

2026-27 UNICEF Australia Pre-Budget Submission

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Overview

As we enter 2026, the world continues to face an unprecedented number of challenges including ongoing conflicts, escalating climate crises, mass displacements, intensifying geopolitical instability, and the disruptive impacts of new technology. The global cost-of-living crisis continues, exacerbated by international instability and conflict. This has left families across Australia feeling the strain, with many struggling to make ends meet. Children depend on stable environments to develop, learn, play and grow. The impact of climate change, conflicts, and economic instability fall hardest on them, disrupting their education, displacing them from their homes, and exposing them to health risks and psychological trauma.

In this evolving international and domestic landscape, the Government's 2026-27 Budget must strike a careful balance between providing immediate relief to those struggling at home, ensuring long-term stability and security abroad, and building resilience against new and emerging challenges that could affect Australia.

Protecting and improving the lives of children and young people is more critical than ever. Their unique needs require comprehensive and targeted investment to safeguard their future and well-being. Investing in children is not only a moral imperative but a strategic investment in the stability and prosperity of our society. Early investment in children lays a strong foundation for the development of Australia at large. These investments not only enhance children's immediate well-being, but also contribute to their long-term growth, equipping them with the skills and resilience needed to take on the mantle as Australia's next generation, navigating and thriving in an ever-changing world.

In this submission, UNICEF Australia is calling for targeted and strategic investments from the Australian Government to ensure the safety, wellbeing and rights of every child. Our budget proposals focus on critical areas requiring immediate action including combating online child exploitation, ensuring better access to crucial services through universal birth registration, protecting children from the escalating impacts of climate change, and investing in children both at home and abroad through foreign aid. By leading on these priorities, Australia can set a global benchmark for upholding and advancing children and their rights, domestically and on the global stage.

These proposals represent not only an investment in children and young people today, but an investment in the nation's future resilience, productivity, and safety. UNICEF Australia presents these recommendations for the Government's consideration, and looks forward to meaningful discussions with Ministers, officials, and Treasury in the coming months. By prioritizing the needs of children and young people, Australia can build a more resilient, harmonious, and prosperous future for all.

Summary of recommendations

1. Make Australia a world-leader in combatting online child sexual exploitation and abuse
 - a. *Invest \$1.2 million over two years to bring the Disrupting Harm research project to Australia, to help protect children at home and abroad and make Australia a world-leader in tackling online child sexual exploitation and abuse.*
2. Accelerate progress towards achieving universal birth registration by 2030 to ensure every child has the best start in life
 - a. *Invest \$7 million to enable States and Territories to provide free first birth certificates to babies in remote areas, low socioeconomic communities, First Nations children and babies born to mothers under the age of 25, with a pathway to universal coverage.*
 - b. *Invest \$5.5 million to expand birth registration and certification outreach programs and improve accessibility.*
3. Protect children and young people from the worst impacts of climate change by placing them at the centre of climate-related action
 - a. *Fund the implementation of a National Framework for Children and Young People Before, During and After Disasters.*
 - b. *Earmark \$30 million of the Disaster Read Fund in 2026-27 to strengthen disaster resilience for children and young people.*
4. Position Australia as a good global citizen and partner in the region through strategic investment
 - a. *Increase the Australian aid budget to 1% of the Federal Budget by 2026-2027.*
 - b. *Restore UNICEF's annual core funding to \$41 million a year.*

Detailed recommendations

1. Make Australia a world-leader in combatting online child sexual exploitation and abuse

Digital technologies undoubtedly bring many benefits to children's lives, but as with all spaces children inhabit, the digital environment exposes them to risks, including one of the greatest emerging threats to children's protection – online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA).

