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Education aid cuts: A broken promise to children

Every dollar cut from education is more than a cut to a budget line – it costs generations their future, with the poorest paying the highest price.

A new UNICEF analysis shows that international aid to education is projected to fall by **US\$3.2 billion by 2026** – a 24 per cent drop.¹

If the announced cuts to official development assistance (ODA) become a reality, UNICEF estimates that **6 million more children² risk being out of school by end of 2026**, 30 per cent of them in humanitarian settings. This is equivalent to emptying every primary school in Germany and Italy combined. It would raise the estimated number of out-of-school children from the current 272 million³ to 278 million.

Among the countries facing the steepest setback, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali both risk of losing 4 per cent in current enrolment which translates to 340,000 and 180,000 students, respectively.

Even children and young people who stay in school will be affected. With reduced support for system strengthening, such as curriculum development, learning assessment, and teacher development, at least **290 million students could experience a decline in the quality of their education almost overnight.**⁴

¹ The projections apply multivariate noncentral hypergeometric distribution to simulate education aid cut using data from the OECD Creditor Reporting System (CRS) and the DonorTracker as of July 2025. The CRS provides ODA data as of 2023, the latest year when detailed data are available for all countries. The DonorTracker provides cut statements and data that captured 82% of global education ODA; cuts for remaining donors were imputed. In total, 59 donors have projected education aid cut. The modelling and argument adopted in this analysis align with partners' analyses on the ongoing wave of fund cuts ([ETF, 2025](#); [GEMR, 2025](#); [GEMR & ECW, 2025](#); [IIEP-UNESCO, 2025](#)).

² We estimated that cuts of 25% or more to K-12 aid could undo five years of progress in reducing out-of-school children. There are 28 low- and lower-middle-income countries meeting the criteria, 19 with projected setback, summing up to 5.73 million children.

³ UNESCO GEM Report <https://education-estimates.org/out-of-school/data/>, retrieved on 14 August 2025.

⁴ More specifically, 290 million students currently enrolled in pre-primary to upper secondary schools across 45 countries, where the ODA on education system strengthening is projected to drop by 25 per cent or more.

Who is hit hardest?



Young learners hit hardest: Even as pre-primary education stagnates with severe underfinancing, primary education faces the steepest cuts of US\$856 million, a 34 per cent decline. This drop yields a potential US\$164 billion lost in lifetime earnings for the affected children.⁵ Such cuts threatens to deepen the already dire learning crisis plaguing low- and lower-middle-income countries, where in some cases only 1 in 10 children aged 10 can read and understand a simple text.



Essential services under threat: Schools are safe havens providing education, clean water, toilets, meals, healthcare, and referrals to child protection services including support for children facing abuse, exploitation or other protection risks. But lifelines like school feeding programmes now face 57 per cent cuts (US\$190 million) – robbing many students of their only nutritious meal and harming learning.



Girls' progress at risk: Gender-focused education aid—such as girls' tuition subsidies, safe and private toilets/latrines, and girls' skills programmes—faces a 28 per cent cut (US\$123 million), risking the reversal of hard-won progress in girls' education.. A decade ago, a girl in one of the least developed countries had about an 80 per cent chance of completing high school compared with a boy; today that gap has nearly closed, but at risk of widening again.



Crisis zones abandoned: With the funding cuts for education in emergencies projected at US\$745 million (24 per cent), countries in humanitarian crises will face heavy financial losses that their systems cannot absorb. A few crisis countries (Central African Republic, Haiti, Somalia, and State of Palestine) could lose education ODA equivalent to over 10 per cent of their public education budget. In emergencies, schools are more than places of learning – they are safe spaces that provide hope, stability, protection, and access to essential services, which are vital to children's recovery and well-being in times of distress.



The foundation crumbles: An estimated US\$500 million (20 per cent) cut to system-level education investments will widen the deficit in data, research and monitoring, impacting countries' ability to understand where gaps are and where action is needed to improve educational outcomes. At the same time, many skilled teachers are being lost due to funding declines. Even if funds return later, this brain drain cannot be quickly reversed. Together, these factors will weaken the foundation and long-term effectiveness of education systems.

