

A young boy with short dark hair, wearing a red t-shirt and blue shorts, is smiling and holding a hula hoop. The hula hoop is orange and blue. In the background, there are green trees and a person in a red dress.

THE SMARTEST MOVE:

**Why the EU must invest in
every child, everywhere**

BRIEFING PAPER



**Save the
Children**

Save the Children believes that every child deserves a future.

In Europe and around the world, we work every day to give children a healthy start in life, the opportunity to learn and be protected from harm. When crisis strikes and children are most vulnerable, we are always among the first to respond and the last to leave. We ensure children's unique needs are met and their voices are heard. We deliver lasting results for millions of children, including those hardest to reach.

We do whatever it takes for children – every day and in times of crisis – transforming their lives and the future we share.

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On the cover: Abudu having fun with a hula hoop. Photo: Save the Children in Uganda

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CAAC	Children and Armed Conflict
CAAFAG	Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups
CP	Child Protection
CRS	Creditor Reporting System
CVA	Cash and Voucher Assistance
CWA	Child Well-being Assistance
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSDDD	Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
CSRD	Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive
DG ECHO	Directorate-General European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
DG INTA	Directorate-General for International Partnerships
DFI	Development Finance Institution
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EC	European Commission
EFSD+	European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus
EIB	European Investment Bank
EiE	Education in Emergencies
EPP	European People's Party
EU	European Union
EY	Ernst & Young
FTS	Financial Tracking Service (UN OCHA)
GG	Global Gateway
GERF	Global Europe Results Framework
HAT	Holistic Assessment Tool
HIPs	Humanitarian Implementation Plans
LDC	Least Developed Country
LIC	Low-income Country
LMICs	Low- and Middle-income Countries
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
NDICI-GE	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PDB	Public Development Bank
PPP	Pilot Programmatic Partnership
RRM	Rapid Response Mechanism
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
TEI	Team Europe Initiative
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNCRC	UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
USAID	US Agency for International Development
WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
WBIF	Western Balkans Investment Framework

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The European Union (EU) has a strong policy framework for supporting children's rights in development cooperation and humanitarian aid, yet the share of Official Development Assistance (ODA) allocated to child-related initiatives remains disproportionately small, especially when compared to the size of young populations in ODA-recipient countries, where children represent approximately 46% of the total population.

This paper argues that investments in children — beyond being a moral imperative — can be a key area in creating an enabling environment that is a crucial foundation for investments in other areas, including trade and infrastructure. Investing in children strengthens the enabling environment by building an educated and skilled workforce. It mitigates instability, fosters democratic values, and contributes to public health resilience — factors that directly impact Europe's economic and security interests. Drawing from Save the Children's rich experience through case studies in health, education in emergencies, and child protection, this paper also highlights concrete successes in supporting children worldwide.

The post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) negotiations will shape the EU's capacity to uphold commitments to children, but securing sufficient ODA funding will be challenging amid competing priorities like defence, migration, and economic competitiveness. With shifting political dynamics, including pressures to align external financing with EU interests and budget cuts across member states, maintaining or increasing ODA levels will require a strong narrative that clearly demonstrates its strategic value for Europe's security, competitiveness, and global influence.

Looking ahead, ensuring that investments in children remain central to the EU's political agenda is critical. As the EU prepares for the negotiations of the next long-term budget, human development — including investments in children — should be recognised as a catalyst for achieving broader EU priorities. Within its 360-degree approach, Global Gateway (GG) offers a strategic opportunity to mainstream and directly target children's needs, reinforcing the EU leadership in sustainable development. However, safeguarding children's rights requires a more comprehensive approach that goes beyond development and humanitarian aid. The EU must also consider its broader global footprint, ensuring coherence across regulatory frameworks, corporate sustainability policies, and international investment strategies. By integrating children's needs across all facets of its external action, the EU can strengthen its global influence, foster resilient societies, and secure long-term economic and political stability.



1. INTRODUCTION



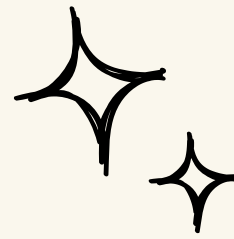
The EU institutions play a key role in global development and the promotion of children's rights. As one of the largest donors of ODA and a major humanitarian actor, the EU institutions can promote children's rights worldwide. They have also set ambitious goals to protect and empower children through external action.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, human development, under which many programmes that support children fall, received high priority in EU external financing.¹ However, in recent years, the EU has increasingly emphasised its own interests in international cooperation, notably through the Global Gateway strategy, which aims to support sustainable connectivity worldwide through investments in both hard and soft infrastructure. Strengthening the 'soft aspects', such as investments in education and health, would help address concerns about the initiative's adaptability to fragile and conflict-affected contexts, as well as its capacity to benefit vulnerable groups, including children. The upcoming negotiations for the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework provide an opportunity to reaffirm the EU's commitment to children's rights.²

This policy brief examines the political and funding challenges in prioritising children's rights in EU external action. It reviews key policy commitments, their implementation in spending, and opportunities to strengthen the EU's support for children under its post-2027 external financing. It is based on a policy review, complemented by quantitative analysis of ODA data, and interviews with selected stakeholders in the EU institutions and a member state. Our analysis shows that despite the strong mandate that EU key policies give to support children's rights in external action, the EU still has room to scale up its funding to support children. Furthermore, we argue that investments in children are a key condition to Global Gateway's success. Investments in children alleviate factors that can lead to instability in partner countries; they contribute to enabling environments for European businesses, and they can have a key role in promoting European interests. This paper also highlights Save the Children's successful approaches and partnerships in health, education in emergencies, and child protection.

While European decision-makers should acknowledge the long-term socioeconomic benefits of child-focused investments, including through ODA, it is important to recognise that fulfilling children's rights is not merely an economic calculation, but a legal obligation enshrined in international law. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified by all EU Member States, alongside other international human rights instruments, establishes comprehensive protections that can only be realised through concrete policies and supported by adequate, equitable, and effective public resource mobilisation, allocation, and spending. The rights-based approach must remain primary, ensuring children are viewed as rights-holders first and foremost, rather than solely as future economic assets.

2. CHILDREN IN THE EU'S DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN POLICIES



The EU's policy framework gives a strong mandate to support children's rights through development cooperation, rooted in the Lisbon Treaty, which mandates the promotion of intergenerational solidarity and child protection.³ The European Consensus for Development (2017) commits to creating a safe environment for children, with investments in nutrition, health, and education.⁴ In recent years, however, the EU's international cooperation has shifted more decisively towards serving the EU's own and mutual interests with partner countries, weakening the EU Consensus as a reference document for external engagement.

In 2021, the EU released its first ever strategy on the rights of the child. While it primarily has an internal focus, it includes an external dimension aiming to strengthen the EU's efforts in child protection and combat child labour globally.⁵ Sectoral strategies, such as the Global Health Strategy⁶, the EU Action Plan on Nutrition⁷, and the Gender Action Plan III⁸, further reference children's rights in their respective areas.



Seydou Keita / Save the Children

At the funding level, the **Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-GE)**, with an envelope of EUR 79.5 billion, includes important language on children. It emphasises that **children are key agents of change**, incorporating children's rights, protection, and participation across both its geographic and thematic pillars. It also sets obligations to apply a rights-based approach and calls for particular attention to the rights of the child.⁹

In humanitarian assistance, the EU policy framework provides clear and comprehensive guidance on children. The European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid (2008) puts the protection of vulnerable populations, including children, to the front and centre of the EU's humanitarian action and reaffirms the EU's commitment to humanitarian aid principles.¹⁰ Accordingly, EU humanitarian aid is delivered solely based on needs and to alleviate human suffering, with a special attention to the most vulnerable. EU Humanitarian Aid Regulation provides a broad legal framework for humanitarian aid but does not provide specific thematic priorities. Thematic priorities are defined through 1) a series of policy guidelines in various sectors and 2) the General Guidelines on Operational Priorities for Humanitarian Aid that are updated yearly. The General Guidelines 2022-2025 **show growing consistency in addressing children's rights, with increasing attention to vulnerable groups and education in emergencies.**¹¹ The policy guidelines include children's rights cross-cuttingly in various sectors, including health, disability inclusion, WASH, food security, displacement, and climate change. This reflects a comprehensive commitment to child protection.

The **EU Guidelines on Child Protection** set priorities for a rights-based approach and multilateral engagement, while the **EU Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC)** support EU actors in addressing the short-, medium-, and long-term impacts of armed conflicts on children¹². The 2024 revision of the latter has spurred efforts towards a more integrated approach, strengthening the links between humanitarian aid and development cooperation, political and policy dialogue with partners, and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions.

In conclusion, the EU's policy framework provides a solid foundation for supporting children's rights and needs in both development cooperation and humanitarian aid. The EU's various strategies, guidelines, and sectoral approaches reflect a commitment to addressing children's specific needs, especially in health, education, and protection. Yet, the question is to what extent the EU has translated the ambitions into consistent, high-profile action across all external policies, which will be the focus of the next sections.



3. EU EXTERNAL ACTION FUNDING TO CHILDREN



This section will present estimates of aid spending in sectors that most likely benefit children. Estimates for 2017-2021 rely on the data gathered and analysed by World Vision International and Ernst & Young (EY). For 2022 and 2023, we supplemented the data using the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Creditor Reporting System (CRS) database, tracking EU institutions' bilateral ODA investments in children. Our methodology combined sector-based allocations of pre-selected key sectors with targeted keyword searches in project descriptions to provide a broad picture of child-relevant ODA, including humanitarian assistance (see Annex 1 for details).

