

The State of the World's Children 2025

# Ending Child Poverty: Our shared imperative

Executive summary

# Poverty poisons childhood – and our collective future

It claims children's lives, undermines their health and development, and constrains their learning. The consequences extend far beyond childhood: Adults who grew up in poverty face weaker job prospects, shorter lives, and higher rates of depression and anxiety.

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It is not a question of scarcity or resources – it is a question of priorities.

Poverty also harms societies. By limiting children's ability to realize their full potential, it undermines future economic prosperity. By dividing the haves from the have-nots, it frays the bonds that tie us together. And by depriving communities of hope, it creates conditions in which violence and extremism can thrive.<sup>1</sup>

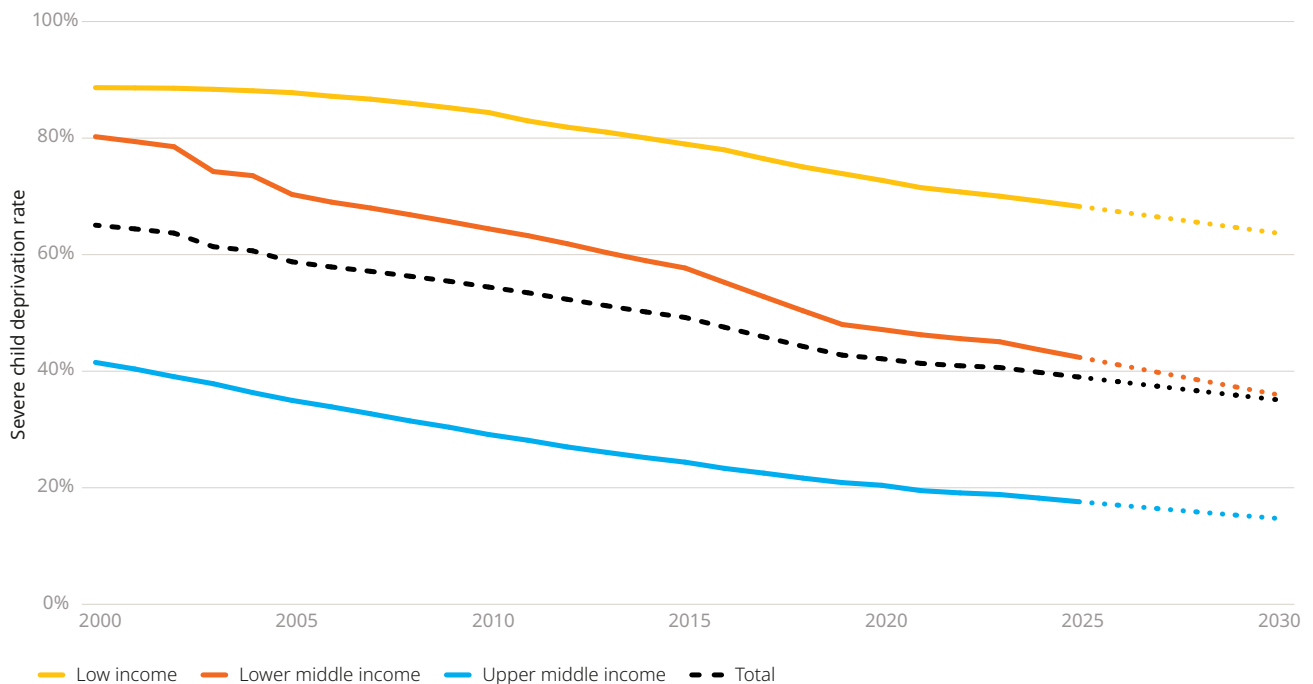
At a time when global military spending has reached a record US\$2.72 trillion,<sup>2</sup> hundreds of millions of children continue to live in deprivation, lacking basics like schooling, clean water and adequate shelter.

This reality is not a question of scarcity or resources – it is a question of priorities.

