structures were fragmented.	Preserve and strengthen synergies across global and regional multistakeholder collaborative networks and structures as platforms for driving evidence-based change and advocacy.



C.1: Establish or Expand Local Coordination Mechanisms, from the National to Community Levels, to Improve Efficiencies and Effectiveness

Multisectoral coordination necessary for providing holistic services for vulnerable children and their families at national and subnational levels is weak in many countries. Siloed funding and fragmented delivery dilute impact and leave gaps in systems essential for ensuring children's optimal development, care, and protection.

As highlighted in Section B, we must continue to support government structures from national to local levels that coordinate across ministries and engage civil society and private sector actors to help promote systems that are better able to support children and families more holistically, reducing redundancy and addressing weaknesses (see recommendation B.1). Local civil society organizations are advocates for their community's needs, and local coalitions need to be supported to allow civil society to organize, align around collective priorities, and support accountability (see recommendation B.3).

Looking forward, newer ways of working must focus on strategies that enable ongoing engagement in coordination, which takes dedicated time and planning in an environment of fewer resources. Scarcity of resources can often lead to less collaboration, and sometimes greater competition, across civil society. However, it will be essential to prioritize collaboration across local civil society to share platforms, technical expertise, and advocacy resources that can reduce costs, keep coordination functions alive, reduce duplication, expand reach, and prevent further fragmentation. Leveraging existing community networks and groups, such as grandmother groups, youth associations, or other structures, can extend the reach of formal services, and exploring ways to recognize, support, or (where appropriate) formalize these networks could further amplify their impact. It is also critical to strengthen coordination capacity and increase the availability of data at local levels to inform decisions and advocate for needed resources from higher levels of government. Digital tools may provide opportunities to facilitate communication and collect, report, and use data efficiently.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEADING COORDINATION AND INVESTMENTS FOR ECD

The [Future Hope of Addis Ababa Early Childhood Development Program](#) was launched by the mayor of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 2021 and serves as a model of locally-led programming and strong local coordination. The initiative aims to ensure that every child in the capital receives high-quality early childhood care and development services. The city coordinates across sectors, including health and education, to provide access to developmentally supportive health and nutrition services, parent coaching via home visits by trained health extension and social workers, community-run day care centers, publicly financed day care centers, and preschool. In addition, the initiative established the African Center for ECD to serve as a hub of learning, innovation, and collaboration to advance evidence-based practices in Ethiopia and beyond. By combining municipal leadership and public investment with partnerships across civil society, philanthropy, and community networks, the initiative serves as a model of local leadership and coordination to support children.

C.2: Preserve Global and Regional Multistakeholder, Collaborative Networks and Structures as Platforms for Driving Evidence-based Change and Advocacy

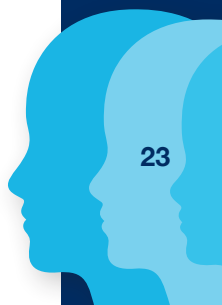
The abrupt changes to foreign assistance have elevated calls for national sovereignty and self-reliance and shaken many multilateral institutions, with massive reforms underway across U.N. agencies and development banks. However, prioritizing local leadership in the reimagined aid architecture does not need to, and should not, mean a retreat from multilateral collaboration and exchange. Global and regional multistakeholder networks and collaborative structures create essential spaces and opportunities for learning, exchange, advancing evidence-based practices, and knowledge generation. They also serve as crucial accountability mechanisms. The sustainability of these networks is increasingly precarious due to sudden funding

reductions and widespread layoffs of technical experts around the world who were core to their functioning and effectiveness.

It is paramount to preserve global and regional multistakeholder networks to safeguard knowledge and continue to provide opportunities for learning and exchange that will advance the fields of children's development, care, and protection. Networks, alliances, working groups, and multilateral structures are essential to maintaining coordination, standard-setting, and shared advocacy grounded in children's development, care, and protection. They connect practitioners, governments, and researchers; maintain resource hubs helping local and national systems access technical guidance; promote accountability; and enable local learning to inform global standards. Without these networks and knowledge systems, progress for children becomes fragmented, less effective, and more vulnerable to political shifts.