We then zoomed in on the EU's humanitarian aid, using data extrapolated by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' (UN OCHA) Financial Tracking Service (FTS). We applied a similar methodology to the one applied used for aid overall, but this time covering the year 2023.

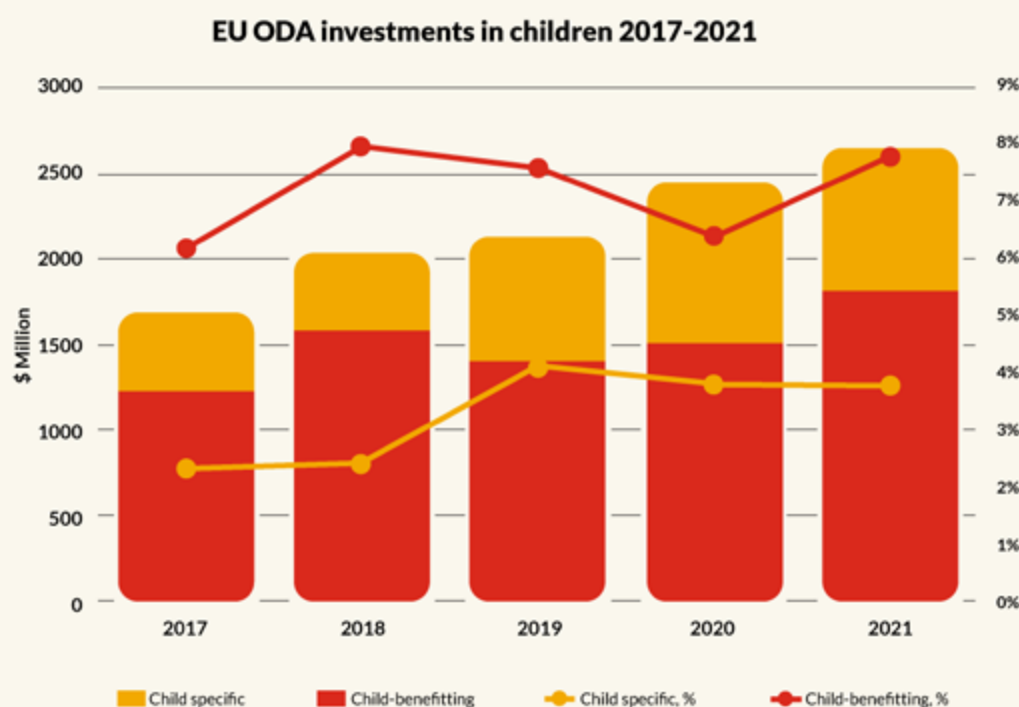
Tracking aid spending that directly benefits or targets children in an accurate manner is a challenge, since neither the EU institutions nor the OECD's Development Assistance Committee have an aid reporting system that enables this. Due to the lack of an accurate reporting system, our analysis is partly based on keyword searches. It may over- or underestimate the actual spending: key words included, such as 'minor' or 'young' can be used in contexts that are not linked to children, but projects that are very relevant to children can be left unidentified if the keyword search doesn't find them. The data presented here are therefore an approximation rather than an exact estimate.



3.1. EU'S ODA FUNDING TO CHILDREN

According to World Vision International and EY data, the EU institutions' child-related ODA in 2017-2021 amounted to \$10.9 billion, representing 10.5% of the EU's total ODA during that time. These investments place the EU institutions as the 13th largest donor for children out of 26 that were reviewed. In real terms, child-related ODA has grown over the years from \$1.7 billion in 2017 to \$2.6 billion in 2021. However, as a percentage of the EU institutions' total ODA, progress has been uneven, fluctuating between 8.5% (2017) and a maximum of 11.7% (2019). It is important to note that the increase in ODA for 2021 may have been driven by the EU response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which in turn would be one of the causes contributing to the rise in child-relevant ODA that year.¹³

Figure 1. EU ODA investments in children 2017-2021

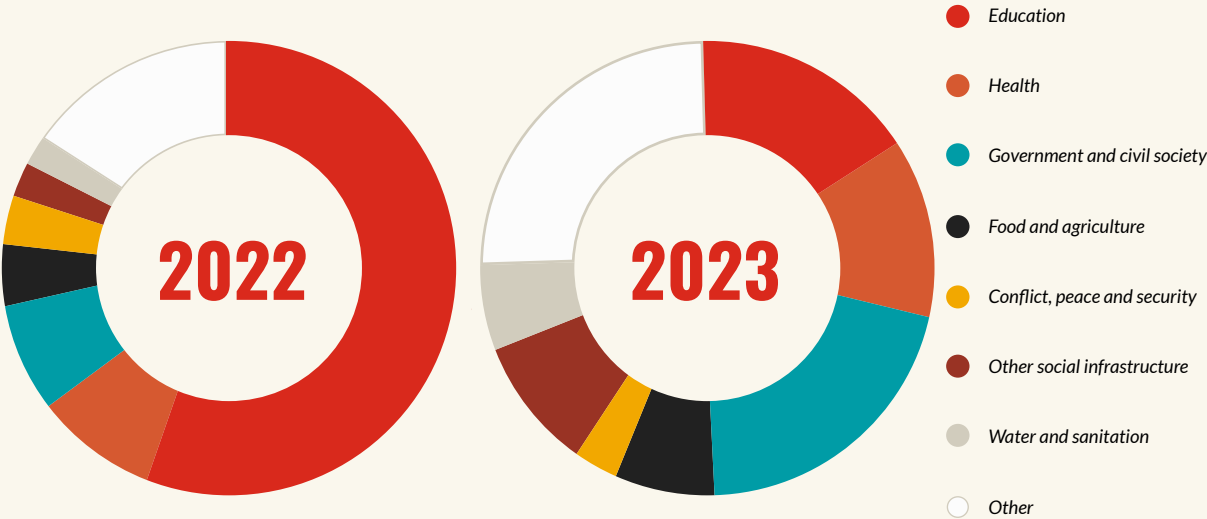


Source: [World Vision and EY \(2024\)](#), reproduced by ECDPM. The figures are expressed in 2020 USD prices. Child-specific ODA refers to programmes directly focused on children whereas child-benefitting ODA includes a broader spectrum of programmes not specifically focused on children but having a considerable indirect impact on them.¹⁴

In 2023 the EU's child-relevant ODA amounted to \$3.3 billion, which makes up approximately 8.6% of the EU's total ODA commitments of nearly \$39 billion for that year. This is higher in both volume and relative terms than in 2022, when the EU's total child-relevant ODA totalled \$1.7 billion, representing 5.3 % of total ODA that year. However, the overall volumes of child-relevant ODA remain relatively small, especially considering the fact that children make up 46% of the population in countries that receive ODA.¹⁵ Thus, while our analysis points to an overall positive trend in child-relevant ODA allocations (albeit some of which may be linked to COVID-19), ODA is still limited relative to the size of the child population in partner countries.

Despite the EU consistently meeting its 20% ODA target for social inclusion and human development, the funds do not always fully reach children. Between 2021 and 2023¹⁶, 25.9% of EU ODA was allocated to social inclusion and human development, which comprises health, education, and social protection — areas highly relevant to children. Yet, actual targeting remains limited. Based on our analysis, only 25% of the EU’s total health aid and 36% of the total education aid can be considered child-relevant in 2023. In health, the largest commitments in 2023 focused on infectious disease control (\$509 million), medical research (\$273 million), and health policy (\$249 million), which all produce indirect benefits to children as part of the overall population, but do not necessarily target them directly. Similarly, despite former Commissioner Urpilainen’s pledge to allocate at least 10% of ODA to education,¹⁷ much of the EU’s \$1.6 billion education ODA in 2023 went to policy and administrative management (\$493 million), vocational training (\$336 million), and higher education (\$214 million), rather than directly benefiting children. That said, education, health, governance, and civil society (which includes most aid to women’s and girls’ political empowerment) were the leading sectors for child-relevant ODA commitments in 2022 and 2023.

Figure 2. EU institutions’ child relevant ODA commitments by sector, 2022-2023



Source: OECD CRS database, analysed by ECDPM. Child-relevant ODA commitments in year 2022 and 2023 by sector. For methodology, see Annex 1.