## Progress is possible

While far too many children still live in poverty, the world has made significant progress. In this century so far, the rate of children living in severe deprivation has fallen by a third, declining from three out of five children in 2000 to two out of five in 2023. (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1** Severe child deprivation rates by income group, historical and projected, 2000–2030



Note: This chart shows the percentage of children aged 0–17 with one or more severe deprivations. Household survey data that serve as the basis for the estimates cover less than 50 per cent of the child population in upper-middle-income countries.

Source: Save the Children estimates of multidimensional poverty rates, 2023 and UNICEF projections for 2024–2030.

The reasons behind these gains are not a mystery: Governments, civil society and the international community took strategic and decisive action. They made ending child poverty a national priority and prioritized child rights. They embedded children's needs into economic planning, provided cash assistance to families, expanded access to essential public services and promoted decent work for parents and caregivers.<sup>4</sup>

The success of these approaches proves that progress is within reach.

Yet momentum has slowed. The COVID-19 pandemic brought progress to a halt, and recovery has been sluggish.<sup>5</sup> In sub-Saharan Africa, major setbacks began even earlier, with some countries making little or no progress in reducing child poverty since 2014.<sup>6</sup>

Without coordinated action to reverse this slowdown, we risk consigning millions more children to deprivation.<sup>7</sup> We risk creating an indebted generation – a cohort of children whose futures are compromised as countries struggle to service debt incurred before they were born.<sup>8</sup>

## A better future demands action now

*The State of the World's Children 2024* demonstrated that three powerful megatrends – demographic shifts, climate and environmental crises, and frontier technologies – will create a world for children in 2050 that is vastly different from today's. Acute crises, such as rising levels of armed conflict and mounting debt burdens, further compound these long-term trends.

Our response to these shifts will determine how far we advance in reducing child poverty. That response cannot wait.

Climate change and conflict threaten to drive ever more families into poverty. Already, four out of five children face at least one extreme climate hazard every year.<sup>9</sup> In 2024, almost one in five children lived in a conflict area – nearly double the rate in the mid-1990s.<sup>10</sup>

Economic growth is slowing in many developing economies, risking their ability to expand anti-poverty programmes and public services for children. Unprecedented cuts in development aid could result in the deaths of at least 4.5 million children under age 5 by 2030 – each one a tragedy for a family and a grave loss of human potential.<sup>11</sup> Aid cuts will also limit children's opportunity to learn. Projected to fall by almost a quarter by 2026, aid reductions in education will put 6 million more children at risk of being out of school.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, inequalities in digital access are increasingly shaping children's access to education, health care and economic opportunity.<sup>13</sup> Digital technology has become a gateway need: Without it, children cannot access essential services and realize their rights,<sup>14</sup> deepening existing divides.

And then there is debt: 45 of the world's developing countries now pay more on interest than they spend on health, and 22 spend more on interest than education.<sup>15</sup> When countries underinvest in children, it creates a vicious cycle – failing to invest in children weakens economies, which in turn hinders countries' ability to repay debt.

Young people know what is happening. They experience the gap between rhetoric and reality.

“They said the economy was recovering. We didn’t feel it. They said schools were open. Ours were underwater. They said children were resilient. We were exhausted. They said we were the future. We asked: Whose?”

Nahjaj Nunes, 2023 United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Youth Foresight Fellow

## Child poverty today

Poverty violates children’s fundamental rights. In a world where hundreds of millions of children suffer deprivation, the rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child – including rights to education, housing, sanitation and more – are not being fully realized.

