

2023-24 UNICEF Australia Pre-budget Submission

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Overview

At the start of 2023, Australia faces the most complex and challenging set of economic conditions in over a generation, with a mixture of domestic and international factors bearing down as the Government builds the 2023-24 Budget.

These include: rising cost of living; disruptions to markets and supply chains from ongoing conflict; a sharp sustained increase to the official cash rate; early stages of the impacts of increased wages; uncertainty of the impacts of changes to China's COVID-zero policy; an energy market in transition; increased occurrence and ferocity of natural disasters; a post-COVID rebuilding of skilled migration; and a fragile economic outlook in Europe and the United States of America.

All the while the longer-term global security, economic, and developmental outlook faces extreme, systemic challenges. Climate change is having real impacts in the Pacific, generating unmitigated famine in the Horn of Africa, unpredicted flooding in South Sudan, conflict and displacement of people in Yemen, and historic flooding in Pakistan. Deep political turmoil, unrest and violence continues simultaneously in most of the world's continents.

There are more children in need today than any time since the Second World War.

Both in Australia and around the world, UNICEF's mission is to protect and improve the lives of children, everywhere. Investing in children and young people here and abroad makes Australia more resilient, prepared, productive, harmonious and safer, as it faces increasing challenges. This 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 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 Australia's children to be engaged in the issues affecting them and better supported to develop and thrive.

We start with a simple proposition – you cannot fix what you cannot measure or count. By investing in the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index, we can track children's wellbeing through a national dataset, feeding data back into the budget process to ensure spending produces positive outcomes. Ensuring every child born in Australia has access to a birth certificate will enable all children to fully access their rights throughout life.

To realise a more fair and equitable society and to support families experiencing disadvantage, abolishing the activity test for the Child Care Subsidy will make access to early learning as easy as possible for every child.

Protecting children in the face of increased climate change means supporting them at the point of disaster. Investments in disaster response, recovery, and resilience-building frameworks, which take into account the unique needs and interests of children, will make this possible. Coupled with investment in youth participation, we can place children and young people at the centre of climate-related action.

Finally, the Government can enhance its commitment to listening to the voices of young people by backing their ideas for a better Australia with a dedicated innovation fund, making Australia a world-leader in youth-led innovation.

Supporting our neighbours both near and far improves children's lives, makes Australia more safe, and gives greater credence to our role as a serious global middle power.

Investing in the health, education and safety of children today, through trusted delivery partners, builds Australia's place in the world and lays a foundation for a more stable and prosperous global community. From boosting regional health and immunisations, to global education programs and bolstering its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals, the Australian Government can make the world a better place for children and young people and in doing so make itself a credible and trusted neighbour, ally, friend and partner. After a year marked by aggression and conflict, there can be no better argument for the need for safe, secure, healthy, and educated people across the global community.

UNICEF Australia presents these Budget recommendations to Government for its consideration. We look forward to discussing them with all Ministers, officials, Members of Parliament and Senators over coming months.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Improve children's wellbeing by tracking their progress through a national dataset

- *Provide funding of up to \$500,000 to refresh the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index with newly available data, and enable deep-dive analysis into specific domains of children's wellbeing.*

2. Ensure all children can fully access their rights by achieving universal birth registration

- *Fund a nation-wide guarantee at a cost of roughly \$1.5million per year, which provides a free first birth certificate for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.*
- *Commission a feasibility and cost-benefit study of providing free birth certificates for every child in Australia.*

3. Improve childhood development outcomes by making quality early childhood education and care accessible for all

- *Remove the activity test for the Child Care Subsidy to provide greater access to early learning, particularly for low-income families.*

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

- *Provide funding of \$200,000 for UNICEF Australia to conduct the first national analysis of child-sensitivity in disaster frameworks across Australia with recommendations incorporating global best practice and an action plan for implementation.*

- *Provide \$17 million over five years, to enable UNICEF to accelerate investment in climate-resilient WASH and healthcare infrastructure across three countries in the Pacific.*
- *Provide funding of \$250,000 per year for three years to create a Youth Climate Representatives pilot program, to enable more comprehensive, consistent, and inclusive youth participation in climate change policymaking across Australia, the Indo-Pacific, and globally.*