FACILITATING LOCAL PEER LEARNING AND COLLABORATION TO SUPPORT FAMILY CARE

The [Transforming Children Care's Transitioning Residential Care Working Group](#) has been pivotal in bringing together local civil society actors supporting the transition from residential care services to family care and community services with key knowledge and peer learning²⁶ to improve collaboration and promote and scale up good practice. The working group has also been instrumental in connecting local practitioners with global stakeholders and networks, such as [Faith to Action](#), who engage donors in high-income countries to redirect their funding to support family care.



GLOBAL NETWORK SUPPORTING NATIONAL ADVOCATES IN RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

The new [Moving Minds Alliance Strategy 2025-2030](#), *Reimagining Early Years Crisis Response*,²⁷ focuses on building an inclusive, locally-led global ecosystem that amplifies the voices of children and affected communities through strengthening partnerships with refugee-led organizations, local journalists, researchers, and other stakeholders to shape policy, partnerships, and solutions, using a dynamic framework that adapts to emerging needs. As part of this shift, Moving Minds Alliance is transforming its approach to donor advocacy. Rather than a narrow concentration on donor countries, the alliance is working with national advocates to mobilize resources from local governments, field-based donors, and regional and national financing mechanisms to improve early childhood development for children in crisis.

However, preserving networks and multilateral structures for collaboration does not preclude the need for change. Global alliances, networks, working groups, and knowledge-sharing platforms must make a concerted effort to expand leadership from across the globe, identify synergies across one another, and, where appropriate, combine efforts to reduce fragmentation and duplication and operate more efficiently in a more resource-constrained environment. Networks and multilateral structures can also serve as hubs for technical assistance, but these systems need to be democratized to elevate opportunities for local or regional technical assistance, rather than defaulting to technical assistance models that rely on Western organizations. With just five years remaining on the Sustainable Development Goals, these networks can serve as accountability mechanisms to ensure global commitments and agreed targets are met and strengthen progress through sharing the data on progress, latest evidence, best practices, and advocacy tools. Regional multilateral bodies—such as the [African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child](#), [ASEAN's regional cooperation on social welfare and development](#), and the [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights](#)—are also central to support and hold governments accountable to best practice. Regional and global networks can also be vital

resources for governments and civil society to access evidence, guidance, and tools that can help countries respond to national priorities for children's development, care, and protection.

D: Maximize Funding through Increasing Efficiencies and Mobilizing New Resources

Sustaining progress for children requires a fundamental rethinking of how resources are generated, allocated, and used. Governments, donors, and civil society must adopt an approach that prioritizes efficiency, coordination, and shared accountability. Streamlining administrative processes, harmonizing reporting requirements, and aligning program objectives across sectors can significantly reduce duplication and transaction costs, allowing limited resources to reach more children, more effectively.

In addition, as foreign aid dwindles, domestic financing and other resources must grow to sustain and improve systems for children's development, care, and protection. National budgets must reflect the central role that child well-being plays in social and economic development, with dedicated budget lines for social services, workforce development, and child- and family-focused

Maximize Funding through Increasing Efficiencies and Mobilizing New Resources

Past Limitations	Pivot to the Future
Governments and civil society were overreliant on large, multiyear foreign aid funding.	Maximize funding through increased efficiencies, diversifying and mobilizing new resources.
Governments' national budgets did not prioritize required services and workforce for all children to reach their full development.	Increase domestic financing for children's development, care, and protection.
Governments, civil society, and other stakeholders were dependent on traditional funding models with limited flexibility.	Develop innovative financing mechanisms and mobilize new and non-traditional funders for children's development, care, and protection.

