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Towards radical accountability to children and young people

UK development and foreign policy: a child rights review

November 2026



About this report

This report assesses UK development and foreign policy based on the asks of children and young people within the 10 Point Plan for Change launched at the Global Partnerships Conference. It focuses on children and young people's overarching ask for radical accountability and places their rights at the centre of the assessment.

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Introduction

Across the world, children are disproportionately affected by the converging crises of conflict, climate change and economic instability. Almost one in four children worldwide are now living in conflict zones, the highest number since records began in 1990.[1] Climate-related shocks disrupted the education of at least 242 million students across 85 countries in 2024 alone.[2] While children make up 31% of the global population, they account for more than half of those living in extreme poverty.[3]

This has devastating consequences for children and direct implications for the UK›s foreign policy objectives and interests. Today›s children will shape the stability, prosperity and resilience of the countries with which the UK seeks to build partnerships, expand trade, prevent conflict and address shared global challenges. Investing in children is one of the most effective ways to support long-term economic growth, strengthen social cohesion and build more stable and prosperous societies.

Children are affected by every major choice in UK development and foreign policy, from aid allocations and humanitarian action to climate finance, technology governance and diplomatic priorities. Yet the systems used to design, fund and judge those choices do not consistently identify children as recipients and rights-holders, assess the age-specific consequences of these systems or give children and young people a meaningful role in decisions. This matters because many of the UK›s flagship international objectives, including its "five securities" (health security, climate security, human security, economic security and food security), depend on outcomes for children. Failing to understand and measure the impact of UK policy on children risks undermining the effectiveness of UK investment and wider strategic objectives.

Ahead of the UK's Global Partnerships Conference in May 2026, children and young people from across the globe set out what they want from the UK and its partners in a 10-Point Plan for Change. Children and young people's message was clear: design change with us, not about us. This report, from the Bond Child Rights Working Group (CRWG), takes that plan as its starting point and assesses where the UK is in terms of the plan since the July 2024 general election. Changes in leadership, including within the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), create an opportunity to move this agenda forward.

Across the nine areas assessed in this report, the evidence does not support one simple story. There has been genuine progress in some forms of child and youth participation, and the UK has taken positive action for children and young people through selected programmes and crisis responses. But these gains are uneven and fragile. In several areas, children remain structurally missing from strategies, budgets, data and accountability frameworks. In financing, education, and health, there is strong evidence of deterioration: resources for children have fallen disproportionately or face further reductions, even where individual commitments have been protected.

The report does not claim that every poor outcome is the result of a deliberate decision to disadvantage children. Much of the problem is systematic omission: policy systems that do not ask what a decision specifically means for children will repeatedly overlook them. But where evidence shows child-focused UK aid falling faster than UK aid overall, or child-critical sectors absorbing disproportionate cuts, "invisibility" is no longer an adequate explanation on its own. These are decisions with identifiable consequences on children's lives.

Children and young people are not a narrow thematic interest. They are rights-holders and participants, and a major proportion of the population in UK partner countries. Broad policy categories can also conceal age-specific risks. Girls, for example, must be recognised both within gender-equality policy and as children with distinct rights, vulnerabilities and forms of agency.

Assessing intentionality around child rights provides a practical test. Key questions to ask is whether the FCDO's priorities are improving children and young people's safety, health, learning, participation and future opportunities and outcomes? And is this happening in ways that are equitable and sustainable over time, including for children and young people facing the greatest barriers?

The UK's evolving approach to international cooperation creates an important opportunity to put children and young people more firmly at the centre of its global priorities. The government is organising its development approach around five securities (health, climate, human, economic and food)[4] while maintaining four shifts (from donor to investor, service delivery to system support, grants to expertise, and international intervention to local leadership).[5] As the UK prepares to lead the G20 in 2027, childhood should have a dedicated focus within the Foreign Policy track, building on the G7 French Presidency's Children Summit and commitments from the Brazilian and South African G20 presidencies on early childhood. As priorities take shape around growth and global stability, alongside the key issues of debt, investment, resilience and climate finance,[6,7] making children's rights, priorities and experiences visible from the outset would immediately demonstrate the UK's commitment to a more equal and accountable approach to international cooperation.

The report's conclusion is clear: the UK has pockets of progress and standalone commitments to children, but it does not yet have an intentional approach that considers unique vulnerabilities, let alone the permanent architecture required to be accountable to them. Radical accountability means making children and young people visible before decisions are taken, enabling them to influence those decisions safely and meaningfully, protecting investment in their rights and publicly reporting what changed in their lives.



13-year-old Mercy Patrick is seen participating in class at Pembamoyo Primary School in Nsanje District southern Malawi on Tuesday 11 September 2023
Photo credit: UNICEF

How we assessed the UK

This is a targeted civil-society accountability assessment, not a comprehensive evaluation of every UK programme. It considers the UK government's record from July 2024 to October 2026 against the first nine areas of the youth-led 10-Point Plan for Change, developed around the Global Partnerships Conference. The tenth area, radical accountability, is used as the report's concluding standard rather than treated as a separate policy area.