5. Make Australia a world-leader in youth-led innovation by resourcing the ambitions of young people

- *Provide funding of \$1.5 million per year for three years to establish a Youth Innovation Pilot Fund to invest in the ambitions of Australia's youth.*

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

- *Utilise existing investments in regional health security by partnering with UNICEF to strengthen routine childhood immunisation in the Pacific.*
- *Commit \$24 million over three years (2024-2026) to the Education Cannot Wait (ECW) fund.*
- *Introduce a year-on-year real increase in the ODA budget, with a gradual increase over time to 0.5% of GNI.*
- *Commit to increase UNICEF's annual core funding to \$41 million AUD to support its core work around the globe in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and UNICEF's global mission for children.*

7. Ensure social cohesion by providing additional support for children and families repatriated from Syria

- *Continue investing in a holistic, long-term rehabilitation and reintegration framework and coordinated services for children and women returning from camps in Northeast Syria to ensure their long-term wellbeing and the public safety of the Australian community.*

Detailed Recommendations

1. Improve children's wellbeing by tracking their progress through a national dataset

At a time when the Australian Government is taking a welcome approach to expanding the scope of budgets beyond purely economic means - through the Measuring What Matters budget initiative - the need for a comprehensive national data set tracking the wellbeing of children is more needed than ever.

Thankfully, although Australia currently lacks a national dataset which tracks the holistic wellbeing of children, UNICEF Australia and ARACY have undertaken to develop one in its stead through the creation of the [Australian Children's Wellbeing Index](#). The Index aims to use data to describe how Australian children are faring across all aspects of wellbeing and how this is changing, and is organised using the Nest, Australia's evidence-based framework for child and youth wellbeing.

In the absence of a government-held national dataset on children's wellbeing, the Wellbeing Index is a best-practice model for how it can be done. The Index is also an essential tool for tracking children's wellbeing while the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare develops a national child wellbeing data asset, as per Measure 29 of the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-30*. With that data asset still years away, the Wellbeing Index is an industry leading alternative which will empower the government to make evidence-based policy and budgetary decisions for Australia's children.

Whilst the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index is currently helping us better understand the needs of Australia's children, it requires regular updating as new data is released to maintain an accurate picture of child wellbeing, which Government investment can enable. This would also enable the Index to be further built out and used to examine the different domains of children's wellbeing through deep-dive analysis into specific areas that require pressing attention.

Government investment in the Index would allow decision makers and policy professionals to track Australia's progress towards improving child wellbeing over the long-term, regularly feeding back into the budget process to ensure our investments in Australia's next generation are producing their desired outcomes.

Recommendation

Provide funding of up to \$500,000 to refresh the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index with newly available data, and enable deep-dive analysis into specific domains of children's wellbeing.

2. Ensure all children can fully access their rights by achieving universal birth registration

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 document that allows a child, a young person, and then an adult, to access those things needed to take part in society.

Without a birth certificate there is no passport, drivers licence, tax file number, or bank account, and without these essential things, access to employment, health care, education, training, and welfare support, all become difficult. This creates disadvantage which cascades and compounds – no access to training can lead to unemployment, unemployment can lead to reliance on welfare support, no access to welfare support can lead to poverty, poverty can lead to poor health outcomes amongst others. At its worst, research has shown it 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.¹

It is because of these protective factors that UNICEF has been a key player in birth registration for over 30 years, working around the world to help governments strengthen their birth registration systems. However, our attention turns now to a country in which few people know birth registration is even an issue – Australia.

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.² 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.³ Similar research in Western Australia found that 11% of births to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers were not registered between 1980 and 2010.⁴

There are a multitude of 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 taken as one at birth, the cost of the certificate may be confused with the cost of registration,⁵ and for people facing financial hardship, this can act as a deterrent.

At a nation-wide level, one of the most impactful initial levers that policy makers could pull is making the first birth certificate free for all children. 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

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ Queensland Ombudsman, 'The Indigenous Birth Registration Report: An Investigation into the Under-Registration of Indigenous births in Queensland' (Report, June 2018) vii.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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

is made free for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia.⁶ With the landmark national referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament forthcoming, any initiatives that promote First Nations electoral enrolment, such as access to a birth certificate, must surely be welcome.