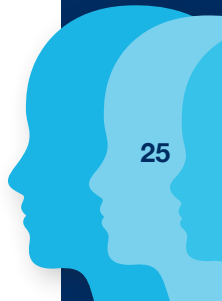
programs. Increasing domestic revenue through progressive taxation, budget reallocation, and social impact frameworks will help governments reduce dependency on volatile aid flows.

D.1: Improve Efficiencies and Reduce Costs through Improved Collaboration and Coordination

Enhancing efficiency in child and family-focused systems has become increasingly urgent as funding declines and service demands rise, requiring organizations and governments to do more with less. Many civil society organizations operate with overlapping mandates, parallel structures, and limited resources—challenges that can lead to duplication, fragmentation, and reduced impact. In this constrained environment, strengthening collective approaches is essential to maintain core child development, care, and protection functions, especially for underserved communities. The context now requires systems to move beyond isolated efforts toward integrated models that emphasize shared responsibility, coordinated action, and strategic investments that maximize reach and effectiveness of every dollar.

To preserve essential gains, stakeholders must continue to prioritize data and digital integration as core system-strengthening practices. Aligning tools with national data systems—rather than

creating siloed or fragmented platforms—ensures that information flows efficiently, duplication is minimized, and decision-makers can access timely, actionable data. When supported by strong ethical safeguards and data protection practices, integrated digital systems enhance transparency, improve resource allocation, and support more effective case management and service delivery. Further, data can be used to identify efficiency gains by better targeting resources to areas of greatest need and by monitoring benefits of investments to guide continuous improvement in allocating resources where they will have the greatest impact.



IDENTIFY OPPORTUNITIES FOR EFFICIENCY BY LEVERAGING COSTING TOOLS

The [Childhood Cost Calculator \(C3\)](#)—developed by the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution—allows users to estimate unit and total costs, as well as identify cost drivers, for a broad range of early childhood development. Building upon prior tools and learnings from [in-country pilots](#), C3 further enhances usability by offering a simple online interface that supports robust cost data collection, analysis, and visualization—features especially useful when assessing trade-offs, planning for scale, or comparing interventions for more efficient allocation of resources.²⁸

Looking forward, civil society organizations can reduce operational and service delivery costs. From consultations, some organizations reported strengthened coalition-based approaches, pooling resources with peer organizations to share costs and amplify their voice in advocacy. Others have invested in capacity building, such as improving financial management, monitoring systems, and storytelling to attract a wider range of funders. By adapting in these ways, some local civil society organizations have not only survived the abrupt U.S. foreign aid withdrawal but also positioned themselves as more independent, innovative, and community-rooted actors in advancing children's development, care, and protection.

D.2: Increase Domestic Financing

Increasing domestic financing for children's development, care, and protection is critical to building sustainable national systems that can withstand volatility in global aid flows. As international funding declines, particularly from traditional donors such as the United States, United Kingdom, and European Commission, governments must assume greater responsibility for prioritizing children within national budgets. Domestic resources including investments in child protection, health and nutrition, early learning, and early intervention for children

with disabilities are essential. Furthermore, governments must ensure that funds dedicated to children are not only budgeted, but efficiently disbursed and monitored, to ensure they reach the most vulnerable children, including children with disabilities, those in alternative care, and children affected by conflict, poverty, or displacement. Mechanisms such as earmarked taxes and public-private partnerships can help expand the fiscal space for investments in children. This shift is not only a matter of sovereignty and long-term sustainability but also an economically sound investment.

Looking ahead, new ways of working will be crucial to expanding and optimizing domestic financing for children. Governments, civil society, and partners can expand newer financing strategies—such as matched funding arrangements with philanthropies, private-sector partnerships, and progressive taxation models—to increase available resources while upholding children's rights. Investing in cross-sector mechanisms such as interministerial budget committees and multisector task forces can help align priorities, pool resources, and integrate services across education, health, social protection, and justice sectors. These approaches promote efficiency, reduce duplication, and enable more holistic, cost-effective programming.