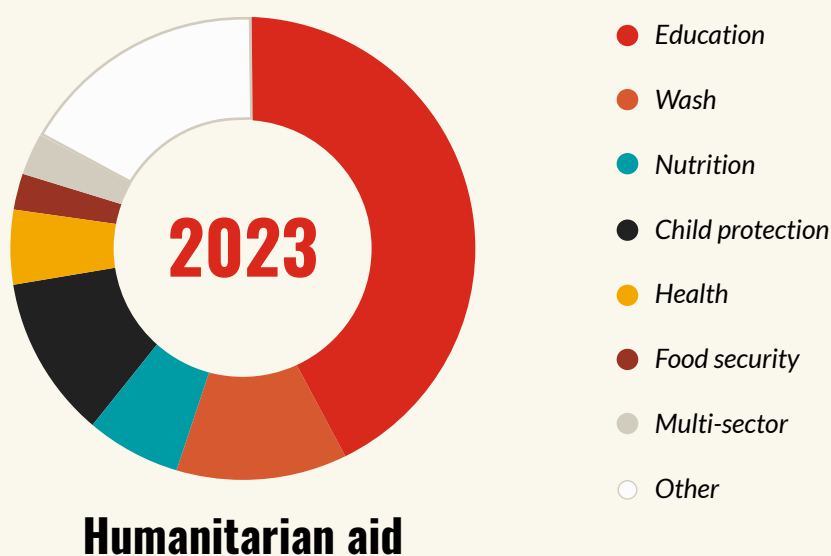
EU humanitarian aid

Based on data from the FTS, we estimate that child-related humanitarian aid in 2023 totalled \$473 million, which made up 15% of the EU’s total humanitarian aid of \$3.1 billion for that year. This is a low share, considering that children are a particularly vulnerable group and constitute a significant share of the population in humanitarian settings.¹⁸

Education was the largest sector for child-relevant humanitarian aid in 2023, reflecting the overall prioritisation of Education in Emergencies (EiE) in the EU's humanitarian aid. According to interviews conducted for this study, EiE is also a distinct area where the EU can bring added value, and where some innovative approaches have been deployed, such as *Réponse Intégrée Rapide pour les Enfants* (see **Box 1, Education in Emergencies**). Key policy documents, such as the 2019 *EU staff working document on EiE in EU-funded Humanitarian Aid Operations* and the 2021 *Humanitarian Action Communication*, emphasise child protection and education. The Humanitarian action communication specifically states that the “EU will continue to put a strong focus on supporting child protection and education in emergencies, in particular access to education for girls in humanitarian contexts including a commitment to allocating at least 10% of EUs humanitarian budget to education”.¹⁹ Despite this prioritisation, in 2023, only \$206 million (7.4%) of the EU's \$3.1 billion humanitarian budget was allocated to education, falling short of the 10% target. However, the following year, the EU was able to reach 9.4 %.

Beyond education, child protection is an important area of child-relevant interventions, and children are a key target group of the EU's overall protection interventions. Similarly, interventions in WASH, have shown to be relevant to children.

Figure 3. The EU's child-relevant humanitarian aid by sector, 2023



Source: FTS, analysed by ECDPM





Education in Emergencies

Education in emergencies (EiE) is the provision of uninterrupted, high-quality learning opportunities for children affected by humanitarian crises. It ensures that children continue to access quality basic education, regardless of who they are, where they live or what is happening around them.

In April Save the Children launched a new programme package called **We Thrive**. This is an integrated set of EiE, Child Protection (CP) and Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) activities designed for rapid implementation in acute crises. Its overarching objective is to enhance the protection, learning, and wellbeing of crisis-affected children through playful, accessible, and lifesaving integrated sessions.

We Thrive builds on, among others, experience from the DG ECHO-funded Pilot Programmatic Partnership (PPP) Action **RIRE: Réponse Intégrée Rapide pour les Enfants** (Rapid Integrated Response for Children). A new iteration of RIRE is currently being implemented under the DG ECHO Programmatic Partnership known as **Presue**.

RIRE is a mechanism that seeks to integrate education into rapid response frameworks, helping children aged 4 to 12 return safely to learning within the first three months of a crisis. This innovative approach combines education with child protection and MHPSS to address both children's learning, wellbeing and protection needs. The RIRE mechanism is designed to be activated within seven days of an emergency affecting at least 50 households.

RIRE aims to restore children's sense of normalcy and support their transition back to education by focusing on protection, wellbeing, and foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Community facilitators are trained to use play-based learning to promote children's socio-emotional learning and foundational skills. In parallel, community-based child protection facilitators address protection needs at both child and household level. Mobile teams also provide psychological first aid to children and caregivers, including the identification and referral of children requiring specialised MHPSS services.

While RIRE is designed to be delivered as a standalone intervention, one of its key aims is to ensure the inclusion of education, child protection, and MHPSS in inter-agency and inter-sectoral rapid response mechanisms (RRMs). Despite being an essential part of a quality child-focused humanitarian response, education is often neglected in first phase humanitarian responses, or, where it is included, it is often restricted to limited education interventions such as provision of school kits or minimal rehabilitation of schools. The lack of a more holistic response to children's needs in emergencies can have long term and wide-ranging effects, as children miss out on learning and access to protective spaces and specialized services, in turn decreasing children's safety and their opportunities to return to learning.

At the end of the three-month RIRE learning cycle, children's progress in learning and wellbeing is reassessed using the Holistic Assessment Tool (HAT). The results inform a tailored transition pathway for each child – whether into formal or non-formal education. To reduce dropouts and ensure ongoing support, key information is shared with the schools or services receiving the child.

3.2 GOING INTO THE NEXT MFF: FINANCING CONTEXT IS CHALLENGING BUT CHILDREN ARE WORTH INVESTING IN

The upcoming negotiation of the post-2027 MFF will set some important parameters of the EU capacity to honour its commitments towards children in the future. Formal negotiations are expected to begin in summer 2025, starting with the overarching European Commission's proposal, followed by sectoral proposals later in the year, and formal negotiations between the Council of the EU and the European Parliament. These negotiations take place at multiple levels, from overall priorities of the MFF to more detailed regulations of financial instruments, such as the current NDICI-GE.

The upcoming negotiations are expected to be challenging, with exceptionally high stakes and multiple competing priorities.²⁰ The next MFF will likely focus on priorities such as defence, migration, EU economic growth, competitiveness, and security. While it is expected that climate change and the Green Deal will remain a priority, it is not evident that it will receive the same political backing it had under the previous Commission. For instance, the European People's Party (EPP) has shifted their position on climate change, moving from support for the EU's Green Deal to championing for looser environmental regulations in the name of EU's competitiveness²¹. Overall, funding for external action will need to demonstrate its value for the EU's economic and security



Esther Ruth Mbabazi / Save the Children

interests to avoid cuts. There is additional pressure to reduce the extent to which EU external financing should respond to ODA criteria.

The current political environment for increasing the EU's ODA is challenging. There is a strong movement in the member states to carry out budget cuts to their own international spending. In the last few years, cuts have been proposed or implemented, for instance, in the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, France and Belgium.²² These are often coupled with the rhetoric of making ODA a vehicle to promote national interests. Conversely, the community of member states that uphold relatively high levels of ODA and advocate for more value- and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)-based cooperation has shrunk. The interviewees across the board highlighted that ODA cuts in member states could also bleed into cuts on the EU institutions' ODA, suggesting that future increases in ODA under the next MFF will be a challenge. This will have to be countered with a compelling narrative that crystallises the value of ODA to Europe – one that speaks to political leadership and resonates with the broader European public.

It is expected that GG will remain a central piece of the EU's offer to partner countries in the post 2027-financial framework. However, the EU's international partnerships and development cooperation extend beyond the GG and are guided by broader policies, principles, and commitments. Considering preferences of EU member states represented in the Council and EU commitments, future EU external financing is likely to retain at least some resources for basic health, nutrition, and education – all areas that directly affect children. However, the overall scale of these future resources is unclear. Despite Commissioner Síkela's commitment to invest 13% of the EU's ODA in education under the current MFF, these commitments may be subject to revision.²³ In sum, there is an actual risk that child-related areas will be marginalised in the next budgetary cycle – a risk that, as this paper argues, comes with significant potential consequences for the EU.

Looking ahead, **there is no evident high-level political drive to prioritise children within EU external action.** While advocates for EU's support to human development and child rights exist within the EU Commission, Parliament and member states, their influence is diminished by broader political direction, both within and outside EU institutions.

Despite the challenging funding environment, it is crucial to keep children on the EU's political agenda. Investing in children is not only an **enabler of the social and economic development** we want to see in 10-15 years, these investments also have the potential to bring long-lasting benefits to society at large. The EU has a duty to protect children as vulnerable members of societies today, but also an interest in investing in children as the adults of tomorrow.

Investing in children can serve Europe's broader economic interests. It can do so by boosting the EU's competitiveness agenda. The recent EC communication on skills ties together skills development and the EU's competitiveness. While the Communication has an EU internal focus, it does mention that strategic support to education and training in partner countries can have a transformative impact *"while also contributing to enhancing competitiveness of European companies, especially in countries of investment"*.²⁴ The Communication makes an important point about linking investments in education and skills in partner countries. On the one hand, education contributes to creating an enabling environment for European businesses. On the other, **investing in children's well-being in partner countries can strengthen global supply chain resilience** by addressing vulnerabilities such as child labour, labour market challenges, and weak healthcare systems – all of which impact EU industries reliant on supply chains in Africa and Asia.²⁵



Investments in education, nutrition, health, and other sectors critical to children's rights and well-being may not offer an immediate return on investment for the EU. However, these are essential **investments to secure sustainable benefits**, in line with the logic of win-win partnerships that are at the core of EU international engagement. In general, analysts have shown that investments in children pay off. For instance, scaling up high-impact nutrition interventions could generate \$2.4 trillion in benefits, with a return of \$23 for every \$1 invested.²⁶

In the current global political context, where the US is withdrawing from humanitarian aid and development cooperation, investing in children can also boost the EU's soft power among partner countries, a value which should not be underestimated in the volatile geopolitical context.²⁷ The EU's Global Gateway strategy and competitiveness agenda depend on building strong, value-driven partnerships. ODA investments in children reinforce the EU's role as a responsible global leader, fostering goodwill and diplomatic influence.²⁸ Aligning ODA with economic diplomacy helps the EU shape development pathways that align with both European values and business interests.