The assessment draws on publicly available policy, spending and programme evidence assembled by members of the Bond Child Rights Working Group. The ratings and conclusions are the working group's own, based on available evidence, not those of the children and young people who wrote the plan.

The working group also held structured, small-group discussions with children and young people. Their contributions are included as qualitative evidence and quotations, but these participants did not determine or endorse the working group's ratings or conclusions.

Rating scale

Rating	Meaning
Progress	Meaningful steps in the right direction for children, although important gaps may remain.
Mixed	Material progress in some respects and regression or serious gaps in others.
Stalled	Commitments or activity exist, and some progress may be visible, but it has not been sustained, embedded or translated into consistent outcomes for children.
Neglected	Children are largely absent from or systematically overlooked within the relevant policy, financing or accountability framework.
Deteriorated	The overall direction has moved backwards for children.

Report Card

The pattern across the nine areas is not uniform, but it is consistent: activity for children exists, but without a system that reliably makes them visible, protects their interests and enables accountability.

Area	Rating	Accountability finding
Partnerships	Progress	The UK has created some meaningful spaces for youth participation, but children and young people have not secured equivalent influence over the principal policy output.
Power	Stalled	Partnership and localisation language has advanced, but decision-making power and resources remain concentrated, with children and young people largely outside formal structures.
Financing	Deteriorated	Previous UK aid cuts disproportionately affected children, further reduction to 0.3% of GNI renews pressure on financing for children, while limited data makes the latest child-specific impact difficult to track.
Education and growth	Deteriorated	Selected commitments remain, but major reductions in education financing undermine access and opportunity, especially for marginalised children.
Humanitarian action	Mixed	The UK protected support in some priority crises, but falling resources and weak child-centred accountability prevent consistent protection across the crisis cycle.
Health	Deteriorated	Protected commitments do not offset steep reductions in wider health spending or weak visibility of priorities identified by children and young people.
Climate	Neglected	Climate commitments remain substantial, but children are not consistently visible in objectives, finance tracking or participation.
Technology	Stalled	The UK recognises digital risk and inclusion, but children are more often protected as technology users than involved as rights-holders shaping governance.
Equality and violence	Mixed	Women and girls have been elevated in FCDO policy, but delivery, funding and age-specific accountability remain uneven, particularly for children facing intersecting discrimination.
Radical accountability	SYSTEMATICALLY OVERLOOKED	Children are not consistently visible in the systems used to make, fund and assess decisions. In some areas, this omission is compounded by policy and spending choices with disproportionate consequences for children.

1. Partnerships

Progress

"We have the initiative to make change happen, but we need the mandate to execute it. Forget tokenism – move from consultation to trusted, shared ownership. Design change with us, not about us; we're your partners in a common future!"

- 10 Point Plan for Change: Partnership

The UK has made genuine but uneven progress in involving children and young people in development policy. It has opened important spaces and supported promising models. But participation has pockets of progress and is not organisationally embedded, nor has it yet consistently translated into influence over final decisions.

What the evidence shows

The UK has created examples of more meaningful participation for children and young people. The Children and Young People's Taskforce on Global Care Reform,[9] launched in 2025, provides a positive model of more meaningful participation of the most marginalised children and young people. Through the taskforce, children and young people have been supported and resourced to contribute to policy development, rather than being invited only to respond to decisions already made. This has included children with experience living in care, a high proportion of whom are children with disabilities, consistent with their disproportionate representation in children's institutions. This demonstrates that the UK government can create mechanisms through which children and young people have a more substantive role in shaping policy. Nonetheless, this is one notable example, rather than the norm.

Meaningful participation requires sustained resourcing. That this taskforce was properly resourced (though only for a limited time) and led by technical experts is notable, particularly considering recommendations from civil society following previous youth engagement initiatives within the FCDO. In 2024, for example, Plan International UK and the Global Partnership for Education piloted a Youth Education Council, which supported children and young people to meaningfully influence FCDO education policy. Their review found the pilot needed to be financially resourced to be properly and meaningfully delivered. However, no budget was allocated, so the pilot ended in September 2025.

> **There are opportunities to participate, but they are often tokenistic; a photo opportunity.**
>
> **Child advocate, CRWG focus group discussion**

Young people had visible roles in the Global Partnerships Conference. At the 2026 Global Partnerships Conference, the UK government supported a Youth Conference Group and included young people in high-level opening and closing sessions. This created opportunities for young people to engage directly with decisionmakers and contribute to discussions about the future of international development.

But participation did not consistently translate into influence over outcomes. The limits of this progress became visible in the conference's principal policy output. The Global Partnerships Compact[10] did not refer to children and young people, despite the omission being raised by civil society during the drafting process. Children (under-18s) were also not consistently represented within the wider conference and consultation process, although youth representatives (over 18) were.

Access to decision-makers is not the same as influence over decisions. This is the central accountability gap. The UK has demonstrated that more meaningful models of participation are possible, but these models are not yet embedded across development and foreign policy. As a result, children and young people are not listened to consistently.