### Monetary poverty: A crisis of extremes

Today, almost one in five of the world’s children – more than 412 million – live in extreme monetary poverty, surviving on less than \$3.00 per day.<sup>16</sup> Children are more than twice as likely as adults to live in extreme poverty,<sup>17</sup> reflecting higher costs for families raising children. Because their bodies and minds are still developing, children are also more vulnerable to poverty’s effects and face potentially lifelong consequences in terms of their well-being.<sup>18</sup>

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Children living in extreme poverty are increasingly concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa, which accounts for more than three out of four of all children who live in extreme poverty, even though the region is home to fewer than one in four of the world’s children.<sup>19</sup> Together, sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia account for almost 9 out of 10 children living in extreme poverty, while representing only about half of the world’s children.<sup>20</sup>

But child poverty is not confined to the world’s poorest regions. Based on a higher poverty threshold in upper-middle-income countries (\$8.30 per day), almost two out of three children globally – 1.4 billion – are living in monetary poverty.<sup>21</sup>

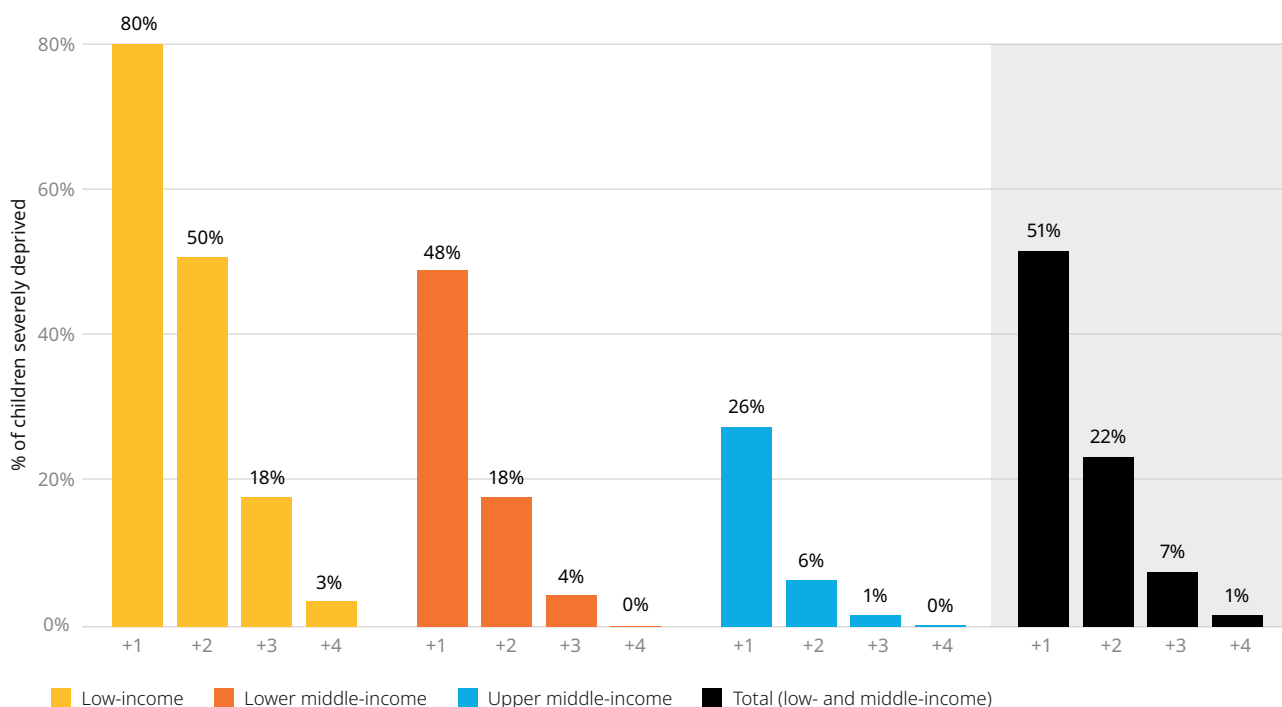
### Severe deprivation: The multiple elements of poverty

Monetary measures tell only part of the story. In low- and middle-income countries, more than one in five children (417 million) are severely deprived in two or more of the following areas: education, health, housing, nutrition, sanitation and clean water (see Figure 2).<sup>22</sup> The highest rates of severe deprivation among children are concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa, with South Asia, East Asia and the Pacific also showing high rates.