The shifting political landscape presents both risks and opportunities for the EU. The ODA funding is under significant pressure, as the EU increasingly moves its focus toward competitiveness and innovative financing modalities beyond ODA, such as lending and blending. At the same time, the EU's timid response to the USAID funding freezes and cuts is raising concerns among partner countries about the EU's reliability as a long-term development partner. This perceived hesitancy risks creating space for increased geopolitical influence by other actors, notably China and Russia.²⁹ Yet, the EU can capitalise on its strengths, bringing together European stakeholders and building

alliances with partners, which in turn can reinforce its diplomatic influence and strengthen its credibility as a partner.

As the EU approaches the next MFF, any future funding for external action should adequately underscore that human development, including children's rights and needs, is a key catalyst for achieving EU priorities in other areas. Child-specific considerations should be integrated across programmes under NDICI-Global Europe, humanitarian aid, and thematic funding, ensuring children fully benefit from social inclusion, human development, and education allocations.

EU member states also have a role to play in keeping investments in children's rights on the agenda. The upcoming EU Council presidencies have an opportunity to raise relevant topics to the debates in the Council working groups they chair, also in the context of MFF negotiations, while maintaining the balanced role required by their position.

Recommendations



- **Ensure sufficient funding for dedicated interventions in child-relevant sectors under the current MFF, across both development and humanitarian aid.** In that regard, ODA in health and education could target children more efficiently.
- **Protect ODA in the next MFF 2028-2034, in the context of a budget that is better aligned with EU priorities and any EU external funding** as well as mutual interests with partners. Again, funding for social sectors such as health and education remain especially crucial for children.
- **Include strong language on child rights in the regulation for future EU's external financing instruments.** This should also encompass a clear mandate to promote and promote the rights of children and other vulnerable groups to ensure that children's rights and needs are thoroughly reflected in future programmes and actions.
- **Similarly, protect the EU's humanitarian financing regardless of the structure of the post-2027 external financing.** Humanitarian action is a specific area with its own objectives, principles, and operational constraints. It should remain neutral, independent, and impartial – in line with the humanitarian principles – to maintain trust and access in conflict zones. This is why ringfencing the humanitarian budget in post-2027 MFF will be important.
- **Strengthen the child-responsiveness of the EU's innovative financing modalities.** While the current EFSD+ includes a window for human development, investments in sectors like health remain limited in volume.

4. HOW CHILDREN'S RIGHTS ARE PRACTICALLY REFLECTED IN EU'S EXTERNAL ACTION

Based on the analysis of policy documents and interviews, the EU has adopted two main avenues to invest in children:

- ✱ **Mainstreaming:** Children are included as one of the target groups in broad interventions which benefit multiple demographic groups.
- ✱ **Targeted support:** Both the EU's development cooperation and humanitarian aid include specific interventions that directly target children.

Despite the EU's strong mandate to invest in children and promote and protect their rights, challenges are encountered in implementation. Interviewees consistently highlight difficulties in effectively mainstreaming children's rights across sectoral interventions, as well as tracking spending and measuring results related to supporting children. This section explores the more practical dimensions of EU programming as it comes to children. It provides an overview of how children's rights and needs are reflected within Global Gateway and draws on examples from five African countries to illustrate how children are present in EU's action in broader international cooperation. The section also considers the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) and highlights innovative approaches that help to better meet children's needs through EU external action.



Rubina Hoque Alee / Save the Children

4.1 CHILDREN IN GLOBAL GATEWAY

Since its launch in 2021, the Global Gateway (GG) has become a key pillar of the EU international partnerships, with its success a top priority for Commissioner Josef Síkela.³⁰ Broadly, GG is a connectivity strategy **designed** to foster economic development in partner countries while **advancing** the EU's competitive agenda by providing investment opportunities for European businesses. It focuses on digital, energy, and transport infrastructure, as well as strengthening health, education, and research systems.

Concerns have emerged that GG prioritises short-term, EU-centric gains over long-term investments in human development including children. Critics argue that it shifts focus away from poverty reduction and broader societal development.³¹ In terms of children specifically, their rights and needs are not explicitly mentioned in the strategy, aside from a general reference to inclusive education.³² While children are not a primary target, GG could still benefit them indirectly through investments in education, health, digital access, and climate resilience.

The Global Gateway's 360-degree approach integrates hard and soft infrastructure to address supply and demand challenges, creating an enabling environment for businesses, employment, and human development. Essentially, this means that investments in infrastructure, for instance in renewable energy or pharmaceuticals, are coupled with investments in education, research, regulatory cooperation or any other sector that will enable transformative impact of the EU's investment. **When investments under the 360-degree approach mainstream or directly target children's rights and needs, the GG can serve as a strategic lever for the EU to strengthen child protection.** The analysis and stakeholder interviews signal a clear commitment within DG INTPA to ensure that the 360-degree approach works in practice. Some encouraging steps forward include efforts to strengthen internal support for human rights mainstreaming, improve guidance and foster child rights approach through a refined toolkit.

However, currently it is difficult to assess to what extent Global Gateway takes children into account. A list of Global Gateway projects is available, with short descriptions. Yet, the publicly available information is not comprehensive and lacks details, including towards partner countries, and their populations that are supposedly benefitting from the interventions.

Based on the information available there are several notable initiatives under GG in education and health sectors (see Table 1) that can directly benefit children. Still, there is significant room for improvement. According to one analysis, only 16% of Global Gateway flagship projects between 2023 and 2024 invested in health and education.³³ To align with GG strategy's overall goal of delivering transformative impact and mutual benefits, it is essential that projects addressing children's needs become the norm rather than the exception and that most flagships around relevant sectors pay more attention to children.

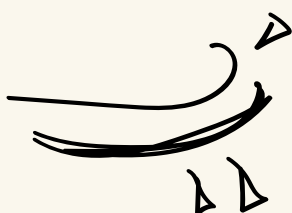




Table 1. Examples of child-relevant flagship initiatives under GG

Sector	Initiative	Description
Education	Regional Teachers' Initiative	Strengthening basic education in African countries.
	Rebuilding future and hope: modernising preschool education	Building a kindergarten and enhancing capacity for teachers and early childhood education managers in Ukraine.
	Youth Mobility for Africa	Increasing mobility opportunities, skills development, and exchanges, scholarships, and cooperation projects.
	VaMoz - Digital	Investing on digital literacy and skills for youth to foster digital transformation in Mozambique.
Health	University Children's Hospital in Serbia	Investment in constructing a new hospital building.
	TEI on SRHR, Africa	Improving sexual and reproductive health and rights in Africa, focusing on adolescent girls and young women.
	TEI on Demography and Social Inclusion in Uganda	Part of the GG's Europe-Africa Investment Package. Initiative of building WASH facilities in schools.
	TEI on Human Development in Zambia	Part of the Europe-Africa Investment Package. Includes early childhood development as a 2024 flagship initiative.
	Salama – Support for Central Drug Purchasing in Madagascar	Strengthening Salama's role in supplying medicines and medical equipment to public hospitals and dispensaries at a decentralized level, with significant impact on public health, particularly for women and children.
Other	Sustainable Urbanisation in India	Rehabilitation of urban infrastructure, e.g. waste management and urban development. Enhances public space access for the elderly, women, and children.
	Lagos Inland Water Transport	Construction and upgrading water transport infrastructure. Gender-inclusive measures, benefiting pregnant women, persons with disabilities, the elderly, and children.

Source: The review of GG flagships for [2023](#), [2024](#), and [2025](#). List compiled by ECDPM. The list includes examples only and is not exhaustive. TEI = Team Europe Initiative.

Investing in children is a cornerstone of the GG's mid- and long-term success. This success depends on the availability of a healthy and educated population – foundations that are established in early childhood. Investment in the first years of life is therefore essential, as it not only supports children's survival but also allows them to thrive later on³⁴. For instance, early malnutrition and disease hinder lifelong human capital accumulation, which is why interventions in nutrition are often associated with large gains in educational attainment and cognitive development. Similarly, a large body of research shows that skills gained during childhood facilitate further skills development later in life.³⁵

Basic services – such as early childhood education and care, basic education, and access to primary health care – are the building blocks for successful investments in other areas. Without adequate investment in these essential areas, longer-term results of the GG are likely to be undermined by the lack of local skills on the one hand, and unstable and unequal societies, prone to public health crises on the other. Similarly, successes of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and higher education investments also depend on a strong foundation laid in childhood education. While the goal is for partner countries to fund basic services like education through their national budgets, many, especially Least Developed Countries (LDCs), remain dependent on external financing, with ODA covering 12.2% of education budgets in low-income countries (LICs) in 2022³⁶. Furthermore, several challenges persist in the accessibility and quality of education across both low- and middle-income countries (LMICs),³⁷ reinforcing the need for continued EU investment in childhood education also in the future.