The rating on partnerships is therefore **progress:** there are credible examples of children and young people being given greater space and influence, but these remain uneven and have not yet translated into a systematic expectation that their views shape policy outcomes.



Riya, 16, leads an awareness raising group for girls in her community in Bangladesh, about issues such as menstruation and reproductive health
Photo credit: Plan International and Abhijit

2. Power

Stalled

"Listening without shared partnership isn't power. Start deciding with us, stop resourcing around us, and be accountable alongside us. Be willing to cede control – where we're not just present but influential. If you're comfortable, power isn't truly shifting..."

- 10 Point Plan for Change: Power

The UK increasingly describes development in terms of equal partnership, localisation and shared ownership. But the structures that control priorities, funding and accountability remain concentrated, and children and young people are still largely outside them.

What the evidence shows

The UK has committed to shifting power. Under previous administrations, including through the 2023 International Development White Paper, the UK committed to working through more equal partnerships based on mutual respect.[11] The UK is also a signatory to international localisation commitments, including the Grand Bargain, which seek to increase the role and resources of local and national actors in humanitarian responses.[12] The current government has reinforced this direction through its four shifts, including moves towards local leadership, partnership and system support, which can be seen through the Global Partnerships Conference and the UK's new approach to Africa.

But funding and decision-making authority remain concentrated. Funding structures, risk-management requirements and strategic priorities have not shifted as clearly as the rhetoric. UK aid continues to be channelled predominantly through governments, multilateral institutions, international organisations and other intermediaries. While these funding routes can deliver at significant scale and with considerable reach, including in humanitarian contexts, local organisations should also be included in the UK's funding portfolio. Local organisations – particularly child- and youth-led organisations – have much less direct access to funding and decision-making power.[13] Children and young people should be supported by organisations working at all levels, and funding for the very different functions played by multilateral or international organisations cannot be pitted against local or grassroots organisations.

> **"It is about power. The voices of children are not taken seriously, and we have very little or no influence over policy matters. This needs to change.**
>
> **Child advocate, CRWG focus group discussion**

Children and young people lack a consistent institutional route into decision-making. Children and young people are involved in designing some UK-funded programmes, but there is little evidence of a consistent FCDO-wide mechanism through which they can influence country strategies, budgets, programme priorities or evaluation. Where children and young people do meaningfully participate, it is often due to the standards and practice of an individual programme or implementing partner, not because the government systematically requires it.

The institutional architecture for child-rights accountability remains weak. The UK does not currently have an overarching child-rights strategy for its international work, a dedicated child-rights policy function or a routine requirement to assess how major development and foreign-policy decisions specifically affect children. Without these mechanisms, children and young people's participation remains contingent, and power does not systematically shift.

The UK has moved further in its commitment to sharing power than it has in changing the structures through which power is actually exercised. This is why progress is assessed as **stalled**.

> **I want leaders to listen to children about the decisions that affect them, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Children are important. They need to be empowered.**
>
> **Child advocate, CRWG focus group discussion**



Child confined to an institution
Photo credit: Hope and Homes for Children

3. Financing

Deteriorated

"What matters to us most is still funded least. Resource us to lead, move from gatekeeping to flexible, long-term partnerships; invest directly in local youth-led responses; and remove the structural barriers that prevent young people from shaping and accessing finance. The principle should be simple: nothing for us without core funding to us."

- 10 Point Plan for Change: Financing

Previous reductions in the UK's official development assistance (ODA), from 0.7% to 0.5% of GNI from 2021 onwards, disproportionately affected children. The government's 2025 decision to reduce ODA further, from 0.5% to 0.3% of GNI by 2027, means significantly fewer resources are now available overall, including for children. Comparable data is not yet available to determine whether children are once again being disproportionately affected by the latest cut. This highlights persistent gaps in the visibility of children within UK ODA spending.

What the evidence shows

Previous UK aid cuts disproportionately impacted children. Between 2019 and 2023, UK child-focused bilateral ODA[14] fell by 57%, compared with a 42% fall in bilateral aid overall.[15] By 2023, child-focused UK aid represented 19% of bilateral aid overall, excluding in-donor refugee costs, compared with a reported average of 25% over the previous decade.[16] In cash terms, UNICEF UK estimated that this left around £1.4bn less each year for children than in 2019.

Financing for child-critical services also fell sharply. For example, between 2019 and 2023, UK bilateral aid for education fell by 58%, while UK aid for nutrition fell by 73%.[17] These reductions cost lives and futures. Children living in poverty, children affected by conflict and displacement, children outside parental care and children with disabilities are particularly dependent on publicly and externally financed health, nutrition, education and protection services.

The 2024 recovery shows that prioritisation is possible. Child-focused ODA increased from approximately £2.1bn in 2023 to £2.59bn in 2024, reaching around 23% of total ODA, while bilateral spending on education, health, nutrition, and water, sanitation and hygiene also increased in cash terms.[18] This improvement should be recognised. It demonstrates that how a constrained ODA budget is allocated is an active policy choice, and that disproportionate cuts are not just a natural consequence of reduced spending.