So far this century, countries have made progress towards reducing child poverty as measured by severe deprivation. Estimates show that poverty based on severe deprivation in at least one area has fallen by one third since 2000 in low- and middle-income countries.<sup>23</sup>

But progress has stalled in wealthy countries in recent years. High-income countries use different indicators to measure severe deprivation among children; data are not directly comparable to those of low- and middle-income countries, although the concept of deprivation is the same. In the European Union (EU), severe deprivation among children declined between 2015 and 2024, but progress occurred only in the first half of the period. More than 6 million children in the region currently live in severe deprivation.

**Figure 2 Severe deprivation rates among children, by country income group (based on number of deprivations)**



Source: Joint analysis of data from Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) by Save the Children and UNICEF.

## Children at heightened risk

The world's **youngest children** experience the highest rates of poverty. In 2024, 22.3 per cent of children aged 0 to 4 lived in extreme monetary poverty, compared with 14.9 per cent of 15- to 17-year-olds.<sup>24</sup>

Half of all children living in **fragile and conflict-affected settings** live in extreme poverty, versus 11.4 per cent of children outside of such states.<sup>25</sup> **The education background of the head of household** is also a factor: Children face an extreme poverty rate of 32.9 per cent when the head of their household has no education, compared with just 5.8 per cent when the head of household has completed tertiary education.<sup>26</sup>

Nearly 79 per cent of children facing extreme monetary poverty live in **rural areas** based on available data, though poverty in **urban slums** and informal settlements is much higher than the average in urban areas.<sup>27</sup> **Children with disabilities** are far more likely to live in poverty than other children,<sup>28</sup> because their families face disproportionately higher health care costs and their parents may be unable to work outside the home due to caregiving duties.

**Children who are displaced or refugees**, although often undercounted, face heightened poverty risk both in transit and upon arrival. Studies from Colombia, Lebanon and Uganda indicate elevated poverty rates among displaced populations.<sup>29</sup> **Indigenous children** also face substantially higher poverty rates. In the 23 countries that ratified the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 18.7 per cent of indigenous peoples lived in extreme monetary poverty compared with 9.3 per cent of the general population.<sup>30</sup>

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**In low- and middle-income countries, 417 million children experience two or more deprivations.**

# Proven ways to reduce child poverty

Evidence from countries that have made substantial reductions in child poverty points to five core policy areas that, when combined, create lasting impact:

- 1. Make ending child poverty a national priority.** Embedding child poverty reduction in laws, plans and budgets transforms it from aspiration into binding obligation.
- 2. Create fiscal space and supportive macroeconomic policies.** Reducing child poverty requires children's needs to be embedded into economic and fiscal governance. Central banks should assess how interest rate changes affect families, and legal frameworks should protect child-related spending and include automatic inflation adjustments. Child-sensitive budgeting and transparency mechanisms also support accountability: Countries with more transparent budgets tend to spend more on health care and child well-being.
- 3. Expand inclusive social protection.** Both universal and targeted family and child benefits have demonstrably helped reduce child poverty rates, improved nutrition and health, and increased school attendance and completion.<sup>31</sup> Targeted cash transfer programmes have proven effective in countries including Brazil, Mexico and South Africa, while Poland's universal child benefit has helped drive a substantial reduction in child poverty rates.<sup>32</sup> Still, approximately 1.8 billion children globally lack any form of social protection coverage.<sup>33</sup>
- 4. Expand access to quality public services.** Children need reliable access to education, health care, water, sanitation, nutrition, information, play and housing to support their learning, development and well-being. Indonesia's School Operational Assistance programme has reduced financial burdens on families while increasing enrolment and retention.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, Bangladesh's integrated maternal and infant nutrition efforts have steadily lowered the country's stunting rates.<sup>35</sup> The European Child Guarantee ensures access to free early childhood education and health care, at least one healthy school meal daily, and adequate housing for marginalized children.
- 5. Promote decent work.** Children's well-being is closely tied to their caregivers' economic security. Despite low global unemployment, more than 58 per cent of the global workforce were informally employed in 2023.<sup>36</sup> In Africa, 29 per cent of working people were living in poverty – more than four times the global rate.<sup>37</sup> Practical steps to ensure decent work include legislating and enforcing minimum wages, increasing formalization through incentives, and extending social security to informal workers. Policies must also support workers' care responsibilities through paid parental leave and affordable childcare.