Additionally, functional basic services, and more broadly investments in human capital, and children, can be seen as investments in peaceful societies and stable, predictable business environments. It is widely accepted that higher levels of human capital contribute to not only better performing economies but also peaceful and resilient societies.³⁸ In that sense, investments in basic services and children under GG should be considered as a key measure to mitigate risks linked to demographic pressures, inequalities and climate change. When children and young people lack opportunities, they can become a driver for instability. For instance, in the Lake Chad Basin, evidence indicates that population growth amid scarce resources fuels insecurity, conflict, and marginalisation of the youth, undermining efforts to foster stability and democratic values.³⁹ These aspects should be taken into consideration when developing GG actions.





4.2 CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN EU'S PARTNERSHIPS: EXAMPLES FROM AFRICA

The EU supports partner countries through a combination of development cooperation programming – including budget support, projects, and technical assistance – and humanitarian aid in the contexts where this is necessary. This study looked at both development and humanitarian projects in five African countries: Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan. This analysis is based on the analysis of Multiannual Indicative Programmes and Annual Action Plans from 2021 to date, as well as Humanitarian Implementation Plans (HIPs) for these countries for the same period.

In development cooperation, children's rights are most explicitly prioritised in human development programmes, particularly in education, health, and nutrition. Initiatives such as primary education, maternal and child healthcare, and social protection directly target children. Some programmes, such as Somalia's *Education Access and Quality Improvement Programme (EAQIP)*, are designed specifically to improve education access and quality for children, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds. In Sudan, the programme *Socio-economic integration of children and young people and protection of the human rights of groups at risk in displacement-affected communities* aims to support children's return to primary school through school meal initiatives. In Ethiopia, the EU supports access to education focusing on children affected by the ongoing conflict. It also seeks for synergies with EiE programmes funded through humanitarian aid and with initiatives of other actors in the sector.

In other sectors such as governance, security, and climate change, children's needs are addressed more indirectly as part of broader vulnerable groups, but with no child-specific focus. In these sectors, it is less evident how children's needs are assessed and addressed. While mainstreaming can be a useful strategy to address children's needs across sectors, the analysis of the programming documents points to the need for more efforts to ensure that children's rights and needs are represented across the board. One way forward could be to further sensitise staff in the EU delegations and build their capacities in addressing the unique and specific needs of children across sectors.

Compared to development cooperation, EU humanitarian aid demonstrates a more direct focus on children's rights and needs. In particular, the EU's HIPs consistently highlight children as a priority group, with consistently allocating 10% of funding to EiE – a commitment that the EU has maintained despite broader funding constraints. HIPs also place strong emphasis on MHPSS, with specific attention to the needs of conflict-affected children.



Sacha Myers / Save the Children

Country-specific approaches further tailor actions to local contexts: in Somalia, HIPs focus on temporary learning spaces, child protection, and psychosocial support for displaced children; in Ethiopia, HIPs prioritise first-line child protection responses, helping children transition into education pathways and reducing time spent out of school. In South Sudan, protection services focus on at-risk children, including unaccompanied and separated children, while promoting access to safe, quality primary education with integrated child protection. In Sudan, EiE efforts are closely linked to child protection efforts, resilience building, and MHPSS. In the Great Lakes HIPs (2022-2025), covering the DRC, the analysis underscores the severe impacts of ongoing conflict, particularly in Eastern provinces, where high numbers of children remain out of school and malnourished. There are also deliberate efforts to enhance synergies with development cooperation programmes in DRC, that already prioritise health and education (**see Box 2, Child Protection**).

CSOs can play a key role in fostering the EU's efforts to support children's rights and needs. They can serve as advocates for improved basic services and hold decision-makers accountable for their policy commitments and delivery of programmes. As implementing partners, CSOs can bring expert knowledge and innovative methods of working tailored to local contexts. CSOs are often better able to reach vulnerable populations in partner countries compared to governmental actors. For instance, in the health sector, CSOs play a vital role in expanding health system access to remote populations, improving the skills of community health workers and responding to emergencies. One notable partnership involves Save the Children and GSK to improve child vaccination rates (**see Box 3, Child Survival**).



BOX 2

Child Protection

Child protection is one of the cornerstones of Save the Children programmes throughout its century long history and is the core of the **Live Free from Violence** strategic goal.

Cash for Child Protection is an intervention whereby Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) is used to address child protection needs and to contribute to a specific child protection outcome as part of a broader strategy. CVA is both a responsive and remedial mechanism, aiming to prevent, reduce, or mitigate exposure to child protection risks and limit the effects of violations on affected children and their families. It implies that the provision of cash (and vouchers) is complemented by other specialised child protection activities (such as individual support). The protection concerns, as expanded below, have been shown to have significant positive impacts from the implementation of CVA programmes.

- **Child Labour:** Providing families and caregivers with cash assistance has significantly reduced child labour in various contexts by alleviating the family financial stress. Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) can help prevent children from having to work or be exploited. The amount and duration of the assistance influence the sustainability of these positive outcomes. *In Nigeria 32% of respondents reported that their children stopped working as a result of the assistance*⁴⁹.
- **Child Marriage:** When designed for intentional protection outcomes and combined with child protection case management, CVA has a positive effect on reducing the risk of child marriage. It reduces household vulnerability and financial burdens, improves educational opportunities for girls, provides a safer environment, and reduces pressure to marry early. Other interventions, such as social behavioural change and longer duration of cash assistance, may further increase the impact. *In the Philippines the risk of child marriage decreased from 16% to 1% and 80% of households reported that their view on child marriage had changed since the start of the project*⁵⁰.
- **Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups (CAAFAG):** where measured, the perception of risk regarding the recruitment of children by armed groups has decreased since CVA was integrated into child protection case management interventions. CVA also has potential in facilitating the reintegration and rehabilitation of CAAFAG. *In DRC 87% of families reported that child recruitment into armed groups decreased since the start of the project (80% at follow-up survey)*⁵¹.
- **Family Separation:** CVA can positively impact family reunification and play a crucial role in mitigating the risk of family separation, particularly when it results from a lack of financial means to support the child or address the household's needs. *In Cambodia, households reporting child separation from caregivers decreased from 14% to 1% across 2 years*⁵².
- **Children's Safety and Well-being:** CVA has contributed to reducing risks of violence against children by positively impacting household relationships, decreasing stress levels, and improving the psychosocial well-being of children and caregivers. *In Mali, 98% of respondents reported a reduction of level of violence within the household since receiving the cash transfer. The feeling of safety*

*among children has improved in the vast majority of case studies where it was measured. In **Egypt**, 47% of caregivers reported a significant improvement on their children's safety and 62% on children's well-being by the end of the program.*

Linking or aligning Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) for Child Protection (CP) with existing government-run social protection programs can significantly improve child protection outcomes. This approach addresses multiple dimensions of vulnerability, promotes long-term resilience, and enhances the overall well-being of children and their families. CASH+ Programs in Child-Sensitive Social Protection provide positive influence on parenting behaviour.

Save the Children has been implementing exemplar programmes in **Lithuania**, where in addition to providing CVA to refugees, referral pathways have been established for cases with identified mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), child protection, or other specific needs. This includes enrolment in the education system, nutrition counselling, provision of information on support services for violence victims, and access to shelter, employment, and social protection opportunities. Similarly, in **Lebanon** the Child Wellbeing Assistance (CWA) "CASH+" approach combines cash transfers with household-level financial counselling, nutrition messaging, and referrals for services including child protection and MHPSS. This encourages spending and support in the best interest of the child.

BOX 3

Child Survival

Working with children, impacted communities, governments and partners, Save the Children aims at ensuring all children have a **healthy start in life** by: improving maternal and newborn health and ensuring the continuum of quality care; promote child survival beyond five years old through integrated primary and community health care; integrating nutrition in all programmes; and investing in sexual and reproductive health and rights, particularly for adolescents. A Healthy Start in Life is one of the four Save the Children strategic goals which all work together to empower children and make their rights a reality, including through climate-smart solutions. Save the Children implements programmes via long standing partnerships both with public and private donors.

Since 2013, Save the Children and GSK, a biopharma company, have partnered to reduce preventable deaths and illnesses in children under five, by improving access to healthcare, training formal and community health workers, developing child-friendly medicines, and advocating for stronger child health policies.

Over the past decade (2013-2023), the partnership has achieved significant milestones. Save the Children and GSK have supported over 3.5 million children across 51 countries, trained 38,000 health workers, and supported 21,000 community health workers. Additionally, they have immunized more than 240,000 children against preventable diseases and treated over 807,000 cases of malaria, pneumonia, or diarrhoea, which are the main causes of death for children under five.

Looking ahead, the partnership emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive approach to improving vaccine access in hard-to-reach areas. Combining community interventions with health system strengthening has proven to increase impact. Furthermore, providing technical and logistical support, better data management, and creating synergies with established health focused interventions are crucial for promoting sustainability.

The partnership was renewed in 2023 for another five years, which will make this public-private sector enterprise at least 15 years long, showcasing the potential of long-standing partnerships between private companies and international non-governmental organisations like GSK and Save the Children. The renewed partnership will focus on fighting vaccine-preventable diseases and protecting children's health, aiming at increasing child vaccination rates globally and nationally, focusing on reducing the number of 'zero dose' children⁵³, who are at the highest risk of contracting diseases like polio, measles, and cholera. Additionally, as vaccination rates decline globally, these preventable diseases are reappearing in places where they haven't been seen for decades, posing life-threatening risks. Africa, with 8.7 million zero dose children, is the most affected continent, with more than a third of these children living in Nigeria and Ethiopia.