PROMOTING MEANINGFUL FINANCING TO STRENGTHEN CHILD PROTECTION

World Vision and the Oak Foundation, in partnership with Foreign Policy Analytics, collaborated on a first-of-its kind global assessment of how 20 countries across five regions allocate and disclose national budgets to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse (CSA). The Safeguarding Childhood Report examines the transparency of government spending, the alignment of budgets with national policies, and the balance between prevention and response efforts. Drawing on extensive document review, expert interviews, and cross-country analysis, the study finds that despite rising rates of CSA, most governments fail to clearly identify or adequately fund CSA-related initiatives, particularly prevention, leaving critical gaps in child protection systems. The report highlights trends, strengths, and weaknesses across countries and offers actionable policy recommendations to strengthen budgeting practices, improve accountability, and ensure that national commitments translate into meaningful protection for children. World Vision is leading efforts across Indonesia, Kenya, the Philippines, Tanzania, and Uganda to equip advocates, governments, and civil society organizations with tools to track, analyze, and influence child protection budgets; build capacity through evidence-based budget monitoring and advocacy; publish policy briefs; and promote survivor- and youth-led advocacy at every level.²⁹

SECURING GLOBAL AND NATIONAL COMMITMENTS TO FINANCE EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

The [Theirworld](#)-led [Act For Early Years campaign](#) is a global push to ensure every child has access to quality early childhood care and education—grounding its advocacy in the science that 90% of brain development happens before age 5. The campaign brings together governments, donors, civil society, businesses, and youth advocates with the goal of mobilizing at least US\$1 billion in new funding for early childhood, raising political priority for the early years, and embedding early childhood development into the global development agenda.

At the G20 in South Africa,³⁰ it was announced that the first-ever International Finance Summit for Early Childhood will take place in 2027. The summit will convene leaders from governments, business, philanthropy, multilateral institutions, and civil society to secure long-term investments and commitments—examining innovative financing solutions, strengthening domestic funding, and scaling cost-effective, evidence-based early childhood interventions to guarantee universal access to quality health, education, childcare, and family support for young children.

D.3: Develop Innovative Financing Mechanisms for Non-governmental Actors and Mobilize New and Non-traditional Funders

In response to declining foreign aid, many organizations are pursuing partnerships with the private sector, experimenting with social enterprise models, and leveraging digital fundraising and diaspora networks to reach individual supporters. While private sector engagement has grown, local groups noted that companies tend to fund discrete activities rather than broader systems-strengthening, which they consider a government responsibility.

Sustaining progress will require funding models that truly center local actors, supported by donor reforms that make resources more accessible and flexible. Simplified applications, flexible budgeting, and capacity-strengthening grants can help smaller organizations overcome existing barriers and access funding opportunities. Local civil society organizations emphasized that increased line-item flexibility—often provided only during crises—was

especially valuable for maintaining essential services as much as possible while adapting to rapidly changing conditions. Going forward, innovative financing and collaborative governance models can expand opportunities for locally led organizations. Promising avenues include pooled or joint funding linked to national strategies; seed funding for private sector engagement; blended finance approaches such as impact bonds; and greater use of Global South-led platforms that connect local civil society directly with donors. Strengthening evidence generation and monitoring will also be critical for making the case for restored or sustained investment and for demonstrating the long-term risks of reversing progress for children's care and protection. At the same time, strategic multimedia campaigns and targeted advocacy can help mobilize public, philanthropic, and policy support for community-owned solutions. To appeal to a wider range of funders, organizations are investing in internal capacities—from financial management and monitoring systems to stronger storytelling.

OUTCOMES FUNDING FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD

The [Education Outcomes Fund](#), in partnership with governments and funders, has launched three outcomes funds for early childhood education in [Rwanda](#), [South Africa](#), and Sierra Leone. The model ties funding to the achievement of results, ensuring that early childhood education programs improve children's development and meet expected levels of service quality. It gives implementers the freedom to adapt and be innovative, rather than prescribing activities, but keeps the focus on achieving results for children.



