

# 2023-24 UNICEF Australia NSW Pre-budget Submission

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## Overview

In 2022/23, New South Wales (NSW) has faced some of the most complex and challenging economic conditions in over a generation. With a mixture of impacts from natural hazards, rising cost of living, an economy that is still recovering from the disruption of COVID-19, and a housing crisis communities are facing numerous challenges that require immediate support from the NSW Government.

Both in Australia and around the world, UNICEF's mission is to protect and improve the lives of children. Investing in children and young people here and abroad makes Australia more resilient, prepared, productive, harmonious and safe, as it faces increasing challenges. Investment in children and young people will build an Australian economy that is stronger, a society that is more stable, and a community that is more cohesive.

The Budget proposals UNICEF Australia outlines for the NSW Government's consideration make investments in the future of children and young people and in the future of Australia. These measures, taken in full or in part, will support children and young people to be engaged in the important issues affecting them and lead to better support for them to thrive and participate fully in NSW society.

## Summary of Recommendations

### 1. Ensure all children in NSW can access a birth certificate to participate fully in early learning and education

- *(a) Increase funding for NSW Births Death and Marriages at a cost of roughly \$500,000 per year, to provide a free first birth certificate for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.*

### 2. Protect children and young people from the worst impacts of climate change by placing them at the centre of climate-related community preparedness, recovery and resilience

- *(a) Develop an NSW framework for child and youth-focused disaster planning that can be used alongside the existing NSW State Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN), can be adapted for different natural hazards, and operationalised in all NSW communities.*
- *(b) Invest in holistic risk and needs assessments and state audits of existing interventions to systemize understandings of children's preparedness and recovery needs in disaster settings to enable more targeted, child-focussed disaster response, recovery, and resilience-building policy at the cost of approximately \$12 million for a whole of NSW assessment, to be reassessed every 5 years.*
- *(c) Invest in evidence-based, long-term programs to enable the resilience and recovery of children and young people in the face of increasing natural hazards at the cost of approximately \$15 million over 5 years.*

## Detailed Recommendations

### 1. Ensure all children can access a birth certificate to participate fully in early learning and education

Birth registration is a child's first right. It is their passport to protection throughout their life, establishing their existence under the law and allowing for their full participation in society over the course of their life. With birth registration comes access to a birth certificate, a pivotal identity document that allows a child, a young person, and then an adult, to access the things needed to take part in society.

Without a birth certificate a child is unable to enrol in early learning and education, and as they continue to grow up are unable to access things like a passport, drivers licence, tax file number, or bank account. We know that early childhood and the education and care received during that time are essential to a child's development and have a significant bearing on health, development, and education attainment.<sup>1</sup> Without this essential identity document, a child can experience cascading and compounding disadvantage from the day they are born. They become essentially invisible to the system and may be unable to access critical health and social services. At its worst, research has shown that not having a birth certificate can place a person on a trajectory to criminal justice involvement and even imprisonment, due to driving without a licence for which a birth certificate is a prerequisite.<sup>2</sup>

While Australia enjoys a high rate of 98% of births under the age of 5 years registered with a civil authority, birth registration rates are much lower within particular populations including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.<sup>3</sup> The true extent of under-registration is unknown but pockets of data provide an indication – a study in Queensland revealed that 15-18% of births to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers were not registered compared to 1.8% of births to non-Indigenous mothers.<sup>4</sup> Similar research in Western Australia found that 11% of births to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers were not registered between 1980 and 2010.<sup>5</sup>

It is evident through our research and consultation with communities that there are several co-occurring and overlapping barriers contributing to birth under-registration in pockets of Australian society. The first and often easiest to identify is the role that cost plays. While birth registration is free, obtaining a birth certificate is not. As the two processes are conducted as one at the time of birth, the cost of the certificate may be confused with the cost of registration,<sup>6</sup> and for people facing financial hardship, this can act as a deterrent. This is especially important during the current cost-of-living crisis, where families may need to choose between essential items and paying for a birth

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1 UNICEF Australia, (2020). Early Childhood services, essential during the pandemic (unicef.org.au)