Longer-term, should Australia genuinely endeavour to achieve universal birth registration and unlock the benefits it would bring, particularly for our First Nations children, then perhaps it is within the realms of possibility for a nation as wealthy as ours to make birth certificates free for all children.

Recommendation

Fund a nation-wide guarantee at a cost of roughly \$1.5million per year, which provides a free first birth certificate for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Recommendation

Commission a feasibility and cost-benefit study of providing free birth certificates for every child in Australia.

⁶ Ibid.

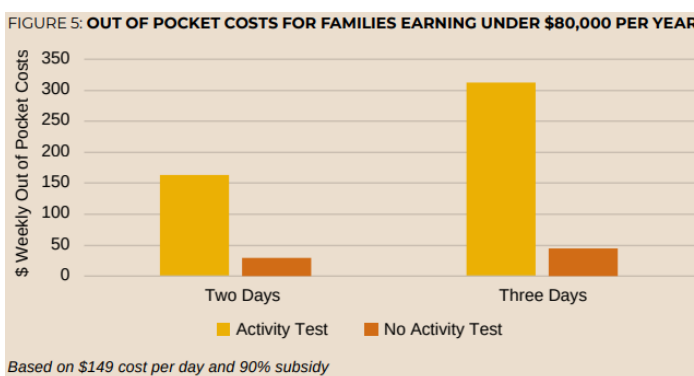
3. Improve childhood development outcomes by making quality early childhood education and care accessible for all

High quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is fundamental for children's health, wellbeing and life chances. The benefits of investment in this space have now been well-documented and are wide-ranging, from increasing children's cognitive capabilities and educational attainment, to allowing more parents and carers to participate in paid work.⁷

Unfortunately, the cost of ECEC in Australia is one of the highest in the OECD⁸ and is a barrier to access. ECEC costs have risen faster than the cost of housing or electricity and a family with two kids in childcare can spend \$25,000 a year.⁹ When asked the main reason why they couldn't look for work in 2021, almost 140,000 Australians cited "childcare" and nine out of ten of them were women.¹⁰

The Albanese Labor Government's landmark reforms in ECEC are very welcome and stand to bring transformative generational change for Australian children. However, families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage can still struggle to access ECEC if they don't meet the strict requirements of the activity test for the Child Care Subsidy. The current activity test is contributing to at least 126,000 children and families from the poorest household missing out on ECEC.¹¹

Research from the Australian Institute of Family Studies has shown that the activity test is negatively impacting low-income families, First Nations families, single parents and families from non-English speaking backgrounds, more than other cohorts.¹² In terms of workforce participation, the test creates uncertainty for parents in casual employment due to the risk that they will not meet requirements and be left with over-payment debts.¹³



Source: Child Care Subsidy Activity Test: Undermining Child Development and Parental Participation

No family should go without ECEC support where it is needed, and simplification or removal of the activity test would ensure greater access to ECEC for low-income families, improved participation from parents dissuaded from working because of the risk of incurring debts, and reduced red tape and improved efficiency.¹⁴ By removing the activity test for the Child Care Subsidy, we can ensure these benefits are realised.

⁷ PwC (2019), *A Smart Investment for a Smarter Australia: Economic analysis of early childhood education in the before school in Australia*. <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/ECO%20ANALYSIS%20Full%20Report.pdf>

⁸ OECD (2022), *OECD Family Database*.

https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF3_4_Childcare_support.pdf#:~:text=Gross%20fees%20for%20care%20in%20a%20%E2%80%98typical%E2%80%99%20childcare,in%20Switzerland%20it%20reaches%2070%25%20of%20average%20earnings

⁹ Thrive By Five (2022), *Thrive By Five website*. <https://thrivebyfive.org.au/>

¹⁰ Centre for Policy Development (2021), *Starting Better: A Guarantee for Young Children and Families*. <https://cpd.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CPD-Starting-Better-Report.pdf>

¹¹ Impact Economics and Policy (2022), *Child Care Subsidy Activity Test: Undermining Child Development and Parental Participation*.