Recent research and evidence are beginning to shed some light on the prevalence of OCSEA in Australia and our local region:

- 28.5% of Australians have experienced child sexual abuse according to the Australian Child Maltreatment Studyⁱ
- 1 in 6 Australian men report sexual feelings towards children, and 1 in 10 Australian men report they have sexually offended against a child, according to research from the University of New South Walesⁱⁱ
- In 2024-25, the Australia Centre to Counter Child Exploitation received more than 80,000 reports of online child sexual exploitationⁱⁱⁱ
- 1 in 8 Australians who use mobile dating apps and/or dating websites report receiving requests to facilitate the sexual exploitation of their own children or children they have access to^{iv}
- Australia is estimated to be the third largest market in the world for livestreamed online child sexual abuse^v

The internet has no borders thus OCSEA is a global, cross-border issue and one in which Australia is already playing a leading role, evidenced through key initiatives like the creation of the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation, and the development of the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-2030*.

UNICEF is also playing a leading role in the global fight against OCSEA. [The Safe Online initiative at the End Violence Fund](#) has invested USD\$15 million in the [Disrupting Harm](#) project, a joint research effort by UNICEF, INTERPOL and ECPAT International. Disrupting Harm conducts multi-sectoral, multi-method national-level research to determine children's exposure to online sexual exploitation and abuse and the capacity of law enforcement, the social service workforce, and judiciary to respond to these crimes.

Disrupting Harm is the most comprehensive data collection effort on online child sexual abuse to date. The project has been completed in 13 countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia and is currently ongoing in another 12 countries in Latin America, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and South Asia. UNICEF Australia is eager to bring this world-leading research to Australia, making us the first high-income country in the world to undertake it and placing Australia at the forefront of tackling this pernicious problem.

The Disrupting Harm project uses multi-method research including national household surveys with children, interviews with children and caregivers, frontline workers, justice professionals and law enforcement, as well as desk-based reviews and analysis of national legislation and policies. Taking approximately two years to complete, the research project ultimately provides a detailed, data-driven pathway for government and civil society to strengthen prevention and response to online sexual exploitation and abuse, including evidence on:

- How many children in Australia experience different forms of online sexual abuse
- Who the most common perpetrators are, and who children report these crimes to
- The capacity of the frontline service workforce to support children who seek help
- The experience and capacity of lawyers, magistrates and professionals working in courts with cases of online sexual exploitation and abuse
- How Australian law enforcement is currently operating within this crime area and opportunities for new approaches
- Any gaps in the current legislative and policy environment, and
- Promising practices in Australia to prevent and respond to online sexual exploitation and abuse

By conducting a Disrupting Harm national assessment, Australia would be the first high-income country in the world to do in-depth research on online child sexual abuse that will significantly aid the government's capacity to prevent and respond to this crime. There is an unprecedented opportunity to collaborate with the government, Australian research institutions and civil society organisations, to fill critical gaps in evidence and develop new solutions. It would firmly establish Australia's leadership on this issue globally and inform the important work of the eSafety Commissioner.

The scalable methodology also enables countries to compare results, identify national differences and global similarities, to help policymakers and practitioners understand how this problem needs to be tackled in-country and internationally. In this sense, Australia would be making a significant contribution to our Asia-Pacific neighbours, helping boost security in the region, and further illustrating Australia's commitment to being a good global citizen and partner of choice in the region.

Recommendation 1a - *Invest \$1.2 million over two years to bring the Disrupting Harm research project to Australia, to help protect children at home and abroad and make Australia a world-leader in tackling online child sexual exploitation and abuse.*

2. Accelerate progress towards achieving universal birth registration by 2030 to ensure every child has the best start in life

Birth registration is one of a child's first rights. Yet UNICEF Australia's *Certify Hope* report shows that around 12,600 births go unregistered each year in Australia, with delays disproportionately affecting babies in remote and low socioeconomic communities, First Nations children, and babies born to mothers under the age of 25.^{vi}

Although registration is free, the cost of a birth certificate remains a major barrier, alongside limited internet access, geographic isolation, low awareness, confusion about the process, and lack of identification documents. Providing a free first birth certificate to families facing the greatest barriers is an important first step, but targeted outreach is also essential to help families navigate these challenges. Evidence shows that culturally safe, community-based outreach delivered in trusted settings significantly improves both registration and certification.^{vii}

Australia has endorsed SDG Target 16.9, committing to a legal identity for all, including birth registration, by 2030.^{viii} With 2030 approaching, the Government has a timely opportunity to make meaningful progress on this commitment and ensure no child is left behind.