2 Gerber, P., & Castan, M. (Eds.) (2021). Critical Perspectives on Human Rights Law in Australia: Volume 2. (1st ed.), Chapter 5: Realising the Right to Birth Registration in Australia (Melissa Castan, Geeta Shyam, Paula Gerber) <https://research.monash.edu/en/publications/critical-perspectives-on-human-rights-law-in-australia-volume-2>, citing Alice Barter 'Chapter 5: Indigenous Driving Issues in the Pilbara Region' in Melissa Castan and Paula Gerber (eds), Proof of Birth (Future Leaders 2015) 62, 63.

3 Australian Government, 'Children under 5 registered with a civil authority' Australian Government's Reporting Platform on the SDG Indicators (Web Page, 17 July 2018) <<https://www.sdgdata.gov.au/goals/peace-and-justice/16.9.1#metadata1>>; Paula Gerber and Melissa Castan 'Chapter 1: The Right to Universal Birth Registration in Australia' in Melissa Castan and Paula Gerber (eds), Proof of Birth (Future Leaders 2015) 3, 3.

4 Queensland Ombudsman, 'The Indigenous Birth Registration Report: An Investigation into the Under-Registration of Indigenous births in Queensland' (Report, June 2018) vii.

5 Alison Gibberd, Judy Simpson and Sandra Eades, 'No Official Identity: a Data Linkage Study of Birth Registration of Aboriginal Children in Western Australia' (2016) 40(4) Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health 388, 390.

6 Gerber, P., & Castan, M. (Eds.) (2021). Critical Perspectives on Human Rights Law in Australia: Volume 2. (1st ed.), Chapter 5: Realising the Right to Birth Registration in Australia (Melissa Castan, Geeta Shyam, Paula Gerber) <https://research.monash.edu/en/publications/critical-perspectives-on-human-rights-law-in-australia-volume-2>, citing Queensland Ombudsman, 'The Indigenous Birth Registration Report: An Investigation into the Under-Registration of Indigenous births in Queensland' (Report, June 2018) vii

certificate. While fee waivers are often offered by the NSW BDM, pathways to accessing the waivers are not clear and applying for a fee waiver itself can be overly complex.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, whilst fines and penalties are rarely imposed in practice, the mere threat of being fined can be a deterrent to someone registering their or their child's birth at a later stage.<sup>8</sup>

At a state-wide level, one of the most impactful initial changes policymakers could make is providing the first birth certificate for all children for free. Acknowledging that this could come at a significant financial cost, it may be that a staged approach is best in which as a first step, the first birth certificate is made free for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia.<sup>6</sup> UNICEF Australia projects that this would cost \$500,000 per year.<sup>9</sup>

UNICEF Australia recommends this additional funding as a first action. There are several other barriers causing birth under-registration in NSW, the complexity of which will require a holistic and targeted approach to ensure all children in NSW have their births registered, have access to a birth certificate, and are supported to thrive in NSW society. UNICEF Australia has authored an analysis paper '[Certify Hope: Birth certificates for every child in Australia](#)' that provides more context and detail on the issue.

- *(a) Provide funding of roughly \$500,000 per year, to offer a free first birth certificate for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in NSW.*

## 2. Protect children and young people from the worst impacts of climate change by placing them at the centre of climate-related community preparedness, recovery and resilience

NSW has been hit by increasingly frequent and intense floods, heatwaves, droughts, and bushfires in recent years. This July has been the hottest month on record, atmospheric carbon dioxide levels are the highest they have been in at least 3.5 million years, and the NSW community is potentially waiting for another bushfire prone summer.<sup>10</sup> The severity of climate-related disasters and extreme weather events in NSW are predicted to increase in future, as shown by the NSW Government projection that the average temperature in the state will increase by 0.7 degrees by 2030.<sup>11</sup> Children and young people are uniquely impacted by climate-related disasters due to their innate physical and physiological vulnerabilities. Children, particularly young children, experience distinct and heightened risks, and evidence shows that the effects of experiencing climate-related disasters can cause long-term damage to educational and emotional development, and physical and mental health.<sup>12</sup>