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61e32e62c8337e6fd7a1e6/t/630de5c741a8de08ad48d593/1661855185396/Undermining+Child+Development+And+Parental+Participation+Report_FINAL.pdf

¹² Australia Institute of Family Studies (2022), *Child Care Package Evaluation: Final report*. <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/child-care-package-evaluation-final-report>

¹³ Ibid, see footnote 11.

¹⁴ Ibid

Recommendation

Remove the activity test for the Child Care Subsidy to provide greater access to early learning, particularly for low-income families.

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

Australia has been hit by increasingly frequent and intense floods, heatwaves, droughts, and bushfires in recent years. Children and young people are highly exposed and uniquely vulnerable to these shocks and hazards. 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.¹⁵ In the summer of 2019-2020 alone, 2 in 5 children and young people were personally impacted by bushfires; 3 in 10 were personally impacted by drought; almost 25% were personally impacted by floods.¹⁶ The 2022 Northern New South Wales (NSW) and Southeast Queensland floods, impacted more than 15,000 homes, over 944 education facilities, leaving an estimated 4,000 children in NSW alone requiring intensive support.¹⁷

In the immediate aftermath of these disasters, children may lose loved ones, homes and property, pets and possessions, experience displacement, lose power, water, phones, and the internet, lose access to learning and education in early learning centres or schools, recreational spaces, and healthcare, and may have to deal with flow-on effects of heightened stress and anxiety among adults around them, including increased incidence of domestic and family violence (DFV).¹⁸ In the medium and long-term, children who experience these shocks and hazards are particularly susceptible to longer term mental health issues, which in turn can cascade into lower educational attainment, and affect wellbeing and employment outcomes well into adulthood.¹⁹

Addressing these needs – the absence of child-friendly spaces, compounding trauma and mental health support, interrupted education, among others – is vital to ensure the long-term health and wellbeing of children, young people and the communities they live in.

A key step in this process is to assess the extent to which current disaster frameworks at Local, State, and Federal levels are child sensitive. A comprehensive national stocktake of this nature would provide a better understanding of where the most critical gaps in policy and practice are, both in a sectoral and geographical sense. Such an analysis would also provide a strong foundation for a new national policy framework to address child and youth-specific response, recovery, and resilience-building in disasters domestically. Accompanying the gaps analysis with modelling on the medium and long-term impacts of continued inaction would lay the groundwork for a fiscally sound case for new investment, in line with the Government's new 'Measuring What Matters' approach to budgeting.

UNICEF's global mandate and experience in child-centric emergency responses means that we can draw on international experience to embed and implement child-sensitive disaster frameworks and analyse global practice to review and improve these frameworks.

In addition, UNICEF Australia's growing domestic partnerships footprint in child-specific drought, bushfire, and flood recovery work, gives us a strong understanding of needs on the ground, and a web

¹⁵ UNICEF Australia et al (2020), *Our World Our Say*, Pg. 16, <youth-survey-report_2020-08-12_v1-2.pdf (worldvision.com.au)>

¹⁶ 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>

¹⁷ UNICEF Australia and Royal Far West (2022), NSW Floods Needs Assessment, Pg. 8

¹⁸ UNICEF Australia and Royal Far West, *After the Disaster*, Pg. 12; <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>

¹⁹ Gibbs, L; Nurse, J; Cook, J; Ireton, G; Alkemade, N; Roberts, M; Gallagher, C; Bryant, R; Block, K; Molyneux, R; Forbes, D: "Delayed Disaster Impacts on Academic Performance Of Primary School Children," *Child Development*, Vol 100: No 0, Pg. 1 – 11; McFarlane A; Van Hooft M, "Impact of childhood exposure to a natural disaster on adult mental health: 20-year longitudinal follow-up study," *British Journal of Psychiatry* (2009) Vol 195; Pg. 142 – 148.

of relationships necessary to coordinate cluster responses in the future. In short, UNICEF Australia is well placed to carry out the gaps analysis and modelling work and assist the Government to create a national plan of action for child-sensitive disaster response in the future.

Recommendation

Provide funding of \$200,000 for UNICEF Australia to conduct the first national analysis of child-sensitivity in disaster frameworks across Australia with recommendations incorporating global best practice and an action plan for implementation.