> **"Fund more youth projects, such as youth clubs at the local level. Give more voices a chance to be heard.**
>
> **Child advocate, CRWG focus group discussion**

The latest reduction in the UK aid budget puts financing for children under renewed pressure. The government's 2025 decision to reduce ODA from 0.5% to 0.3% of GNI by 2027 substantially reduces the resources available for international development and climate action, including the overall resources available for programmes and services that benefit children.[19] Current forecasts indicate that ODA could fall further, to around 0.29% of GNI in 2027, leaving an estimated £320 million shortfall against the government's 0.3% commitment.[20] We do not yet have the data to determine whether children are once again being disproportionately affected by these cuts. This lack of timely, transparent data is itself an accountability gap. Without clearer tracking of child-focused spending, it is difficult to assess how reductions in UK aid are affecting children or whether they are being protected as resources contract.

Youth-led organisations remain largely invisible within UK aid financing data. Published ODA data identifies activities and participating organisations but does not systematically identify whether organisations are youth-led. This makes it difficult to determine how much of UK aid directly reaches youth-led organisations.[21] By contrast, gender equality has more established international systems for tracking finance, including the OECD DAC Gender Equality Policy Marker, and there is specific analysis of funding to women's rights organisations.[22] There is no equivalent framework for youth-led organisations. This creates an important accountability gap. The UK cannot readily demonstrate whether its commitment to local and youth leadership is translating into resources reaching organisations led by young people.

The rating is therefore **deteriorated**. Previous reductions in the UK aid budget disproportionately affected children, and the decision to reduce ODA further to 0.3% of GNI has substantially reduced the overall resources available. While it is not yet possible to determine whether children are again bearing a disproportionate share of the cuts, the direction of financing has moved backwards and there is insufficient transparency to assess or protect children and young people's share of UK aid.



Child in a Kenyan orphanage
Photo credit: Hope and Homes for Children

4. Education and growth

Deteriorated

"Make a minimum of twelve years of quality, free education that is future-focused and disability inclusive. Then stop training us last and hiring us least; sustainable growth starts with us."

- 10 Point Plan for Change: Education and growth

The UK continues to support important education and skills programmes. However, continued investment in selected initiatives is outweighed by substantial reductions in education financing. This is weakening the UK's ability to support the inclusive education, skills and opportunities called for by children and young people.

What the evidence shows

Important education and skills commitments remain. The UK has maintained its £80m, four-year commitment to Education Cannot Wait, which supports education for children affected by emergencies and protracted crises.[23] It has also continued some programmes focused on girls' education, skills and employment, and education remains part of the government's wider international approach to women and girls.[24]

But wider education financing has fallen substantially. UK bilateral education aid fell by 58% between 2019 and 2023, part of the wider disproportionate reduction in UK aid focused on children.[25] More recent spending decisions continue that pressure. Between 2026 and 2028, the UK's effective spend on bilateral aid for education which is internationally focused is set to be almost two thirds less than between 2023 and 2025. This is a 40% cut, which is significantly more than the overall reduction to UK ODA.[26]

> **The UK government should provide funding to support children, young people and communities with free and safe travel to education and school facilities, sanitary products, free school meals, community engagement programmes to support families and communities to recognise the importance of education, access to digital devices – and remote learning opportunities for use in times of crisis – and opportunities after education, including training and jobs.**
>
> **Youth advocate, CRWG focus group discussion**

The UK has sharply reduced its contribution to global education financing. The UK pledged £100m to the Global Partnership for Education for 2026-2030, compared with £430m over five years at the previous replenishment. This is a reduction of approximately 77%.[27]

Marginalised children face the greatest risks. The government's own assessment of the impact of UK ODA cuts recognises that reductions in education spending are likely to affect already marginalised groups, including girls and children with disabilities.[28] For children already facing barriers to education because of poverty, disability, displacement, institutionalisation, gender or conflict, reduced provision can deepen existing inequalities in access, learning and future opportunities.

This is an accountability issue as well as a financing issue. Naming education as a priority is not enough if the resources available to deliver it are simultaneously being reduced. The test is whether marginalised children can enter, remain in and complete safe, inclusive education and move from learning into skills and decent opportunities.

The rating is therefore **deteriorated**: some commitments remain, but the overall financing trajectory has moved backwards. This risks rollback, and it is likely to widen the barriers children already most likely to be excluded from education face.

> **"The UK government should remove their ban on students coming to study at UK universities if they are nationals from Afghanistan, Sudan, Myanmar and Cameroon.**
>
> **Youth advocate, CRWG focus group discussion**



Maiten, 18, holding a seedling in a community nursery on an island in Shefa Province, Vanuatu
Photo credit: Conor Ashleigh / Save the Children

> **The UK government should increase funding for education and skills development to support marginalised youth who are missing out on opportunities to learn, develop skills and find work.**
>
> Youth advocate, CRWG focus group discussion



Anzal* writing notes in her book Anzal*, is a brave 13-year-old girl who was born with complete hearing loss. She is the fourth child in a big, loving family with 14 siblings. Anzal is currently in 8th grade at a welcoming, inclusive school in Somalia
Photo credit: Astaan Media / Save the Children

5. Humanitarian

Mixed

"Childhood cannot wait for safety. It depends on it. Prioritise our protection, participation and dignity before, during and after crises, including for those displaced and unseen. These things are not optional – they're lifesaving."