By working with communities, governments, and local and global partners, Save the Children and GSK will develop, pilot, and implement tailored approaches in Ethiopia and Nigeria to reach zero dose children in diverse settings. By sharing their findings on effective strategies, they aim to ensure their solutions can be adopted by others and integrated into national policies. Their robust research will support advocacy efforts to ensure more children worldwide receive vaccinations, keeping them healthy, happy, and thriving.



4.3 EU DUE DILIGENCE CAN SHAPE CHILD RIGHTS OUTCOMES GLOBALLY

The EU's impact on child protection extends far beyond development cooperation and Global Gateway. Other policy areas, such as corporate sustainability and international investment, also shape the Union's footprint on children's rights. Two key examples include the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), that came into force on 5 January 2023, and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), that entered into force on 25 July 2024 after intense negotiations. These directives require companies operating in the EU to conduct comprehensive due diligence on human rights and environmental impacts across their value chains, thus strengthening child protection beyond the EU, particularly in addressing practices like child labour.

There is growing pressure to delay implementation and simplify the requirements, citing concerns about EU competitiveness.⁴⁰ To address these concerns, the EU Commission published an omnibus simplification proposal on 26 February 2025, an extensive package of measures aimed at simplifying requirements and streamline regulation, including amendments to the CSRD and the CSDDD.⁴¹



Save the Children in Uganda

While efforts to reduce bureaucratic burden are commendable, the substance of these directives should be protected. Reopening these directives risks watering down the crucial human rights and environmental protections, including those specifically designed to protect children. Such changes may also disrupt ongoing legislative processes at the national level and affect companies that have already made investments into sustainable practices. Moreover, weakening due diligence requirements and narrowing the definition of stakeholders could negatively impact children's rights and affect meaningful participation of children in matters that affect them.

While humanitarian and development cooperation remain crucial in protecting children's rights, they are not sufficient. A more comprehensive approach is needed – **one that considers the EU's broader impact across regulatory frameworks, corporate sustainability, and international investment**. For instance, in the critical raw materials sector – an area of high interest for the EU and Global Gateway – human rights violations including child labour remain serious concern. For example, an estimated [30% of cobalt small-scale mining sites in DRC involve children](#). Investing in children's well-being on the one hand, and rigorous due diligence processes on the other, could not only address key vulnerabilities in the supply chain, but also mitigate reputational risks for European businesses and ensure that the EU protects children's rights in a coherent manner. By ensuring coherence across these areas, the EU can better uphold its commitment to child protection and promote a more sustainable and rights-based external action.

As part of the EU's geostrategic and value-driven approach to infrastructure development, GG aims to ensure that investments uphold high standards of rule of law, human rights, and labour rights, in line with the NDICI-Global Europe regulation. It can also play a role in ensuring that the businesses involved in GG initiatives uphold the child rights provisions outlined in the CSDDD.⁴² Yet, it remains unclear to what extent GG projects effectively safeguard children's rights and enforce corporate social responsibility standards, including protections against child labour. While Development Finance Institutions (DFIs) and Public Development Banks (PDBs) adhere to certain human rights and due diligence principles, some key implementing institutions – such as the European Investment Bank (EIB) – have faced criticism from civil society organisations for inadequate human rights due diligence, weak transparency measures, and a lack of independent complaint mechanism.⁴³

Currently, GG doesn't have specific mechanisms to ensure a human rights-based approach by itself. The notion of its value-based approach relies primarily on the language in NDICI-GE regulation that addresses child labour and human rights. These are also echoed by individual DFIs/PDBs, who integrate human rights as part of the social, and environmental policies and standards. In practice, GG's value-based offer is thus operationalised through the due diligence processes of the implementing institutions. As shareholders in many of those PDBs and DFIs, including European Investment Bank and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, EU member states have the opportunity to strengthen these banks' due diligence processes for human rights, particularly focusing on children's rights.



4.4 SYSTEMS TO TRACK SPENDING AND ASSOCIATED RESULTS IS CONSIDERED AS A KEY CHALLENGE

A key challenge that interviewees across the board mentioned is the EU's limited ability to track spending on children. The lack of systematised approaches to data collection on child-relevant spending hinders the ability to monitor financial allocations. Additionally, there are no comprehensive mechanisms to track spending on children, either within the EU or in its external assistance. While some tools, such as DG INTPA's Inequality Marker, offer some insights into funding for disadvantaged groups, they do not systematically disaggregate data by age. This results in a limited and incomplete picture of the actual financial support directed toward children, making it difficult to assess whether investments adequately address their needs.

Tracking results present another challenge. The Global Europe Results Framework (GERF) – a tool used to collect and measure key results of interventions funded by EU external assistance – includes few indicators directly measuring children's well-being, focusing mainly on immunisation, nutrition, and school enrolment.⁴⁴ While some data are age-disaggregated, their use is inconsistent across interventions. Country-level programming varies in how child-focused indicators are included and the extent to which age disaggregation is applied. DG ECHO's Gender-Age Marker helps assess the impact of humanitarian aid across age groups, but it is not used beyond humanitarian assistance and lacks precise data on child-specific action. Although DG ECHO tracks the number of children reached by interventions, much of this information remains internal. As a result, despite some



Mustafa Saeed / Save the Children

existing tools and reporting mechanisms, the EU's external action lacks a comprehensive system for tracking how interventions impact children across sectors.

UNICEF, together with Save the Children, have proposed a **child marker** to improve visibility and accountability of EU investments in children.⁴⁵ Similar markers already exist within the OECD-DAC system, for areas such as gender or climate and biodiversity. They increase the capacity to track spending at the macro level and assess projects in a standardised way. A child marker could fill current gaps, offering a more structured and visible way to monitor and report how EU investments address children's rights and needs.

To be truly useful, any future **marker should be kept as simple as possible, to avoid creating administrative burden that could make its use counterproductive**. Interviewees pointed out that a proliferation of different markers may lead to unwanted consequences, including increased staff workload, higher administrative costs or incentivised manipulation (e.g., inflating spending against the given priorities), ultimately undermining their credibility and reliability. Proper support measures to staff in their implementation and solid accountability systems can mitigate those risks and, at the same time, improve traceability of children-related spending.

Another approach for tracking EU ODA investments in children would be to integrate child-relevant tracking into existing tools and reporting frameworks. One option would be to require age-disaggregated data in the Inequality Marker, Gender Marker, and GERF to ensure that EU-funded interventions systematically report the number and percentage of child beneficiaries. However, a dedicated child marker would offer several additional benefits, namely better identification of child-specific and child-benefitting initiatives, and a stronger basis for assessing gaps and prioritising future investments among different priorities. It could also help showcase the added value of the EU's external investment for its partners.

Recommendations



- **Strengthen the focus on children within GG:** Ensure that GG systematically integrates children's rights and needs across its investments by fully implementing its 360-degree approach. This includes prioritising child-focused sectors such as education and health, mainstreaming child rights in infrastructure and digital investments, and ensuring that GG initiatives contribute to children's well-being and development.
- **Mainstream children's rights across sectoral programmes, drawing on lessons from other mainstreaming practices:** Invest in training, toolkits, and internal support to equip staff with the necessary skills to integrate children's rights into development and humanitarian initiatives. Leverage UNICEF-EU's Child Rights Toolkit and the forthcoming internal EU child rights toolkit to guide this process.

- **Work further to increase the availability of long-term funding in humanitarian aid.** While humanitarian funding as such is meant to provide assistance in crisis situations, it must also offer greater flexibility coupled with predictability and a longer time span of the funding. This approach would allow strengthening of the key systems in health, education, nutrition and WASH that are vital to child survival in humanitarian contexts.⁴⁶ For instance, the European Court of Auditors has found that EiE projects were often too short-term which contributed to inefficiencies.⁴⁷ In practice providing more predictability would mean further strengthening the EU's ability to provide [multi-year funding](#) – which is an existing commitment of DG ECHO.
- **Reinforce human rights standards in development finance:** Strengthen the integration of human rights considerations in European DFIs and PDBs to ensure GG projects uphold high human rights and environmental protection standards. Member states, as shareholders, could play a key role in driving this process.
- **Ensure Policy Coherence in Protecting Children's Rights:** Align internal and external EU policies to consistently protect children's rights across development, humanitarian aid, trade, and environmental policies. In this context, the revision of the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) should sustain the level of ambition of the regulation and adhere to its original purpose, while reducing the administrative burden of companies. Additionally, foster motivation across DGs by building a compelling case for children's rights and introducing organisational incentives.
- **Consider adopting a child marker to better track and report how interventions address children's needs in both development cooperation and humanitarian assistance.** While some steps to increase the possibilities to monitor how EU's spending targets children can be taken by adapting existing mechanisms, the dedicated child marker would ensure an ability to better identify child-specific and child-benefitting initiatives, and track spending among different priorities to assess where further attention is needed.
- **Increase Transparency in GG Spending:** Enhance transparency by providing clear data on the scale of GG investments and how they benefit vulnerable groups, including children. Adopting a child marker could be a useful tool to enhance transparency.
- **Enhance child participation in GG:** The EU should explore ways to strengthen the involvement of children in investments that mainstream or directly target them. This could include stronger representation of child-rights organisations in GG's *Civil Society and Local Authorities Advisory Platform* or establishing a dedicated space for children within the Youth Sounding Board or a similar structure.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



The EU's external action policies include strong commitments to children's rights and well-being. On the one hand, dedicated policy documents – such as the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child – target children and reflect the EU's ambitious commitments to enhance children's well-being. On the other, several sectoral strategies on health, nutrition, gender, and education make important links to the rights, needs, and survival of children. The EU's humanitarian aid framework also remains firmly committed to child protection, with guidelines for ensuring support in crises, particularly in education in emergencies.