Children and young people across the Indo-Pacific are among the most exposed and vulnerable to the impacts of climate change today. UNICEF's Children's Climate Risk Index reveals that over 140 million children in the region are highly exposed to water scarcity; 120 million children are highly exposed to flooding; 210 million children are highly exposed to cyclones; and 420 million children are highly exposed to air pollution.²⁰ The East Asia and Pacific region also has the highest proportion of children facing multiple shocks and hazards; 65% of children face four or more shocks, compared to the global average of 37%.²¹

In this context, the importance of investing in child-focused climate-resilient infrastructure cannot be overstated. Up front investments in the resilience of schools, healthcare, early childhood development (ECD), agricultural, and WASH infrastructure to slow-onset and acute climate disasters saves lives, prevents long-term disruptions to developmental trajectories, and reduces the scale and complexity of humanitarian response after a disaster strikes.

Investing in such infrastructure also aligns broadly with the prerogatives of the Australian Government to listen closely to what our Indo-Pacific colleagues are asking for. Partner governments, civil society stakeholders, and young people in Asia-Pacific and beyond are calling for more ambitious financial commitments towards adaptation, resilience-building, and loss-and-damage, including towards child-critical sectors such as education, healthcare, and WASH. A core tenet of the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*, launched by the leaders of the Pacific Island Forum (PIF), states, as its ambition on the question of climate change that “all Pacific peoples remain resilient to the impacts of climate change and disasters and are able to lead safe, secure, and prosperous lives.”²²

We welcome the Government's significant investments in Official Development Assistance (ODA) both to the Pacific and Southeast Asia, and acknowledge expansions in financing for climate resilient infrastructure through the Climate and Infrastructure Agreement with Indonesia and the growth of the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP).

It is vital some of these investments translate towards child-focussed climate-resilient infrastructure of the kind outlined above. UNICEF has a strong and long-lasting presence across the Indo-Pacific, including across fourteen countries in the South Pacific, and is well positioned to help deliver on these investments, as they grow in scale.

²⁰ UNICEF (2021), *Climate Change Risk Index*, Pg. 11, <[UNICEF-climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis.pdf](#)>

²¹ UNICEF internal data (2021).

²² Pacific Islands Forum (2022), *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*, Pg. 25, <[PIFS-2050-Strategy-Blue-Pacific-Continent-WEB-5Aug2022.pdf \(forumsec.org\)](#)>

Recommendation

Provide \$17 million over five years, to enable UNICEF to accelerate investment in climate-resilient WASH and healthcare infrastructure across three countries in the Pacific.

Children and young people across Australia and the Indo-Pacific believe that decision-makers are not listening to their voices or representing their interests in climate and disaster policymaking. The landmark 2020 *Our World Our Say* survey found that only 13% of young Australians felt that they were listened to by leaders in Government on climate change issues. A 2021 Plan International survey of adolescents and youth from 37 countries, including within the Indo-Pacific region, found that 84% of respondents felt their government's efforts to include their views in climate change policymaking were insufficient.²³ The current Federal Government's commitment to a National Youth Steering Committee, a National Youth Engagement Strategy, and five new thematic Youth Advisory Groups bodes well for young people to be heard and their priorities seriously considered on policy issues that affect their lives. Given the fact that children and young people consistently rate climate change as their top concern, the Federal Government should ensure that at least one of those Youth Advisory Groups is focused on climate change. However, the urgency of the crisis, the complex, varied nature of its cascading impacts on children and young people in different parts of Australia, and the fact that children and young people bear the highest cost of the crisis in coming decades, makes addressing child and youth participation in climate change policymaking a bigger imperative.

To ensure that the voices and perspectives of children and young people are heard and listened to in a consistent, inclusive, and comprehensive manner, the Federal Government should create and resource a 'Youth Climate Representatives' pilot program. Such a program would involve selecting two young people – including as a minimum one First Nations young leader – to travel, consult, and listen to the perspectives of their peers across Australia on the impacts of climate change and the solutions to the crisis. Modelled on the Australian Youth Representative to UN program, the Youth Climate Representatives would report on their findings to the National Youth Steering Committee, the Minister for Climate Change and Energy, and the Minister for Youth, and share their findings at the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP) as members of the official delegation. Importantly, the Representatives would also have the opportunity to meet with youth leaders and youth-led organisations in the Indo-Pacific region to build relationships, discuss common concerns, and share good practices across the region, whilst also building a more aligned influencing agenda at forums such as COP and the Conference Of Youth (COY). The Youth Climate Representatives would be supported by a small secretariat in the Office for Youth. Developing the program now would lay the foundations for unprecedented youth voice and participation at COP 31.