- 10 Point Plan for Change: Humanitarian

Children and young people are disproportionately affected by conflict, displacement and other crises, and the number and severity of such crises has risen sharply. Against this backdrop, the UK's response presents a mixed picture: it has protected support in some priority crises and continues to play an important diplomatic role. But this sits within a shrinking ODA budget and an inconsistent approach to protecting children across crises.

What the evidence shows

The scale of children's humanitarian need remains exceptional. UNICEF estimated that more than 200 million children across 133 countries required humanitarian assistance in 2026.[29] Yet children remain insufficiently visible within humanitarian financing and accountability. The UK needs an approach of "anticipatory accountability"[30]; this means systematically integrating children's rights, needs and protection across preparedness, response and recovery.

The UK continues to show material leadership in major crises, despite a sharply contracting ODA envelope. In Sudan, the government allocated £146m for 2026/27, including £15m for local frontline responders.[31] It has also committed to directing more than 70% of FCDO bilateral country programme spending to fragile and conflict-affected countries by 2028/29.[32] However, the reduction of UK ODA to 0.3% of GNI means substantial reductions across FCDO programming,[33] with the government's own equality assessment acknowledging likely negative consequences for certain groups most in need of support, including children and people with disabilities.[34]

Diplomatic action has not always matched the urgency of children's protection needs. The UK has used UN diplomacy, arms-export controls, sanctions and international convening in response to major conflicts, but the timeliness and consistency of its approach has varied. Protecting children affected by conflict requires the UK to uphold international law consistently and use its diplomatic, legal and economic influence effectively.

In Sudan, the UK has played a significant diplomatic role, including through international convening and sanctions,[35] but international action has remained insufficient to protect civilians, prevent atrocities and secure humanitarian access.[36]

The UK's approach to the occupied Palestinian territory also illustrates this mixed picture. Earlier in the period assessed, the UK's response drew significant concern over whether action matched the scale and urgency of the protection risks facing children. More recently, the government has taken stronger action, including supporting the central findings of the International Court of Justice's July 2024 Advisory Opinion and measures relating to settlement expansion and settler violence.[37] These steps are significant. But sustained and consistent action is needed to protect children and uphold international law across crises.

Child-centred accountability remains weak. Children are recognised as having specific vulnerabilities, but there is little evidence of a consistent UK framework requiring child-specific outcomes, age-disaggregated evidence, meaningful participation or accountability to children and young people across humanitarian action. Without these mechanisms, it is difficult to assess whether UK action is consistently protecting children and young people across crises.

The rating is therefore **mixed**: the UK continues to demonstrate humanitarian solidarity and has protected support in some major crises, but falling resources, inconsistent diplomatic action and weak child-centred accountability prevent this from translating into consistent protection for children and young people.



Children draw in a child-friendly space in Kassala state, Sudan
Photo credit: Plan International and Abdalrhman Justen

6. Health

Deteriorated

"Health information and services must be accessible, trustworthy, child-friendly and co-created with us – leaving no one behind. The invisible is often the most harmful: mental health, trauma, chronic illness, hidden disabilities, malnutrition and SRHR all deserve the same urgency as 'visible' health issues."

- 10 Point Plan for Change: Health

The UK has maintained important commitments, most notably to immunisation, but wider health spending has fallen sharply. Several priorities raised by children and young people remain difficult to identify in public allocations and reporting.

What the evidence shows

Health spending has fallen sharply. The FCDO's ODA programme spend on health was £974.8m in 2024/25 and was due to fall by 45.9% to £527.3m in 2025/26.[38] At the same time, in 2025 the UK announced a **£1.25bn, five-year pledge to Gavi**,[39] and it remains the largest donor to Gavi. This demonstrates that child-focused health investment, such as immunisation, can be prioritised where political commitment exists, even within the UK's shrinking aid budget.

Children are among those most exposed to the consequences of cuts to UK aid for health. In July 2025, the FCDO's Equality Impact Assessment acknowledged that reductions in health spending risk increasing disease burden and deaths, with impacts falling particularly on people living in poverty, women, children and people with disabilities.[40]

> **"Without health, our future will be greatly affected. Prioritise health for children, especially mental health support, so we can grow up to be who we want to be.**
>
> **Child advocate, CRWG focus group discussion**

Independent evidence links UK aid cuts to worsening child health outcomes. A 2025 article in BMJ Paediatrics Open concluded that recent UK aid reductions have harmed child health in low- and middle-income countries, including through disruption to vaccination, maternal and child health and nutrition programmes, and increased risks of child morbidity and mortality.[41] Children already experiencing high disease burdens, poverty and poor access to healthcare are particularly exposed.