CONCLUSION

The 2025 aid retrenchment has decimated steady, system-building partnerships precisely when children’s development, care, and protection require continuity, equity, and technical depth. Left unaddressed, interruptions in essential services, workforce attrition, and the erosion of service delivery mechanisms and data systems will compound disadvantages for the most vulnerable children and increase long-run fiscal costs for governments and donors alike.

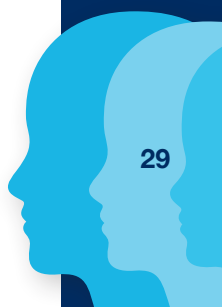
This report has outlined pragmatic steps forward. In the immediate term, donors and governments should stabilize core child-focused functions: frontline social service workers, disability-inclusive early childhood services, family strengthening and case management, and national information systems that link health, education, social protection, and justice. Funds should flow in greater proportion to local organizations and public systems with the cultural reach and staying power to sustain recovery. Meaningful participation—“nothing about us without us”—must be operationalized through budgeted roles for children, youth, and persons with lived experience across planning, implementation, and monitoring, with robust safeguarding.

Government, civil society, and donors should co-finance government-led, cross-sectoral

strategies that embed whole-child approaches and align portfolios behind national priorities; expand domestic fiscal space for child well-being; and invest in the social service workforce as a strategic national asset. Regional and global networks—and the evidence repositories they maintain—are not optional overhead. They are the infrastructure that keeps standards, guidance, and comparative learning available when individual projects end or agencies realign. Preserving, modernizing, and identifying synergies across these platforms will prevent the loss of institutional memory and help sustain quality at scale.

Finally, the aid community should protect and expand the evidence base that underpins effective policy: open-access archives; standardized, disaggregated data; and shared performance indicators that translate resources into measurable improvements in children’s lives.

By acting on the priorities set out here—stabilize core services, center local voices, protect the front-line workforce, localize financing, and safeguard knowledge—donors, governments, and civil society can keep children at the center of policy and financing decisions, even in a constrained environment. That is both a moral imperative and a sound investment in shared stability and prosperity.



AUTHORS

[Mattito Watson](#) is a senior fellow with the Georgetown University Collaborative on Global Children's Issues, where he contributes to the collaborative's efforts around centering children in adversity in a changing landscape of foreign assistance and funding, with a focus on prevention and response to violence against children; the impacts of technology and artificial intelligence on children's development, care, and protection; and promotion of strong child safeguarding practices.

[Catherine Kirk](#) is a senior fellow with the Georgetown University Collaborative on Global Children's Issues, where she contributes to the collaborative's efforts around centering children in adversity in a changing landscape of foreign assistance and funding, with a focus on early childhood development and families of children with disabilities.

[Severine Chevre](#) is a senior fellow with the Georgetown University Collaborative on Global Children's Issues, where she contributes to the collaborative's efforts around centering children in adversity in a changing landscape of foreign assistance and funding, with a focus on children's care and protection and social services.

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ABOUT THE CHILDREN IN ADVERSITY PROJECT

The [Children in Adversity Project](#) at the Georgetown University Collaborative on Global Children's Issues is stewarding knowledge, partnerships, and reflection at a time of unprecedented changes in U.S. foreign assistance. Led by former United States Agency for International Development experts with decades of global experience, we engage local leaders, partner with young people, amplify the voices of persons with lived experience, and work across sectors to reimagine support for children, youth, and families in today's complex global environment.

About the Collaborative

The Georgetown University Collaborative on Global Children's Issues fosters cross-disciplinary research and dialogue on critical and emerging challenges affecting children around the world, with a particular focus on children in adversity and pathways to resilience. The collaborative is:

- committed to creating opportunities that are child-centered;
- grounded in the lived experiences of children, their families, and communities;
- responsive to current and emerging needs and useful to actors working in a variety of contexts and capacities to meet them;
- evidence-informed and solutions-oriented; and
- building effective bridges between young people and stakeholders involved in practice, policy, and research.