These five pillars require **enabling conditions**: recognizing shared global responsibility, catalysing public support for change, improving data collection and disaggregation, listening to children, and building foresight capacity to prepare for the future.

# Three crises threatening progress

Although proven solutions exist, three immediate crises – climate and environmental crises, rising levels of conflict and the funding shortfall – threaten to undermine efforts to reduce child poverty. Alongside long-term megatrends that offer both opportunities and risks, acute crises are harming children now – destroying livelihoods, displacing families, disrupting education, and causing hunger and malnutrition.

## The climate and environmental crisis

Each year, four out of five children face at least one extreme climate hazard, such as a heatwave, flood or drought. In 2023, nearly 9 million children were displaced by such disasters.<sup>38</sup> Projections for 2050 show that about eight times more children will be exposed to extreme heatwaves, three times more to extreme river floods and nearly twice as many to extreme wildfires.<sup>39</sup>

In combination, climate hazards and poverty compound each other. Children living in poverty are more likely to be exposed to extreme climate hazards, and these hazards push families deeper into poverty. In 2024, at least one in seven children – 242 million – experienced school disruptions due to climate shocks, leading to learning losses.<sup>40</sup> Research estimates that climate change effects could force between 32 million and 132 million people into extreme poverty by 2030, with the most affected populations in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.<sup>41</sup>

The burden is heaviest in countries least responsible for the climate crisis, and least equipped to adapt.<sup>42</sup>

## Climate-responsive solutions

Through decisive climate action, up to 175 million people could be lifted out of extreme poverty by 2050.<sup>43</sup> It involves the following:

- **Expanding shock-responsive social protection in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.** Bangladesh's anticipatory cash transfer programme delivers funds to vulnerable households before floods reach critical levels, allowing families to protect their assets and therefore reducing their anxiety.<sup>44</sup> Similar national social protection systems can be scaled to provide automatic responses to climate triggers.
- **Supporting displaced children.** As climate-driven displacement increases, countries must strengthen systems to ensure displaced children retain access to education, health care, social protection and legal identity. Countries including Brazil, Morocco and Türkiye have policies that ensure migrant and refugee children can access services, regardless of their status.<sup>45</sup>
- **Enabling community-led solutions.** As an example, in South Sudan's Maban County, community consultations led to locally defined flood preparedness strategies.<sup>46</sup> These included early warning systems and child-led anticipatory action plans. Children designed evacuation strategies and safe learning spaces, building both practical readiness and emotional resilience.



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- **Strengthening climate-resilient infrastructure and services.** Governments should invest in early warning systems, rapid response protocols, and climate-adaptive schools and health facilities. For example, European cities like Barcelona, Madrid and Paris have transformed schoolyards into ‘cool islands’, using trees, gardens and shaded areas to combat urban heat.<sup>47</sup>

## Rising levels of conflict

The world is experiencing a historic rise in armed conflict: 2024 and 2025 have seen the highest number of countries engaged in armed conflict since World War II.<sup>48</sup> In 2024, about 19 per cent of the world’s children lived in a conflict area – nearly double the rate in the mid-1990s.<sup>49</sup>

In 2024, the United Nations verified 41,370 grave violations against children in conflict – a 25 per cent surge from 2023.<sup>50</sup> Denial of humanitarian access, with more than 7,900 verified instances in 2024, puts children at acute risk of abuse, exploitation, disease and famine.<sup>51</sup>

A well-established link exists between monetary poverty and armed conflict.<sup>52</sup> Between 2014 and 2024, the extreme child monetary poverty rate in fragile and conflict-affected states rose from 46 per cent to 50.2 per cent, while in all other states it fell from 19.9 per cent to 11.4 per cent.<sup>53</sup> This means half of children in fragile and conflict-affected settings live in extreme poverty, compared to roughly one in nine children in all other states.