Several priorities identified by young people remain insufficiently visible in funding and reporting. Mental health, trauma, chronic illness, hidden disabilities and adolescent-friendly sexual and reproductive health (SRHR) services are difficult to trace consistently through publicly available allocations and results. The FCDO's own Equality Impact Assessment identifies significant reductions affecting sexual and reproductive health programming.

> **The UK government should fund children and young people's access to information about periods and sexual and reproductive health and rights, so they can understand how their bodies work.**
>
> **Youth advocate, CRWG focus group discussion**

This is not only a funding challenge but an accountability challenge. Priorities that cannot be traced through budgets, indicators and results are harder for children and young people to influence or scrutinise. Nonetheless, it is notable that the UK has continued to champion the importance of SRHR on the world stage at a time of increasing attacks on the issue, for example by making it a "Choice foundation" priority in the new Women and Girls› framework.

The rating is therefore **deteriorated**. While the UK government has maintained key commitments, wider health spending has fallen sharply. Children and young people have called for accessible, equitable and child-friendly services, but their priorities, including on mental health, remain difficult to identify in public allocations and reporting.



Farah, 11, uses cardboard and bits of wood to cook with in Gaza
Photo credit: Juzoor for Health and Social Development

7. Climate

Neglected

"We are the most impacted, the least prepared, and already living the consequences of conflict, displacement, and scarce resources. This is not tomorrow's problem. Give us the skills, jobs and voice to shape a just transition with home-grown climate solutions. We didn't create this generational crisis. Include us in solving it."

- 10 Point Plan for Change: Climate

The UK remains a major climate-finance contributor, but children are not consistently visible in its international climate objectives, accounting, reporting or participation. The issue is not the absence of climate action. It is the level of ambition and the absence of a reliable child-rights test within that action.

What the evidence shows

The UK has maintained a substantial climate-finance commitment. The government committed £11.6bn in international climate finance (ICF) between 2021/22 and 2025/26.[42] However, changes to the way climate finance is counted have raised questions about how much of this represents additional investment and how much is existing ODA reclassified as climate finance.[43] Children and young people remain largely invisible in UK climate finance reporting. While the UK publishes substantial data on overall climate finance spending and results, it does not systematically report how much finance benefits children and young people, reaches child-focused outcomes, or supports children's rights.

Transparent reporting is essential to understanding what resources are genuinely reaching climate-affected communities. The lack of transparency has tended to result in children being neglected by climate finance and has made it difficult to track how much climate finance is reaching them. Analysis of past UK ICF commitments has shown a historic underinvestment in children and there has been little evidence to date of this changing.

Only a small share of UK climate finance is identifiable as focused on children. Of the £9.2bn in bilateral UK ICF between 2011 and 2023, £990m – around 11% – was identifiable as child-focused. Child-focused ICF in 2023 was also reported to be more than 46% below its 2018 peak.[44] This matters because children and young people face distinct climate risks, which arise from issues including displacement, disruption to education, health, nutrition, water and sanitation and a lack of protection.

The wider climate-finance system also largely overlooks children. Analysis of 591 projects approved between 2006 and March 2023 by the Green Climate Fund, Global Environment Facility and Adaptation Fund found that only 2.4% of funding supported projects that included child-responsive activities.[45] Child-responsive climate finance means more than simply ensuring children are among a project's participants; it requires their distinct vulnerabilities and rights to be addressed and their participation to be supported. As climate action is a thematic priority for the UK, it has a critical role to play in influencing others so that this neglect can be addressed.

Children remain insufficiently involved in shaping climate decisions. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has made clear that children have a right to be heard in environmental decision-making and that their views should be considered in climate policy.[46] Yet the evidence reviewed for this report does not demonstrate a consistent UK mechanism through which children and young people – particularly those most exposed to climate impacts – can influence ICF priorities, implementation or accountability.

The youth ask goes beyond recognising children and young people as vulnerable to climate change. It asks for skills, jobs and meaningful influence over a just transition. The UK's climate-finance commitment is substantial, but the evidence does not yet show that children are considered or even visible in what is funded, how success is measured or who gets to shape decisions. This is why we assess progress as **neglected**.



7-year-old Paulo Jeremaya and 6-year-old Eliza Banda (left) are seen washing their hands at Pembamoyo Primary School Nsanje District southern Malawi on Monday 11 September 2023
Photo credit: UNICEF - Chikondi

8. Technology

Stalled

"Technology is shaping our lives, but we had no say in how it was built. Close the digital divide and involve us – especially girls and women – in AI governance, digital safety laws, and decisions about automation. Our futures are inside these systems; we should be in the rooms building them."

- 10 Point Plan for Change: Technology

Technology is increasingly shaping children and young people's rights, opportunities and futures. While there has been progress in recognising children and young people's safety and rights in digital and AI policy, children and young people still have limited influence over the decisions shaping these technologies. Opportunities for participation remain inconsistent, and there is little evidence that children and young people's views systematically influence technology policy and governance.