APPENDIX 1: OVERVIEW OF RECOMMENDATIONS WITH ILLUSTRATIVE STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

A. Reimagine Aid Infrastructure to Prioritize Children and Families

Recommendation A.1: Shift power and decisions to national and local actors.

Illustrative Strategies for Implementation		Government	CSO	Donors
A. 1. 1	Channel more financial and technical resources directly to national governments and local civil society partners that deliver frontline services.			✓
A. 1. 2	Increase direct outreach, support to, and coordination with local civil society and ensure they are actively engaged to inform policies, services, and budgeting decisions.		✓	✓
A. 1. 3	Reinforce and scale community-led models of care, services, and support, prioritizing existing community structures rather than external models.	✓	✓	✓

Sustain and Strengthen

Efforts should strengthen and invest in community-led solutions, recognizing the inherent knowledge and expertise of local actors on how to solve problems facing their own community rather than placing greater value on external expertise. Investments in children’s development, care, and protection—particularly for the most vulnerable children and families—can be strengthened by building on constructive cultural practices.

Recommendation A.2: Balance emergency relief with the long-term investment in systems necessary to prevent and navigate crises.

Illustrative Strategies for Implementation		Government	CSO	Donors
A. 2. 1	Channel humanitarian funding and resources to local organizations and government systems with deep cultural knowledge, trust, and commitment that can sustain beyond the emergency period.			✓
A. 2. 2	Support, maintain, and train the government and local civil society frontline workforce on emergency preparedness and early warning systems, with an increased focus on engaging the local community through a child and family-sensitive lens.	✓	✓	

Sustain and Strengthen

Mainstream children’s development, care, and protection across sectors for both humanitarian response and development work to maximize benefits for children and families and safeguard from potential harms. Document examples of where this approach works well and share with relevant national, regional, and global networks.

Recommendation A.3: Adhere to the principle of “nothing about us without us” in the design, implementation, and monitoring of all initiatives.

Illustrative Strategies for Implementation		Government	CSO	Donors
A. 3. 1	Provide direct funding and flexible grants to networks led by people with lived experience that have cultural trust and ensure funds reach hard-to-reach, marginalized populations.		✓	✓

A. 3. 2	Engage and work with young people, associations of people with lived experience, community members, community groups, and local leadership to inform policies and services, prioritize needs, support community workforces in providing essential services, monitor who is being excluded, and adapt outreach strategies to close service gaps.		✓	✓
A. 3. 3	Adequately budget for the full participation of persons with lived experience in the design of policies, programs, services, and other initiatives.	✓	✓	✓

Sustain and Strengthen

Commitments to centering persons with lived experience in decision-making requires ensuring adequate safeguards to protect their participation and prevent retraumatization or exploitation, as well as partnering with trusted community leaders and grassroots networks to reach marginalized groups intentionally and ethically. All engagement with children, families, and people with lived experience should be safe, inclusive, empowering, and grounded in informed consent and trauma-informed practice. There should also be clear referral pathways for those requiring additional support.

B. Empower Governments to Prioritize Children's Development, Care, and Protection

Recommendation B.1: Strengthen local, inclusive and multisectoral systems supporting children and their families.

Illustrative Strategies for Implementation		Government	CSO	Donors
B. 1. 1	Align donor funding with government-led priorities, strengthening cross-sectoral national strategies and systems components that support children's development, care, and protection and take a whole-child and family approach rather than reinforce sector-specific silos.			✓
B. 1. 2	Donor-funded social safety nets for children and families should be progressively integrated within sustainable, long-term government-owned systems, for example through government and civil society co-case management approaches.	✓	✓	✓
B. 1. 3	Strengthen local, subnational, and national interministerial coordinated investments in whole-of-child and family-focused approaches.	✓		