However, it remains challenging for the EU's external action to translate these ambitions into consistent, high-profile action, and well-resourced initiatives. Child-related ODA does show an upward trend, which is encouraging. Despite an encouraging upward trend in child-focused ODA – with \$3.7 billion allocated in 2023, representing 9.4% of total EU ODA – overall investment remains insufficient when measured against the scale of child populations and needs in partner countries. To meaningfully realise its commitments, the EU must shift from words to action and ensure that children's rights are not only mainstreamed but prioritised across the full spectrum of external action. Children's well-being is not only a measure of our humanity – it is also a smart and forward-looking investment.

Investing in children is both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity. It is central to the success of the EU's Global Gateway and to advancing the EU's broader agenda on sustainable development, competitiveness, and global stability. Early and sustained investments in child health, nutrition, protection, and education build the foundation of strong human capital – a skilled, resilient, and productive workforce capable of driving inclusive growth. Such investments also contribute to creating more stable and secure societies, by addressing drivers of child labour, weak social systems, and youth marginalisation – all of which pose long-term risks to peace, security, and prosperity. In an increasingly complex and fragile global context, prioritising children's rights within EU external action is essential. It safeguards the EU's legacy as a global leader in human development and ensures its long-term geopolitical relevance. This is an opportunity the EU cannot afford to miss.



This paper also provides several recommendations to support European decision-makers in moving forward:

Protecting and Enhancing Child-Focused Funding

Sustain Child-Relevant Investments: Ensure continued funding for children in development and humanitarian aid, especially in health and education.

Protect ODA in Future MFF: Secure ODA budgets for 2028–2035, ensuring strong mandates for children’s rights and needs in future funding instruments.

Ringfence Humanitarian Funding: Protect humanitarian funding in post-2027 EU financing, ensuring it remains needs-based and not politically influenced. Increase Long-Term Humanitarian Funding.

Policy and Human Rights Integration

Align EU Policies to Protect Children’s Rights: Ensure coherence across development, trade, and environmental policies, maintaining ambition in the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive.

Reinforce Human Rights in Development Finance: Ensure European DFIs and PDBs uphold strong human rights and environmental standards in GG projects.

Flexible and Effective Financing Mechanisms

Enhance Child-Responsiveness in Innovative Finance: Expand investments in human development under EFSD+ and ensure financing instruments benefit children more directly.

Increase Transparency in Global Gateway (GG) Spending: Improve data accessibility to show how GG investments support vulnerable groups, including children.

Consider Adopting a Child Marker: Improve the EU’s ability to track child-relevant investments and their achievements.

Mainstreaming Children’s Rights in EU Actions

Mainstream Children’s Rights in Sectoral Programmes, Including Under Global Gateway: Invest in training, toolkits, and internal support, drawing lessons from gender mainstreaming to improve effectiveness.

ANNEX 1: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology was a combination of desk research, analysis of quantitative data and interviews. The analysis involved a comprehensive review of the key EU policy documents, including regulations for funding instruments, key policy documents, guidances, annual report, humanitarian implementation plans and multiannual indicative programmes as well as annual action plans for five African countries (DRC, Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia). To bring nuance to the findings and to gain deeper insights, ECDPM also carried out eight interviews with officials in the EU institutions, including EU Commission, and European Parliament, as well as a member state to better understand the debates in the EU Council.

Quantitative analysis

The quantitative analysis for the briefing paper primarily relies on the data work published by [World Vision and the EY](#) covering the years between 2017 and 2021. This data has been provided online. ECDPM complemented this data by our own analysis for the year 2023. This analysis is based on the data on the OECD Creditor Reporting System (CRS). To determine child-relevant ODA spending, the data counts the spending on certain CRS purpose codes and combines it with targeted word searches in the project descriptions in ODA spending for other sectors.

All ODA spending was counted as child-relevant, for the following purpose codes:

Purpose code and name	Description
11220 - Primary education	Formal and non-formal primary education for children; all elementary and first cycle systematic instruction; provision of learning materials.
11231 - Basic life skills for youth	Formal and non-formal education for basic life skills for young people.
11240 - Early childhood education	Formal and non-formal pre-school education.
11250 - School feeding	Provision of meals or snacks at school; other uses of food for the achievement of educational outcomes including 'take-home' food rations provided as economic incentives to families (or foster families, or other child care institutions) in return for a child's regular attendance at school; food provided to adults or youth who attend literacy or vocational training programmes; food for pre-school activities with an educational component. These activities may help reduce children's hunger during the school day if provision of food/meals contains bioavailable nutrients to address specific nutrition needs and have nutrition expected outcomes in school children, or if the rationale mainstream nutrition or expected outcome is nutrition-linked.
11260 - Lower secondary education	Second cycle systematic instruction at junior level.

11320 - Upper Secondary Education	Second cycle systematic instruction at senior levels.
12220 - Basic nutrition	Micronutrient deficiency identification and supplementation; Infant and young child feeding promotion including exclusive breastfeeding; Non-emergency management of acute malnutrition and other targeted feeding programs (including complementary feeding); Staple food fortification including salt iodization; Nutritional status monitoring and national nutrition surveillance; Research, capacity building, policy development, monitoring and evaluation in support of these interventions. Use code 11250 for school feeding and 43072 for household food security.
13020 - Reproductive health care	Promotion of reproductive health; prenatal and postnatal care including delivery; prevention and treatment of infertility; prevention and management of consequences of abortion; safe motherhood activities.
15261 - Child soldiers (prevention and demobilization)	Technical co-operation provided to government – and assistance to civil society organisations – to support and apply legislation designed to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers, and to demobilise, disarm, reintegrate, repatriate and resettle (DDR) child soldiers.
16015 - Social services (incl youth development and women+ children)	Social protection schemes in the form of cash or in-kind benefits to households with dependent children, including parental leave benefits.
43072 - Household food security programme	Short or longer term household food security programmes and activities that improve the access of households to nutritionally adequate diets.

The spending under the purpose codes have been included completely. Beyond the abovementioned purpose codes, the data to specify child-relevant ODA was complemented by data from other sectors based on word search in the project description. The following list of key words were used:

Key words			
Adolescent antenatal babies baby bebe birth boy Brain development child child care Child Development	Childhood children daycare development disorder Early learning ECD enfance Enfant enfants fille garcon	girl jeune jeunesse Minor neonatal jovens Nursery nouveau ne Orphan	Pre-school Primary School Teenager toddler Under 5 young Youth

If one or more of the words showed up in the project description, the project was marked as child relevant. Both for years 2022 and 2023 10 largest child-relevant investments were reviewed manually to ensure that they indeed have focus on children. In addition, some random checks were made. Some investments were omitted, as while the project description mentions keywords, the projects themselves bear very little relevance to children. The omitted project lines are the following:

Name	USD, million	Region and sector	Description
EU contribution to Sustainable Transport Connectivity in the Western Balkans 2021-2027 (2021-2027 WBIF)	129,6	Europe, Road transport	In October 2020 the European Commission adopted a comprehensive Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) for the Western Balkans, which aims to spur the long-term economic recovery of the region, support a green and digital transition, foster regional integration and convergence with the European Union. The EIP is accompanied by the Guidelines for implementing the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB), which further detail investments and actions that can foster the green transition in the region under the EIP and beyond. With the EIP, the Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport and the Green Agenda, the EU provides strong support for economic recovery and reform for a modern, greener and more prosperous Western Balkans delivering better to their citizens on the road to the EU. The EIP also offers a path for a successful regional economic integration to help accelerate convergence with the EU and close the development gap between EU Member States and the Western Balkans region. The EIP will increase the competitiveness of the Western Balkans. Its implementation will have to be accompanied with the relevant reform measures. The EIP Communication identifies ten flagships with the expectation that these would unlock significant investments in particular in the field of digital, sustainable transport, clean energy transition and environment. To support the implementation of mature transport flagship projects, identified in the EIP, this Action foresees the provision of technical assistance and investment grants for the construction or rehabilitation of sustainable infrastructures in the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) in the period 2021-2027. It also supports the Poznan Summit commitment on the Western Balkans road and rail safety and reduction of travelling time. The Western Balkans Investment Framework members include the European Commission, member states, bilateral donors, financial institutions who altogether in partnership share the objectives of the Economic and Investment Plan for Western Balkans and together contribute to achieve common goals to spur the socio-economic cohesion of the region. In this context, the Western Balkans Investment Framework contributes to support the Team Europe Initiative.
EU contribution to Sustainable Transport Connectivity in the Western Balkans 2021-2027 (2021-2027 WBIF)	116,6	Europe, Rail transport	
EU contribution to the Western Balkans Investment Framework 2021-2023 (2021-2027 WBIF)	104,7	Europe, Energy conservation and demand-side efficiency	
EU contribution to the Western Balkans Investment Framework 2021-2023 (2021-2027 WBIF)	100,1	Europe, Responsible business conduct	
EU contribution to the Western Balkans Investment Framework 2021-2023 (2021-2027 WBIF)	50,2	Europe, Communications	
Support to water, sanitation and solid waste management sectors	8,06	Bolivia, Water and Sanitation	
			The Action aims to improve the living conditions of the population living in Bolivia by increasing the coverage of drinking water and sanitation services and to strengthen the framework conditions to transform lineal waste management towards a circular economy model (overall objective). This will be achieved through four specific objectives: 1. Increase access to sustainable drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services in rural communities and in minor and intermediate towns. 2. Strengthen the water and sanitation operators in the communities and beneficiary populations (DESCOM-FI) and the capacities of sectoral actors at different levels (central, departmental, municipal and local - Public Social Water and Sanitation Companies -EPSAs-). 3. Contribute to sustainable urban development through urban planning and integrated waste management with focus on circular economy in selected metropolitan areas in Bolivia. 4. Improve municipal solid waste management through digitalization, innovation and pilot projects in selected intermediate and small cities in the framework of a just transition.