A 2020 survey of children and young people in Australia found that 90% had experienced at least one natural hazard event in the preceding three years.<sup>13</sup> In the summer of 2019-2020 alone, 2 in 5

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7 Gerber, P., & Castan, M. (Eds.) (2021). *Critical Perspectives on Human Rights Law in Australia: Volume 2*. (1st ed.), Chapter 5: Realising the Right to Birth Registration in Australia (Melissa Castan, Geeta Shyam, Paula Gerber) <https://research.monash.edu/en/publications/critical-perspectives-on-human-rights-law-in-australia-volume-2>.

8 Gerber, P., & Castan, M. (Eds.) (2021). *Critical Perspectives on Human Rights Law in Australia: Volume 2*. (1st ed.), Chapter 5: Realising the Right to Birth Registration in Australia (Melissa Castan, Geeta Shyam, Paula Gerber) <https://research.monash.edu/en/publications/critical-perspectives-on-human-rights-law-in-australia-volume-2>.

9 based on ABS data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander births 2021 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Births year of registration and the current rate of \$60 for a birth certificate in NSW

10 The impacts of climate change put almost every child at risk | UNICEF

11 Department of Planning and Environment, Interactive climate change projections map | AdaptNSW

12 UNICEF Australia and Royal Far West (2019), *After the Disaster*, Pg. 13. <https://www.royalfarwest.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/After-the-Disaster-Recovery-for-Australias-Children-produced-by-Royal-Far-West-UNICEF-Australia.pdf>

13 UNICEF Australia et al (2020), *Our World Our Say*, Pg. 16, <youth-survey-report\_2020-08-12\_v1-2.pdf (worldvision.com.au)>

children and young people were personally impacted by bushfires; 3 in 10 were personally impacted by drought; almost 25% were personally impacted by floods.<sup>14</sup> The 2022 Northern NSW and Southeast Queensland floods impacted more than 15,000 homes and over 944 education facilities, leaving an estimated 4,000 children in NSW alone requiring intensive support.<sup>15</sup> The experience of trauma or a large-scale emergency event or disaster interrupts their childhood, affecting their immediate and long-term mental health, emotional wellbeing, and development through to adolescence and young adulthood.

We know that climate change impacts the wider social determinants of health, including access to and quality of early learning, education, employment, and housing.<sup>16</sup> These impacts will worsen as climate-related shocks and hazards become more frequent and intense in the coming years and decades. A systemic approach to protecting children from the negative impacts of the climate crisis, in the long run, requires a whole-of-government, multi-sectoral commitment to addressing children's needs within economic and social policy, particularly in areas relevant to the social determinants of children's health.

UNICEF Australia recognises that a whole-of-government approach would require a long-term investment by the NSW Government. In light of the heightened risk of more frequent and extreme weather events, UNICEF Australia encourages the NSW Government in the first instance to focus on child-focused community preparedness, recovery and resilience policy. We believe this is the most pressing and immediate area in need of development in NSW and will produce the most effective short-term outcomes and safety measures for children and young people.

UNICEF Australia recommends the development of an overarching NSW Child and Youth-Focused Response, Recovery, and Resilience-Building Framework that can sit alongside the existing NSW State Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN) to ensure that due consideration is given to children's needs before, during and after natural hazards. NSW currently lacks such a framework. Existing state disaster management plans contain no explicit reference to children's needs when preparing, responding to, or recovering from natural hazards or disasters. A Child and Youth-Focused NSW Disaster Response, Recovery, and Resilience-Building Framework would serve as a reference point for addressing the needs and priorities of children and young people and should create a set of common principles and standards to be included in the state EMPLAN. This could then assist and direct communities in identifying, planning and policymaking across geographies and sectors, incorporating issues such as emergency response, psychosocial programming, and education.