Sustain and Strengthen

All stakeholders should sustain and scale efforts that empower governments to strengthen local, integrated multisectoral systems for children's development, care, and protection. This includes through national, subnational, and local strategies and policies; coordination mechanisms; standards for quality service delivery; and a capacitated and effective workforce. This should be supported by cross-sectoral approaches and tools, such as integrated case management and referral mechanisms, and nationally-owned administrative data systems (including digital data management systems) for monitoring children's development, care, and protection and for tracking progress toward improved well-being and development outcomes. Dedicated budgets informed by costing exercises and investment cases are also essential. Efforts should further support governments in embedding child-focused services across all relevant sectors into national and local budgets, staffing, and policies.

Recommendation B.2: Recognize and resource civil society and organizations of persons with lived experience to support and hold governments accountable.

Illustrative Strategies for Implementation		Government	CSO	Donors
B. 2. 1	Fund advocacy and interventions led by local civil society and associations of persons with lived experience that support and hold governments accountable to protect and support the rights of all children, including those who may be less visible such as children with disabilities, LGBTQI+ children, and other vulnerable and marginalized groups.			✓
B. 2. 2	Fund the development and strengthening of shared performance indicators across national, regional, and global accountability frameworks as these mechanisms help translate resources into measurable improvements in children’s lives.	✓		✓
B. 2. 3	Collect data and evidence that track progress and gaps with national, regional, and global standards to inform solutions to meeting these standards.		✓	

Sustain and Strengthen

Donors and international civil society stakeholders should sustain and strengthen their support to local civil society and organizations of persons with lived experience to hold governments accountable for their commitments and pledges to children, such as commitments to the Convention on the Rights of the Children and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as well as pledges under the Sustainable Development Goals, the Global Ministerial on Violence Against Children, and the Global Care Reform Campaign. Civil society should continue to use evidence, advocacy, and case studies to demonstrate the needs of children and families in adversity on the ground to raise awareness and advocate for accountability and resources. Governments should continue to convene and coordinate donors and civil society, including organizations of persons with lived experience, to support them to fulfill their mandate as ultimately responsible for the welfare of children in their countries; foster on the ground collaboration through frequent transparent communication and engagement with local civil society; and identify gaps in services for children in adversity and their families, including those caused by foreign aid cuts, and strategize how to bridge these gaps.

Recommendation B.3: Invest in an adequate, motivated, and competent workforce.

Illustrative Strategies for Implementation		Government	CSO	Donors
B. 3. 1	Recognize, invest in, and support the community workforce, whether voluntary or paid, as a strategic investment, not charity, to ensure sustainability and resilience, including with training, supportive supervision, and financial support such as stipends.	✓	✓	✓
B. 3. 2	Build alliances with local organizations, faith-based groups, and youth-led networks to sustain services through resource-sharing.		✓	
B. 3. 3	Invest in emerging digital tools that would facilitate training and ease the workload of frontline workers.			✓

Sustain and Strengthen

All stakeholders should sustain and strengthen the investment in an adequate and well-capacitated frontline workforce, informed by costing exercises and investment cases. This should include sustainable, professional development opportunities for the social service, education, and health formal and informal workforce, in particular frontline staff. Governments should increase investments and collaboration with universities and higher education to strengthen and grow the workforce, especially frontline social service workers, to fill the gap left by reduction in foreign assistance.

C. Support Local, Regional, and Global Networks for Coordination and Evidence Exchange

Recommendation C.1: Establish or expand local coordination mechanisms, from the national to community levels, to improve efficiencies and effectiveness.

Illustrative Strategies for Implementation		Government	CSO	Donors
C. 1.1	Work collaboratively across local civil society to share platforms, workforce, technical expertise, and advocacy resources, reducing costs and keeping coordination functions alive to reduce duplication, expand reach, and prevent further fragmentation within sectors.		✓	
C. 1.2	Recognize, support, and potentially formalize community networks and groups to support government work and reach.	✓	✓	✓
C. 1.3	Strengthen coordination capacity and data availability through coordination mechanisms at the local level. Explore use of digital tools to facilitate communications and access to data.	✓	✓	✓

Sustain and Strengthen

Support local coordination mechanisms and coalitions that can advocate for children collectively and strengthen collaboration and coordination across civil society and government stakeholders.