What the evidence shows

International commitments and UK policy increasingly recognise children's rights in the digital environment. The 2024 Global Digital Compact commits governments to protect children's rights online and strengthen action on child online safety.[47] The UK's Digital Development Strategy 2024-2030 also commits to tackling digital exclusion, including supporting 50 million women and girls by 2030 to participate safely and meaningfully in the digital world.[48] The 2026 Women and Girls Framework includes online violence within its safety agenda, and the UK and Australia have jointly committed to tackling technology-facilitated gender-based violence (GBV), considering it a "national security threat".[49] These are meaningful policy developments, particularly for girls and young women. However, progress on protection has not yet been matched by equivalent progress in enabling children and young people to influence digital and AI governance.

Children remain largely absent from the international spaces shaping technology and AI governance. The declaration from the 2025 Paris AI Action Summit addressed human rights, gender equality and digital divides but did not explicitly address how AI affects children.[50] This matters because AI and digital systems are already shaping children's education, access to information, privacy, safety and future opportunities.

There are examples showing that children's meaningful participation in shaping technology is possible. Around **150 children participated in the Children's AI Summit**, contributing to a manifesto on how AI should be developed and governed.[51] Their involvement demonstrates that children can contribute substantively to debates about emerging technologies rather than being treated only as technology users requiring protection. However, there is limited evidence of how recommendations from the Children's AI Summit subsequently influenced UK AI policy or governance. Creating opportunities for children and young people to contribute is an important step, but participation is not meaningful until there is a clear route from children and young people expressing their views to these views influencing decision-making.

Established child-rights standards set a higher bar than protection alone. UN General Comment No. 25 makes clear that children's rights apply fully in the digital environment. The guidance calls for measures including a child-rights impact assessment, privacy and safety by design, access to remedy and meaningful participation by children.[52] A 2025 joint UN statement on AI and children's rights similarly calls for children to participate safely and meaningfully throughout AI policy, design, development, deployment and review.[53] The evidence reviewed for this report does not yet demonstrate that these standards are embedded consistently across the UK's international technology agenda. Children – particularly girls, children with disabilities and those affected by poverty, conflict or digital exclusion –, remain more visible in this agenda as people who need to be protected from technological harms than as rights-holders entitled to influence the systems shaping their lives.

The rating is therefore **stalled**: recognition of digital inclusion online safety and technology-facilitated GBV has advanced, but there is limited evidence of a corresponding shift towards systematic child and youth participation and child-rights accountability in technology governance.



Sonia 11 India prevented from entering orphanage
Photo credit: S Ajay Kumar Hope and Homes for Children

9. Equality and violence

Mixed

"Don't ask us to overcome barriers – remove them. Design systems to be gender- and disability-inclusive from the start, so we don't have to fight to access what is ours. Stop putting the burden on survivors; believe us when we try to claim protection. Real equality begins when systems change, not when we are forced to endure."

- 10 Point Plan for Change: Equality and violence

The UK has elevated women and girls within its international priorities and retained important commitments on disability inclusion and violence prevention. These are significant openings for progress. However, implementation is constrained by UK aid cuts, uneven age-specific accountability and weak visibility of girls as children with distinct rights and vulnerabilities. The overall picture is therefore mixed.

What the evidence shows

Important policy commitments to equality remain in place. The UK's Disability Inclusion and Rights Strategy 2022-2030 commits the FCDO to advancing the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities,[54] while the UK International Strategic Framework on Women and Girls 2026 retains commitments on safety, education, health, economic opportunity and tackling violence against women and girls.[55] The UK has also invested in evidence and programmes aimed at preventing violence against children. However, children facing inequality have been disproportionately exposed to UK aid reductions. Impacted sectors, including health and education, are particularly important for children already facing poverty, disability, displacement, discrimination based on their gender, conflict and exclusion. Recent cuts within the FCDO, alongside attempts to rely on the mainstreaming of disability and gender to tackle exclusion, risk losing expertise and critical standalone programming, which previous dual-track approaches supported.

Political prioritisation does not automatically create age-specific accountability. Girls sit at the intersection of children's rights and gender equality: they experience forms of discrimination and violence shaped by both their age and gender. Globally, 50% of sexual assaults are committed against girls under 16,[56] while adolescent girls aged 16-19 are the age group most likely to experience domestic abuse.[57] Childhood and adolescence also provide a critical opportunity to reshape beliefs about gender, power, relationships and violence before they become entrenched. Treating women and girls as a single category can obscure the distinct risks, rights and forms of agency that girls experience during childhood and adolescence. If the government wants to deliver on its commitments to women and girls – including on ending violence – it must use an explicit child- and life-course lens alongside its wider gender-equality approach.

The consequences of UK aid cuts are already visible at programme level. For example, in September 2025, the FCDO confirmed that funding for the Gaashaan programme, which supported Somalia to respond to GBV, would end two years early. The programme combined survivor support, community-based prevention, systems strengthening and funding for women's organisations, and had been intended to benefit around 43,750 women, girls, boys and men. Its early closure reduced access to services, including safe spaces, case management and clinical support.