Recommendation

Provide funding of \$250,000 per year for three years to create a Youth Climate Representatives pilot program, to enable more comprehensive, consistent, and inclusive youth participation in climate change policymaking across Australia, the Indo-Pacific, and globally.

²³ Plan International (2021), *Youth Survey on Climate Change*, <82% of young people don't know how their government is tackling climate emergency | Plan International (plan-international.org)>

5. Make Australia a world-leader in youth-led innovation by resourcing the ambitions of young people

The Albanese Labor Government's new youth engagement model being led by the Minister for Youth, with its focus on providing a voice and structure for younger Australians to directly engage with government, is a welcome one. UNICEF Australia particularly supports the Government's intention to provide Australia's young people with strong and formalised engagement in government and policy making, through the Youth Steering Committee and other mechanisms.

While consulting with young people is a welcome first step, consultation without commitment and resourcing to act on the ideas and ambitions of young people is a missed opportunity. Establishing a Youth Innovation Pilot Fund could meet the moment to harness the energy and ideas of young people – an initial modest investment of funding to resource initiatives developed by young people themselves, which are aimed at taking new approaches to improving the wellbeing of Australia's children and young people. Young people themselves would be involved in the governance of the Fund which could come under the remit of the Minister for Youth and intersect with the Youth Steering Committee, and pilot initiatives and flag those delivering positive results for more significant investment. The Fund would make Australia a world-leader in youth engagement and be a source of inspiration which places Australia's youth at the forefront of civic participation and innovation.

Recommendation

Provide funding of \$1.5 million per year for three years to establish a Youth Innovation Pilot Fund to invest in the ambitions of Australia's youth.

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

UNICEF Australia welcomes the new Government's commitment to revitalizing Australia's approach to international development, as well as new spending commitments in the Pacific and across Southeast Asia.²⁴ It's important we contribute consistently to building a stable and prosperous region in the shadow of COVID-19, and the Government's investment to aid pandemic recovery in Timor-Leste and the Pacific will do just this. These investments will have important impacts on children's health, nutrition, and learning outcomes over the next decade.

Amidst the Government's focus on pandemic recovery, Australia should remain committed to strengthening routine immunisation efforts as a contribution to regional health security. Official data published by the World Health Organisation and UNICEF in 2022 shows the largest sustained decline in childhood vaccinations in approximately 30 years.²⁵ 25 million infants missed out on lifesaving vaccines against contagious diseases such as whooping cough in 2021, and countries such as Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea have seen significant reductions in the coverage of routine immunisation as a result of the pandemic.²⁶

In response to this, the Government's commitment to an investment of \$375 million in regional health security over five years can be impactful. This investment should pay particular attention to the increasing and serious risks of declining routine immunisation and prioritise strengthening childhood immunisation. Key intervention strategies here include catching up zero dose children by 2025 to guard against vaccine-preventable diseases, integrating COVID-19 vaccine and routine immunisation delivery, improving demand generation and community engagement to increase uptake, and strengthening country capacity to respond to outbreaks. With our strong footprint in the Pacific, experience delivering 16.8 million COVID-19 vaccines in the region, and multiple Country Offices at the ready to implement, UNICEF is the ideal partner to help Australia improve health security in the Pacific.

Recommendation

Utilise existing investments in regional health security by partnering with UNICEF to strengthen routine childhood immunisation in the Pacific.

UNICEF Australia welcomes the Australian Government's renewed focus and ambition to addressing the impacts of the climate crisis in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. This commitment is apparent in increases to ODA allocations for the Pacific, and South East Asia, some of which will be dedicated to building climate-resilient infrastructure, accelerating the renewable energy transition, and enhancing practical Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) measures (including disaster-resilient school infrastructure) across the region. It is also in Australia's financial contributions to climate-fuelled humanitarian crises in places such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Horn of Africa. All of this comes at a time of an inflation crisis, pressure to address cost-of-living domestically, and high levels of public debt.