The potential return on investment is significant. A birth certificate unlocks access to early learning, schooling, sporting clubs and disability support – improving children’s wellbeing, and physical and mental health. Improved access to early learning and education generates significant benefits such as increased lifetime earnings linked to better education outcomes. A birth certificate also enables essential identification such as a passport, driver’s licence, tax file number and bank account, supporting long-term economic participation.

These benefits generate value for governments through higher tax revenue and reduced welfare and health costs, and stronger outcomes for families and communities. Preliminary analysis suggests that increasing birth registration and certification amongst families facing the greatest barriers could generate a total social and economic value for each year of investment of over \$60m for children, families and government, throughout children’s lifetime.^{ix} Prioritising families facing the greatest barriers will help reduce intergenerational disadvantage and ensure fairer access to essential services.

The Government’s leadership on early childhood reforms shows a clear commitment to investing in the early years. Investing in universal birth registration is the next step to guarantee that every child has the best start in life.

Recommendation 2a. *Invest \$7 million to enable States and Territories to provide free first birth certificates to babies in remote areas, low socioeconomic communities, First Nations children, and babies born to mothers under 25, with a pathway to universal coverage.*

Recommendation 2b. *Invest \$5.5 million to expand birth registration and certification outreach programs and improve accessibility.*

3. Protect children and young people from the worst impacts of climate change by placing them at the centre of climate-related action

Children and young people are uniquely vulnerable and disproportionately impacted by natural disasters^x. These impacts stem from immediate disruptions to life, such as school closures and property damage, and the long-term consequences of trauma and displacement^{xi}. Australia is also experiencing an increase in the frequency and severity of climate-related natural disasters, including bushfires, floods, cyclones, and droughts^{xii}. With increasing frequency there will be larger and longer lasting impacts on our children and young people^{xiii}.

In 2025, UNICEF Australia worked with Deloitte Access Economics on a report exploring the economic and social impact of disasters on children and young people. This report found the impact of disasters on children and young people is an estimated \$6.3 billion per annum.^{xiv} Education loss is the largest driver of the overall economic burden, with other economic and social impacts including child abuse, mental health outcomes, displacement, pre-term birth, and physical health impacts^{xv}.

Current policies in Australia for preparing, responding to and recovering from a disaster, are not child-centred and often overlook their unique needs. As climate-related disasters become more frequent and

severe, the risks to children will grow and the social and economic consequences will have impacts that last decades.

UNICEF Australia has worked with leading experts across Australia to develop a draft *National Framework for Children and Young People Before, During and After Disasters*. If implemented across federal, state and local governments, this framework would help ensure children's unique needs are embedded in every stage of disaster planning, response, and recovery. With funding from the Commonwealth Government for its implementation, in partnership with State and Territory governments, every child in Australia can be better protected and supported when disaster strikes.

Recommendation 3a - *Fund the implementation of a National Framework for Children and Young People Before, During and After Disasters.*

The establishment of the Disaster Ready Fund (DRF) in Australia has been a welcome development which has already delivered \$600 million in funding to 452 projects that improve disaster resilience across Australia^{xvi}. However, despite children and young people being uniquely vulnerable and disproportionately impacted by natural disasters^{xvii}, there is currently no specific funding directed toward disaster resilience measures that address their needs or vulnerabilities.

To help address this gap, future DRF grant opportunities would benefit from a requirement that recipients consider how their project impacts children and young people, giving regard to the unique vulnerabilities they face. Additionally, a pilot program in which a proportion of overall DRF funding is earmarked specifically for child sensitive projects or projects in child critical sectors, would be beneficial. This could be achieved through a pilot in which \$30 million of the DRF is earmarked for child sensitive projects in 2026-27, with the view to expanding it further in 2027-28. Investing in long-term resilience building for children and young people will reduce the overall economic cost of disasters and lessen the enduring social and economic impact on communities.