Conflict causes poverty by undermining economic stability, destroying infrastructure and disrupting public services like water, education and energy.<sup>54</sup> Disruptions to education violate children’s right to learn and develop, eroding both individual potential and shared prosperity. Countries experiencing repeated or prolonged conflicts accumulate a ‘conflict debt’ – cumulative, long-term economic damage that stalls poverty reduction.<sup>55</sup>

## Protecting children in conflict

Effective strategies combine flexible humanitarian transfers, education continuity and psychosocial support. Governments need to:

- **Ensure humanitarian access and uphold children’s rights.** Governments and armed actors must respect international humanitarian law, remove barriers to aid delivery and uphold the best interests of children in all decisions affecting children in conflict zones.
- **Invest in social protection in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.** Provide unconditional cash transfers to vulnerable families, supplemented with in-kind support such as food, shelter and supplies. Where digital infrastructure exists, use it to deliver aid efficiently while linking beneficiaries to mental health services, case management and other essential services. Strengthen social protection systems to ensure sustained delivery.
- **Prioritize education in crisis response.** Treat education as a core component of emergency response by establishing temporary learning spaces, catch-up classes and hybrid learning models. Invest in digital tools, such as solar-powered tablets for remote learning during power outages.
- **Restore essential systems.** Rebuild health, education and civil registration systems quickly to ensure children have the legal identity documents they need to access services. Technology providers can create secure digital platforms for aid delivery, while educators can apply trauma-informed approaches in safe learning spaces.

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- **Empower local actors.** Civil society organizations, community leaders and youth groups, which are trusted by communities, are often the first responders. Support them with training, resources and coordination mechanisms to extend outreach through mobile schools and community-based programmes.

## The funding crisis and underinvestment in children

Too many governments face an impossible challenge: How to invest adequately in children when funding is scarce. Most low-income countries collect 7–15 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in taxes, but 25–30 per cent is needed to fund universal health care, education and social protection.<sup>56</sup> Climate adaptation requires roughly 3–3.5 per cent of GDP annually in low-income countries, further pressuring budgets.<sup>57</sup>

International financing has failed to fill the gap. Official development assistance has stagnated in real terms, with the share reaching the least-developed countries falling from one third to under one quarter in a decade.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, foreign direct investment in developing countries has declined sharply after peaking in the early 2000s. The least-developed countries receive less than 5 per cent of foreign direct investment flowing to developing countries, and less than 2 per cent of global flows.<sup>59</sup>

With private investment flowing elsewhere, aid stagnating and domestic revenue covering barely half of basic needs, governments now face a crisis. External debt service consumes around one fifth of government revenue in many low-income countries, often exceeding health and education spending combined.<sup>60</sup> In Africa, per-capita spending on interest (US\$70) exceeds spending on health (US\$44) or education (US\$63).<sup>61</sup>

## Structural solutions for sustainable change

Traditional solutions – debt cancellation, increased aid, austerity or borrowing from new sources – have fallen short or deepened the crisis. Instead, debt restructuring is needed to transform obligations into opportunities for governments to make robust, sustainable investments in children. The key is to align incentives around reducing child poverty and enhancing children’s well-being. Elements of such a programme would include:

- **Linking debt relief to investments in children.** Countries would work with creditors to reduce debt payments while improving tax collection. The resulting savings – combined with increased tax revenue – would fund investments in children’s nutrition, education, health, and protection from violence and exploitation.
- **Providing rapid technical support.** International partners would help countries upgrade digital tax systems and strengthen revenue collection, with gains realized within two to three years. As domestic revenue increases, it would be shared between creditors and child-focused programmes, with the majority supporting social investments.
- **Creating a sustainable path forward.** Countries would graduate from the framework as they meet benchmarks in both revenue capacity and child development outcomes.