The State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC), the peak committee of officials developing state emergency policy in NSW, is best placed to lead the development of such a framework. This process should include a public consultation process involving children and young people who have been affected by disasters in Australia, including those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and marginalized migrant communities. The creation and implementation of the framework should also be guided by an expert advisory group of specialist agencies, including SEMC, relevant NSW Government departments, local council representatives, relevant members of the NGO sector, academic experts, and children and young people themselves.

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14 UNICEF Australia and Royal Far West (2019), *After the Disaster*, Pg. 10. <https://www.royalfarwest.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/After-the-Disaster-Recovery-for-Australias-Children-produced-by-Royal-Far-West-UNICEF-Australia.pdf>

15 UNICEF Australia and Royal Far West (2022), *NSW Floods Needs Assessment*, Pg. 8

16 UNICEF Australia and Royal Far West (2019), *After the Disaster*, Pg. 13. <https://www.royalfarwest.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/After-the-Disaster-Recovery-for-Australias-Children-produced-by-Royal-Far-West-UNICEF-Australia.pdf>

This action, coupled with the introduction of child-centred risk and needs assessments, and investment in long-term evidence-based programs will increase the capacity of children and young people in NSW to better prepare and recover in the face of disasters and by extension will result in more resilient communities. As the NSW EMPLAN states, 'resilient communities are better able to withstand a crisis event and have an enhanced ability to recover from residual impacts'.<sup>17</sup>

- *(a) Develop an NSW framework for child and youth-focused disaster planning that can be used alongside the existing NSW State Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN), can be adapted for different natural hazards, and operationalised in all NSW communities.*

We know that several factors increase the risk of long-term impacts from natural hazards. Some factors are preexisting, some arise during an emergency, and others occur afterwards. The preexisting vulnerabilities that impact children, such as poverty, homelessness, low engagement with education, additional accessibility needs and lower access to healthcare and other services need to be considered in a risk assessment. UNICEF Australia encourages the NSW Government to conduct an audit on existing policies, strategies and interventions that are associated with climate-related disasters to identify where a child-focused lens is needed and to engage a child-focused risk assessment to encourage early identification of these preexisting vulnerabilities. There is an opportunity to overlay the data with existing disaster risk mapping, and consider pre-emptive investment in evidence-based, long-term programs at the community level to provide the appropriate levels of support to ensure communities are resilient and prepared in the face of a natural hazard.

Similarly, UNICEF Australia encourages the government to employ a child-focused needs assessment when assessing community needs post disaster. UNICEF Australia employed a version of its global emergency needs assessment methodology in the aftermath of the 2022 Northern NSW and Southeast Queensland floods, helping to identify the short and long-term psychosocial, and physical health needs of children and young people affected in those communities.<sup>23</sup> The assessment has formed the basis for multiple tailored health interventions in the aftermath of the floods in the region and could be used as an example of a child-centred needs assessment for the NSW Government.

Programs such as the [Bushfire Recovery Program](#) in NSW, which provide a community led, multi-disciplinary wraparound model of healthcare support to children, parents, care givers and communities, and [Future Proof](#) in Victoria, which supports rural young people to lead local bushfire recovery and build resilience in their own communities, are examples of programs that could be expanded. UNICEF Australia recommends that the NSW Government be prepared to significantly scale-up investments in these kinds of programs across the state as the frequency and intensity of disasters increase.

- *(b) Invest in holistic risk and needs assessments and state audits of existing interventions to systemize understandings of children's preparedness and recovery needs in disaster settings to enable more targeted, child-focussed disaster response,*

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<sup>17</sup> NSW Government, NSW State Emergency Management Plan, para. 615: NSW State Emergency Management Plan

*recovery, and resilience-building policy at the cost of approximately \$12 million for a whole of NSW assessment, to be reassessed every 5 years.*

- *(c) Invest in evidence-based, long-term programs to enable the resilience and recovery of children and young people in the face of increasing natural hazards at the cost of approximately \$15 million over 5 years.*

### **About UNICEF Australia**

UNICEF believes in a fair chance for every child and we are the world's leading organisation working to protect and improve the lives of children in over 190 countries. At UNICEF Australia we work to protect and promote children's rights by advocating for the rights of children in Australia and overseas.