Recommendation 3b - *Earmark \$30 million of the Disaster Read Fund in 2026-27 to strengthen disaster resilience for children and young people.*

4. Position Australia as a good global citizen and partner in the region through strategic investment

Recent years have been marked by significant international crises, from escalating conflicts, widespread humanitarian and health crises, increasing climate related disasters, and economic instability, with children disproportionately affected. Despite this representing a need for increase spending in foreign aid, we are seeing aid budgets contract across many high-income countries^{xviii}.

In the face of this worrying trend, Australia's continued commitment to Overseas Development Assistance and the introduction of 2.5% indexation from 2026-27 – adding more than \$8.6 billion over a decade to the program^{xix} – have been most welcome. However, with need greater than ever, the need for increased ambition in foreign aid spending remains.

As the 14th largest economy in the world^{xx}, increasing ODA to 1% of the Federal budget would ensure we meet our international responsibilities and be an opportunity for Australia to show strong leadership to

cultivate security, stability and prosperity in the region. With aid at only 0.65% of the Federal Budget and an aid-to-GNI ratio of 0.18^{xxi} – well below the OECD DAC average of 0.33^{xxii} – Australia has a timely opportunity to strengthen its global contribution and regional partnerships.

While we recognise the financial pressures the Government faces, the need for aid around the world is greater than ever. Across the Asia-Pacific, children and their families are facing heightened risks, including the spread of infectious diseases, food insecurity, spikes in domestic violence, and disrupted education^{xxiii}. Australia's security, economy and values are inseparable from how our neighbours weather conflict, disasters and climate shocks. Strategic, child-centred aid builds resilient health, education and governance systems, reduces fragility and displacement, and strengthens the rules-based order we rely on. Bringing the ODA budget up to 1% of the Federal Government would assist in protecting children's lives today, while creating the stable, prosperous region Australia needs tomorrow.

Recommendation 4a - *Increase the Australian aid budget to 1% of the Federal Budget by 2027-2028*

UNICEF offers a unique proposition to help the Government achieve its vision of being a good global citizen and regional leader. UNICEF's efficiency and effectiveness at global scale is demonstrated both by our footprint in 190 countries, and by our ability to rapidly negotiate humanitarian access and adequately manage risk in response to complex humanitarian contexts, as we have done recently responding to crises in Gaza, Sudan, and in Pacific.

UNICEF has the ability to mobilise both public and private resources. We have deployed combined private and public sector surge funding to humanitarian emergencies in countries such as Türkiye and Syria, Gaza, India, Sri Lanka, China, PNG, Fiji, Vietnam, and Tonga. We also directly support programmes in the Asia-Pacific region and hold uniquely strong relationships with UNICEF Country Offices in Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Pacific, and Southeast Asia.

Given our strengths as a go-to partner for the government, supporting UNICEF's annual core funding can help the Australian Government achieve its goals in the region and globally. Our 75 years of experience has shown that contributing to core resources for results (RR) is the most effective way to support children. Core funding gives UNICEF the certainty to plan and implement long-term programmes for children, the flexibility to address challenging and rapidly changing contexts, and the efficiency that comes from reducing transaction costs and maximising resources that go directly to children.

In the East Asia Pacific region, core funding has enabled us to:

- be able to respond to critical gaps in the early stages of humanitarian response, and for the delivery of vaccines where there are shortfalls in logistical support
- be equipped with technical expertise and capacity at the country level. On average, 60-65% of RR in this region is being used for technical assistance provided by programme experts to national and sub-national governments and partners
- support and scale up innovative approaches and take calculated risks to bring innovative solutions for children
- have strong risk management mechanisms to ensure that due diligence is assured for engagement with partners, including for child safeguarding and Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

The Partnership Framework between AusAID and UNICEF 2008-2015, agreed under the previous Labor Government, saw the Australian Government's annual core funding to UNICEF reach \$34.4 million. Since 2014, the core funding has been on a decline to an annual investment of \$19 million in 2024. A restoration of UNICEF's annual core funding to former levels (adjusted for inflation) will help the Government efficiently deliver impact at scale, both in the region and around the world, boosting our standing as a model global citizen and leader on the international stage.

Recommendation 4b - *Restore UNICEF's annual core funding to \$41 million a year.*

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