> **All children should be given equal opportunities; they should not be left behind.**
>
> **Child advocate, CRWG focus group discussion**

This matters because equality cannot depend on marginalised children overcoming systems that were not designed around their rights. The accountability test is whether the government can demonstrate that children facing intersecting forms of discrimination are identified before decisions are made, protected from disproportionate harm and able to benefit equally from UK investment. Current systems do not consistently provide assurance that this is the case. The elevation of women and girls within FCDO policy creates an important opportunity to strengthen this approach. But delivery must be accompanied by adequate resources, specialist expertise and explicit attention to age.

The rating is therefore **mixed**: political prioritisation and new frameworks represent substantive progress. But cuts, programme losses and weak age- and disability-specific accountability prevent assurance that marginalised children and young people are better protected in practice.



Young advocates in Kenya raise awareness of the harmful effects of child marriage
Photo credit: Plan International

Conclusion: Radical accountability

"Points 1 to 9 mean nothing without the will to act, the investment to deliver, and the transparency to prove it. Accountability to young people means co-ownership of decisions, measurable goals that are funded and tracked, action plans to achieve youth leadership, and commitments that come true. No child or young person should be left behind by a system that was never designed to see them."

- 10 Point Plan for Change: Radical accountability

The assessments of nine core areas of UK international policy affecting children and young people point to a cross-cutting institutional weakness. The UK has standalone programmes, policy commitments and examples of good practice for children and young people. What it lacks is a joined-up system that requires decisionmakers to identify children's rights and priorities, assess consequences before choices are made, protect investment, enable participation and report publicly on results.

That weakness produces two different but connected patterns. First, children are systematically omitted: they are grouped into broad populations or vulnerability categories, treated mainly as programme participants or referenced through the abstract language of "future generations". Their age, rights, views and outcomes are not consistently visible in policy, finance or reporting. Second, in areas where comparable spending evidence exists, omission is accompanied by measurable deprioritisation. Child-focused UK aid and allocations to several child-critical sectors have fallen faster than UK aid overall. The move to 0.3% of GNI intensifies the risk.

Radical accountability is not another consultation exercise. Nor is it a tenth thematic priority. It is the architecture that makes every other commitment credible. It means that children and young people can see what was promised, influence what is decided, trace what was funded, understand what changed and challenge the government when commitments are not kept.

The UK's G20 presidency should be a practical test of this approach. The government has already signalled that it wants to see meaningful reforms in the international financing architecture, particularly more effective debt restructuring. It also seeks to further climate action and promote safer AI. All of these issues will shape children and young people's lives even when they are not labelled as child or youth policy.

Children and young people should be recognised as a priority in their own right, while their rights and outcomes should also be visible across the wider G20 agenda. The government should make children and young people explicit in objectives, impact assessments, participation, indicators and public reporting – and judge success partly by whether children and young people are protected, provided for and listened to.

Priority recommendations to the UK Government

1. Make children and young people visible in every major decision

- Introduce published child-rights impact assessments and require proportionate mitigation and corrective action.
- Establish a 'Children's Envoy' within the FCDO to ensure strategic cross-departmental oversight and prioritisation.
- Improve age-, sex- and disability-disaggregated data and create identifiable budget lines for child-focused priorities.
- Report what major policies and investments deliver for children and young people, not only the activity funded or people reached.

2. Protect and restore investment in children

- Reverse years of disproportionate cuts to child focused ODA, increasing the percentage of the ODA budget reaching children with critical services and effective interventions.
- Set a time-bound pathway back to 0.7% of GNI. Phase out in-donor refugee costs from ODA, returning savings to overseas programmes and ensuring cuts to child- and youth-specific services are reversed.
- Increase predictable, flexible finance reaching local organisations and child- and youth-led groups, with proportionate access requirements.

3. Build permanent child-rights capacity and accountability

- Adopt a cross-FCDO children's strategy, include children within ministerial portfolios, and establish a dedicated policy function with named senior responsibility and specialist expertise.
- Set measurable goals and publish regular progress reports that children, young people and civil society can use to hold the government to account.
- Embed child protection and safeguarding expertise across UK-funded development and humanitarian action, including through anticipatory accountability.

4. Share decision-making with children and young people

- Make meaningful participation a resourced requirement across the FCDO, encompassing policy, funding, programme design, diplomacy, monitoring and evaluation.
- Remove barriers for children and young people facing discrimination, disability, displacement, poverty, digital exclusion, or who lack family care.
- Close the feedback loop by showing how children and young people's evidence changed decisions, and enable accessible challenge and remedy.

5. Use UK global influence to make child rights concrete

- Make children explicit in the UK's G20 priorities and objectives, including by connecting finance, debt, climate, technology and security outcomes to children alive today.
- Champion child-rights standards in multilateral institutions and require comparable accountability from UK-funded partners.
- Use diplomacy to advance children's protection, participation and access to essential services, both in crisis responses and long-term development.

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