²⁴ ACFID Budget Analysis (2022)

²⁵ UNICEF (2022), COVID-19 pandemic fuels largest continued backslide in vaccinations in three decades", The WHO & UNICEF Estimates of National Immunization Coverage (WUENIC), <https://www.unicef.org/eap/press-releases/covid-19-pandemic-fuels-largest-continued-backslide-vaccinations>

²⁶ Ibid.

Even so, prioritising funding to protect and prepare children and young people internationally for the ever-growing impacts of the climate crisis is crucial. One way to ensure commitment to this important area of work, whilst also aligning with climate adaptation and DRR priorities, is to continue investing in the Education Cannot Wait (ECW) fund for education in emergencies and protracted crises. ECW has expanded its strategic focus to include responding to climate change as a key driver of emergencies. Increasingly frequent and intense climate change-driven disasters are pushing more children, particularly girls, out of school. We know that lost learning has significant decades-long and even multi-generational consequences for levels of poverty, gender inequity, and violence in affected communities.

ECW has already reached more than 7 million children and adolescents in emergencies, including more than 3 million girls, and 60,000 children with disabilities across 41 crisis-affected countries, but the need to scale-up is urgent.²⁷ New estimates from ECW show that 222 million school-aged children are affected by crises globally, which is a significant increase from 2016 (75 million). Approximately 78.2 million are out of school, with 120 million in school but not achieving minimum proficiency in mathematics or reading.²⁸

Recommendation

Commit \$24 million over three years (2024-2026) to the Education Cannot Wait (ECW) fund.

UNICEF Australia appreciates the tight fiscal environment the Government is facing and, in this context, welcomes the new Government's approach to innovative means of contributing to poverty reduction, including the recent commitment to allocate 20% of Australia's Special Drawing Rights allocation at the International Monetary Fund to vulnerable countries.

However, Official Development Assistance (ODA) remains a key pillar of Australia's contribution to addressing international development issues at global scale. With an ODA/Gross National Income (GNI) ratio of 0.2% in 2021, Australia currently ranks 21 out of 29 OECD donors on aid generosity. Comparatively, Canada sat at 0.3% of GNI and the United Kingdom at 0.5% of GNI. Moreover, the new Government's pre-election costings fell short of the amount required to increase aid in line with inflation and GNI.²⁹

Recent surveys from the Lowy Institute³⁰ and the ANU's Development Policy Centre³¹ respectively show that more Australians now want the Government to maintain or increase our aid budget, compared with 2019. The key takeaway, according to the ANU's Terence Wood, is that "most Australians don't want aid cut right now."³²

UNICEF Australia welcomes the Government's recent ODA increases which puts us on the right trajectory as a good global citizen to help address a multitude of development issues. However, given the significant need across the region and the globe, a gradual increase over ODA over time to 0.5% of GNI is required.

²⁷ [Education Cannot Wait \(2023\), Education Cannot Wait Key Statistics, <Main Results Dashboard | Education Cannot Wait>](#)

²⁸ Plan International et al, Joint Letter to Minister Pat Conroy on Education Cannot Wait;

²⁹ Cameron Hill and Huiyuan Liu (2022), "[Aid campaign wrap: Labor promises to cut by less than the Coalition - Devpolicy Blog from the Development Policy Centre](#)"

³⁰ Lowy Institute (2022), "[Budget priorities - Lowy Institute Poll](#)"

³¹ Terrence Wood, (2022), "[Attention Labor: Australians don't want aid cut - Devpolicy Blog from the Development Policy Centre](#)"

³² [Ibid.](#)

Recommendation

Introduce a year-on-year real increase in the ODA budget, with a gradual increase over time to 0.5% of GNI.

We also recognise the work done to build greater connectivity between countries by the Australian Government through the Australian Awards Fellowships program. Building connections between the people of Australia and the Indo-Pacific through exchanges and in-bound programs for NGOs, universities and private businesses strengthens bonds, relationships and capacity. UNICEF would welcome continued investments in programs like the Australian Awards Fellowships and other comparable initiatives.