The numbers are ODA commitments, expressed in constant 2022 prices, and US dollars. Commitments are firm obligations, expressed in writing and backed by the necessary funds, undertaken by official bilateral donors to provide specified assistance to a recipient country or a multilateral organisation.⁴⁸ Commitments react and signal quicker political priorities, whereas disbursements – the actual spending – tracks the money spent on the ground. There may be significant differences between these two flows in any given year, considering that commitments can take time to be realised and can be reviewed. The analysis covered ODA, not other official flows.

The following choices were made in dividing the data to different categories:

Sector used for analysis	OECD-CRS sector codes
Conflict, Peace and Security	I.5.b. Conflict, Peace & Security
Education	I.1.a. Education, Level Unspecified I.1.b. Basic Education I.1.c. Secondary Education I.1.d. Post-Secondary Education
Food and Agriculture	III.1.a. Agriculture III.1.b. Forestry III.1.c. Fishing IV.2. Other Multisector VI.2. Development Food Assistance VIII.1. Emergency Response
Government and Civil Society	I.5.a. Government & Civil Society-general
Health	I.2.a. Health, General I.2.b. Basic Health I.2.c. Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) I.3. Population Policies/Programmes & Reproductive Health
Other	Administrative Costs of Donors II.1. Transport & Storage II.2. Communications II.3.a. Energy Policy II.3.b. Energy generation, renewable sources II.3.c. Energy generation, non-renewable sources II.3.e. Nuclear energy plants II.3.f. Energy distribution II.4. Banking & Financial Services II.5. Business & Other Services III.2.a. Industry III.2.b. Mineral Resources & Mining III.2.c. Construction III.3.a. Trade Policies & Regulations III.3.b. Tourism IV.1. General Environment Protection IV.2. Other Multisector IX. Unallocated / Unspecified VI.1. General Budget Support VIII.1. Emergency Response VIII.2. Reconstruction Relief & Rehabilitation VIII.3. Disaster Prevention & Preparedness
Other Social Infrastructure	I.6. Other Social Infrastructure & Services
Water and Sanitation	I.4. Water Supply & Sanitation



Data categories according to region:

Category presented in the paper	Category includes
Africa	Africa North of Sahara South of Sahara
America and Caribbean	America Caribbean and Central America South America
Asia and Oceania	Asia Far East Asia Middle East Oceania South and Central Asia
Europe	Europe
Regional and Unspecified	Regional and unspecified

Humanitarian funding

A similar analysis was carried out in the context of the EU’s humanitarian aid. The data was gathered from the UN OCHAS’s Financial tracking Service (FTS). Funding that was allocated under Education and Child protection, was accounted as child-relevant as whole. For humanitarian aid in other sectors, the key word list above was used. If any of the words showed up in the project description, the project was marked as child relevant. In initiatives where several sectors were mentioned, spending was accounted for under category ‘other’. When education or child protection was one of the sectors mentioned, the spending was accounted for fully, also for interventions where the description did not mention children.

In the FTS data, ECDPM counted both commitments and paid contributions, leaving out pledges. The analysis concerned the year 2023, to ensure coherence with the analysis of the development cooperation funding, and because the 2024 figures were not final at the time of the analysis.

Key limitations

While the methodology provides a rough indication of the EU's child relevant spending, it is not precise. On the one hand, it may not account for all projects that are relevant or benefitting children. The project descriptions are general and while the project might be relevant to children, it has been left out if the description does not include the predetermined keywords. On the other hand, this methodology may be too sensitive to account for some projects, where children are not a consideration. For instance, it is possible to use one or more of these keywords in another context (for instance, words young, minor, or under 5 could also be used in other contexts). Furthermore, many project descriptions were cut, at times in the middle of the word.

Even the projects that are child-relevant can have varying focus on children. Some examples of the projects descriptions include:

"This Action will support high impact interventions to save lives and protect the health of the most vulnerable (especially women, new-borns, children and people with disabilities), with full consideration of specific gender needs. This includes strengthening primary health care (PHC) structures, and enhancing health security measures, in order to protect the population against the main health threats. Activities will target district health facilities in the country as the most effective approach."

"The Specific Objective (Outcome) of this action is to support the development of climate-smart agri- (aqua) culture and sustainable transformation of Agri-SMEs in selected value chains, with a view to creating decent job alternatives for young people including addressing causes of irregular migration."

"Education, training, youth and sport are key areas that support citizens in their personal and professional development. High quality, inclusive education and training, as well as informal and non-formal learning, ultimately equip young people and partici..." (the project description was cut).

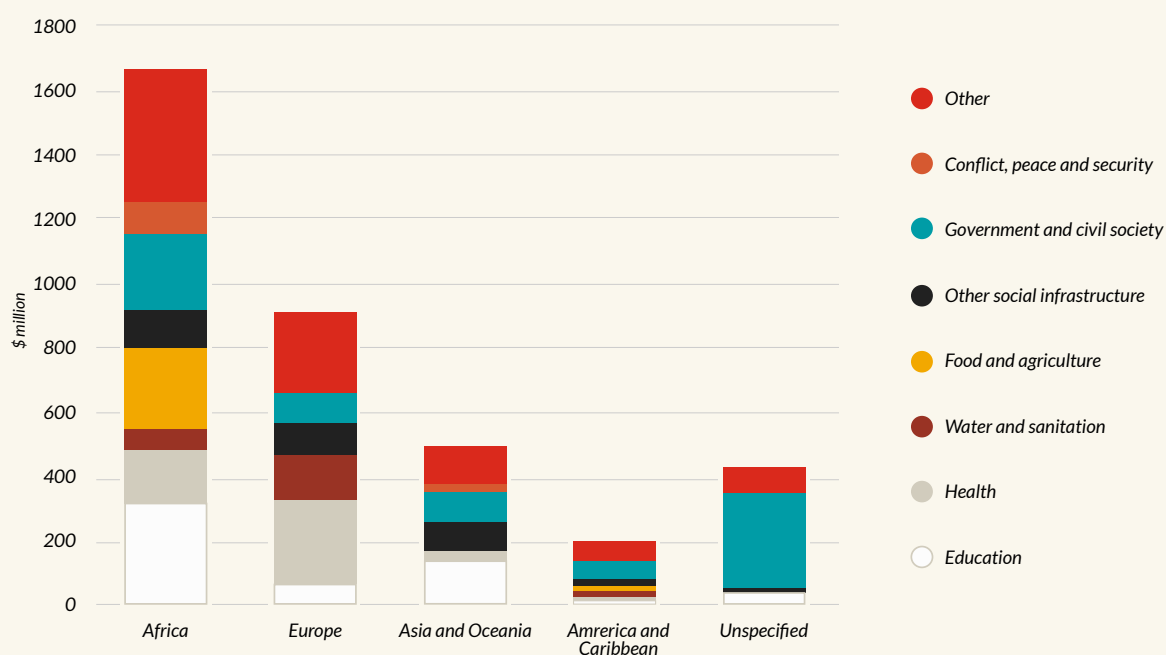
"The project will improve the inclusion of women and men, boys and girls from Roma and Egyptian communities in employment and education through pilot-testing, refining, replication, and developing recommendations for scaling of context-relevant models, which engage local government, businesses, and CSOs."

These examples illustrate the large variety of project descriptions that our methodology considered child-relevant. In the context of this study, it was not possible to fine tune the methodology to account for the share of spending under a project that is child-relevant. As we do not have access to more detailed project documentation this level of granularity was not possible, and we counted all of the spending to be child-relevant.

Finally, because the keywords include young and youth, it is likely that the methodology includes projects that do not target children but target youth, which refers to a different demographic group. While there is overlap between these concepts, children include people up to 18 years whereas youth can include people up to 25, or even older depending on the context. However, 'young' and 'youth' were included in the key word search because these programmes can be inclusive to children as well. The project descriptions unfortunately don't allow us to review the age range that the project targets.

It is also worth noting that the ECDPM figures are not comparable to the ones created by World Vision and EY. This is due to differences in methodology. Similarly, the data from OECD and the FTS should not be added up, as there are some overlaps.

ANNEX 2: BREAKDOWN OF THE EU'S CHILD-RELEVANT ODA BY REGION AND SECTOR



Source: OECD-CRS data, analysed by ECDPM. Data expressed as USD, Million, commitments, constant 2022 prices. For further details on regional and sectoral classification and data analysis, see methodology.

ENDNOTES

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