This approach creates shared benefits: Governments achieve visible social progress, creditors receive predictable returns and more children escape the grip of poverty.



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# A question of will

Ending child poverty in the twenty-first century is within our power. We know from both evidence and experience that we can make significant progress quickly, even in economically challenging times. We know which policies and investments accelerate progress. And we have the foresight and experience to lay the groundwork today to meet future challenges.

We also know this is a shared imperative. Economic crises, climate shocks and conflicts know no borders. In a world of plenty, too many children are suffering as poverty strips them of their rights and endangers their futures. And when poverty undermines social cohesion and economic prosperity, we all lose.

So why aren't we achieving more?

In the first-ever edition of *The State of the World's Children* report in 1980, UNICEF Executive Director James P. Grant assessed the extent of global resources and knowledge available to combat child poverty and declared they were sufficient to do the job.

Just like today, we knew then what to do and we had the resources to do it.

“It is not over our capacity to achieve this goal that the question mark now hovers. ...  
It is over our wisdom and our will to do so.”

**James P. Grant, Former UNICEF Executive Director**

The progress the world has made to reduce child poverty since 1980 shows that will was found.

Even amid today's mounting crises, we believe that will to end child poverty can – and must – be found again.

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## Editorial note

The following corrections have been made to an earlier version of this Executive Summary:

- On page 1, the following statement "In this century so far, the number of children living in severe deprivation has fallen by a third, declining from three out of five children in 2000 to two out of five in 2023." has been corrected to: "In this century so far, the rate of children living in severe deprivation has fallen by a third, declining from three out of five children in 2000 to two out of five in 2023."
- On page 2, the statement "Unprecedented cuts in development aid could result in the deaths of an estimated 4.5 million children under age 5 by 2030" has been corrected to "Unprecedented cuts in development aid could result in the deaths of at least 4.5 million children under age 5 by 2030"
- On page 3, the statement: "Building on progress made since 2000, the number of children in severe deprivation has decreased by an estimated 10 to 15 per cent since the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals were adopted in 2015." has been corrected to: "So far this century, countries have made progress towards reducing child poverty as measured by severe deprivation. Estimates show that poverty based on severe deprivation in at least one area has fallen by one third since 2000 in low- and middle-income countries."
- On page 5, the figure "1.6 billion children globally lack any form of social protection coverage" has been corrected to 1.8 billion reflecting an age grouping of 0–18 years.
- On page 6, the statement: "The burden is heaviest in countries least equipped to adapt: 40 per cent of people affected by climate disasters live in low-income countries, which contain only 9 per cent of the global population." has been corrected to: "The burden is heaviest in countries least responsible for the climate crisis, and least equipped to adapt."

# About us

**UNICEF**, the United Nations agency for children, works to protect the rights of every child, everywhere, especially the most disadvantaged children and in the toughest places to reach. Across more than 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive, and fulfil their potential.

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UNICEF Innocenti equips thought leaders and decision-makers with the evidence they need to build a better, safer world for children. The office undertakes research on unresolved and emerging issues, using primary and secondary data that represent the voices of children and families themselves. It uses foresight to set the agenda for children, including horizon scanning, trends analysis and scenario development. The office produces a diverse and dynamic library of high-level reports, analyses and policy papers, and provides a platform for debate and advocacy on a wide range of child rights issues.

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ISBN: 978-92-806-5705-0

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Cover photo: © UNICEF/UNI864582/Ponce

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