UNICEF offers a unique proposition to help the Government achieve its vision of being a good global citizen and deepening regional relationships. UNICEF's efficiency and effectiveness at global scale is demonstrated both by our footprint in 190 countries, and by our leadership in the procurement and delivery of COVID-19 vaccines on behalf of COVAX, delivering 1.58 billion COVID-19 vaccine doses globally, and 16.8 million to countries in East Asia and the Pacific.

UNICEF also has strong partnerships with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Pacific Community, as demonstrated by the signing of a second five-year Framework Agreement for Cooperation (FAC) with ASEAN. Alongside the FAC, a corresponding rolling workplan of 44 joint activities are currently under implementation in the areas of health, nutrition, education, WASH, social welfare and development, climate change, disaster risk reduction and adolescent participation and empowerment.

UNICEF has the ability to mobilise both public and private resources and enhance people to people connections. In 2021, UNICEF Australia mobilised over \$43m AUD in funding from the private sector. We directly support programmes in the Asia-Pacific region and hold uniquely strong relationships with program specialists in Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Pacific, and Southeast Asia. We have deployed combined private and public sector surge funding to humanitarian emergencies in countries such as India, Sri Lanka, China, PNG, Fiji, Vietnam, and Tonga.

Given our strengths as a go-to partner for the Government, supporting UNICEF's annual core funding can help the 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 equipped with fit-for-purpose technical expertise and capacity at the country level. On average, 60-65% of RR in this region are being used for technical assistance provided by programme experts to governments and partners;
- support and scale up innovative approaches and take calculated risks to bring innovative solutions for children in an uncertain world;

- be able to respond to critical gaps in the early stages of humanitarian response, and for the delivery of COVID-19 vaccines where there are shortfalls in logistical support;
- 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 \$34.4m AUD. Since 2014, the core funding has been on a decline to an investment of just \$14.9m AUD in 2021. In comparison, Australia's annual average contributions to the International Development Association of the World Bank Group from 2017 to 2020 has been approximately \$160m AUD. 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

Commit to increase UNICEF's annual core funding to \$41 million AUD to support its core work around the globe in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and UNICEF's global mission for children.

7. Ensure social cohesion by providing additional support for children and families repatriated from Syria

UNICEF Australia welcomes the repatriation of a first cohort of children and women from camps and other facilities in Northeast Syria and acknowledges the Government's commitment to bring those remaining overseas back to Australia. These children are not responsible for their situations, having been taken to Northeast Syria without consent or having been born there. Bringing the children home without their mothers, as has been suggested, separates them from close family and potentially retraumatizes them again. It also risks complicating their perceptions of Australia and their ability to reintegrate, potentially creating domestic national security risks in the future.

Australia has the capacity to ascertain and act on any security risks domestically, and the legislative, and deradicalization infrastructure to manage the challenges posed by the repatriated children and women. Although Australia has historically had a dearth of specialist reintegration and disengagement programs to work with returned children of foreign fighters, our child protection, children's mental health, and trauma response networks across the health and social services spaces are perhaps capable to supporting small numbers of children with specific, multi-faceted needs. Specialist models such as the multi-dimensional Rehabilitation and Reintegration Intervention Framework (RRIF) have been designed for the specific needs of these highly traumatised and potentially indoctrinated children.³³ Australian academics have also provided advice to the current Australian Government for what a context-specific rehabilitation and reintegration framework in Australia could look like, incorporating coordinated support in the areas of accommodation, child protection, legal support, religious guidance, psychological first aid, mental health support, family and community engagement and additional specialist services.³⁴ A comprehensive approach of this nature has individualised health and wellbeing dividends, and national security dividends.

Recommendation

Continue investing in a holistic, long-term rehabilitation and reintegration framework and coordinated services for children and women returning from camps in Northeast Syria to ensure their long-term wellbeing and the public safety of the Australian community.

³³ S Weine et al "Rapid Review to Inform the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Child Returnees from the Islamic State. - Abstract - Europe PMC", *Annals of Global Health*, 86:1 (2020).

³⁴ Charles Chang (2022), <'ISIS brides' return to Australia: What we know so far | SBS News>