Recommendation C.2: Preserve global and regional multistakeholder, collaborative networks and structures as platforms for driving evidence-based change and advocacy.

Illustrative Strategies for Implementation		Government	CSO	Donors
C. 2.1	Identify synergies across regional and global networks to reduce fragmentation and duplication of efforts and to foster multisectoral approaches.		✓	✓
C. 2.2	Share new evidence, data, and advocacy tools across regional and global networks so there are a greater number of assets to mitigate the impacts of budget cuts, and foster synergies across networks to reduce duplication and fragmentation.	✓	✓	✓
C. 2.3	Draw upon regional and global multilateral structures and networks for key evidence, analysis of trends, guidance, tools, and approaches to respond to national priorities.	✓		

Sustain and Strengthen

Stakeholders continue to support and strengthen regional and global networks, working groups, and alliances that safeguard knowledge and drive coordination in children's development, care, and protection. Donors, CSOs and regional networks continue to strengthen open-access databases, research collaboratives, and practitioner learning platforms. Donors increase funding for key networks that support children and provide essential infrastructure for sharing guidance, standards, and tools across countries. Likewise, multilateral structures, including the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Child Protection Area of Responsibility, African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, ASEAN, and U.N. regional initiatives, require sustained technical and financial support to help governments monitor progress, align with global norms, and respond to emerging risks. CSOs need to continue to prioritize participation in and direct support to these partnerships, which will help fill the coordination and knowledge gaps left by diminished U.S. engagement, ensuring that collective capacity to protect children not only endures but strengthens.

D. Maximize Funding by Increasing Efficiencies and Mobilizing New Resources

Recommendation D.1: Improve efficiencies and reduce costs through improved collaboration and coordination.

Illustrative Strategies for Implementation		Government	CSO	Donors
D. 1. 1	Work collaboratively across civil society to share platforms, technical staff, and advocacy resources, reducing costs and keeping coordination functions alive to reduce duplication, expand reach, and prevent further fragmentation within sectors.		✓	

Sustain and Strengthen

Donors, governments, and CSOs need to continue to explore the application of digital technologies aligned with national data systems to avoid fragmentation, to increase efficiencies, and to provide more timely data to inform decision making and improve targeting and cost-effective responses.

Recommendation D.2.: Increase domestic financing.

Illustrative Strategies for Implementation		Government	CSO	Donors
D. 2. 1	Leverage philanthropic funding to advocate for matched domestic funding and explore domestic resource mobilization opportunities for children’s development, care, and protection, including private-sector partnerships and progressive taxation.	✓		✓
D. 2. 2	Fund national interministerial budget committees and cross-sector task forces to align priorities, pool resources, and integrate services across sectors.	✓		✓

Sustain and Strengthen

Develop the investment case to increase domestic resource allocations for children’s development, care, and protection and encourage interministerial and joint programming.

Recommendation D.3. Develop innovative financing mechanisms for non-governmental actors and mobilize new and non-traditional funders.

Illustrative Strategies for Implementation		Government	CSO	Donors
D. 3. 1	Pilot new, longer-term commitments through pooled and joint funding, aligned with government-led national strategies that advance local priorities for children’s development, care, and protection.			✓
D. 3. 2	Provide seed funding or incentives to advance private sector and blended finance models, such as impact bonds, that support community-owned interventions.			✓
D. 3. 3	Invest in multimedia campaigns and evidence-based advocacy tailored to policymakers, the public, and donor audiences.		✓	

Sustain and Strengthen

Use evidence and advocacy to target a wide range of funders, including bilaterals, foundations, private donors, corporate partnerships, and diaspora support, including working with regional and local donors to fill gaps and improve local funding streams.

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