5 Angrist, N., Britto, P., Dercon, S., Kaffenberger, M., Karlan, D., & Piper, B. 2025. [Doing more with less: Why foreign aid should prioritise foundational learning now.](#)



Education aid cuts put the most vulnerable children's futures at risk

As bilateral donors scale back support, multilateral agencies struggle to fill the gap, placing countless children at risk due to constrained resources. For example, UNICEF has faced a significant decline in humanitarian funding for its operations in the Rohingya refugee response, where some 350,000 Rohingya refugee children are now at risk of losing access to basic education permanently.

Without urgent funding, education centres may close, leaving children vulnerable to exploitation, child labour, and trafficking – an entire generation of Rohingya children risks being left behind.

What must be done?

The consequences are stark – but there's still time to act.

Protecting education means protecting lives – and securing a safe, resilient and peaceful future for children, their families and communities. Investing in education is key to delivering on the promise that the future children deserve is still possible. This is a collective responsibility we cannot afford to shortchange.

Rebalance education aid. Funding needs to be more equitable and effective, and it must benefit the most disadvantaged children first. It should be directed more toward the least developed countries (LDC), where education needs are most urgent and current resources fall far short.⁶ A minimum of 50 per cent of education ODA should be directed to LDCs, aligning with the Addis Ababa Action Agenda.

Safeguard humanitarian education funding.

Humanitarian education funding must be safeguarded through dedicated, ring-fenced allocations that cannot be diverted when crises escalate. Education in emergency contexts should be prioritized as both a life-saving and life-changing intervention, integrated alongside health, food, water, mental health support and other essential sectors in all humanitarian planning and financing.

Focus education aid. Aid should concentrate on early childhood and primary education, where the returns are the highest. Evidence shows that the continuum of the first and next thousand days are critical for a child's physical growth and brain development. Investing in the early years and into primary school, where children develop essential foundational literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional skills, drives both short- and long-term returns for children and societies. Education aid should continue to support generating and using evidence about what works in foundational learning, such as school-readiness support, structured pedagogy and other evidence-based approaches.

Simplify global aid architecture. In line with the [UN80 Initiative](#), streamline coordination among agencies working in international development to reduce duplication and use resources more efficiently. Amplify the voices of developing countries to promote inclusive governance.

Building Resilient Education Financing. Education financing must innovate without replacing core aid. Stakeholders should push forward with blended finance, earmarked taxes, outcome funds, and other tools that expand the pie. At the same time, governments are expected to step up, shifting more domestic resources to cover aid shortfalls and build resilience into national systems, even if this means tough trade-offs. The private sector, too, has a vital role, not only as a financier, but as a connector linking schools with labor markets and fueling business development.

6 Burnett, N., & Jenkins, R. 2025. [An urgent lesson plan to fix international aid](#). *International Journal of Educational Development*, 117, 1-3.



Predicted impact of the education aid cuts between 2023 and 2026

	EDUCATION AID CUT (\$/%)	# ADDITIONAL CHILDREN AT RISK OF DROPPING OUT	# OF STUDENTS AFFECTED BY WEAKENED SCHOOL SYSTEMS
TOTAL	3.2B (24%)	5,728,067	290M
By Region			
East Asia and the Pacific (EAP)	270M (22%)	119,912	20M
Europe and Central Asia (ECA)	270M (21%)	36,458	6M
Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA)	391M (28%)	1,203,893	31M
Latin America and Caribbean (LAC)	200M (28%)	1,194	55M
Middle East and North Africa (MENA)	769M (26%)	1,440,211	32M
South Asia (SA)	285M (24%)	993,430	58M
West and Central Africa (WCA)	414M (25%)	1,932,969	88M
By Country Context			
Humanitarian setting	745M (24%)	1,710,294	67M
Least Developed Countries	881M (25%)	1,332,340	30M

Source and calculation: See Footnote 1 on simulation of aid cuts; Footnote 2 on simulation of the number of additional children at risk of dropping out; and Footnote 4 on the number of students affected due to cuts in systems strengthening support that cannot be easily absorbed by the governments. Here 'Region' refers to the seven UNICEF programme regions.

Where cuts hit hardest

Primary education

Decline:
US\$856 million
↓ (34% drop)

Consequence: Potential
US\$164 billion
lost in lifetime earnings
for affected children.

School feeding programmes

Decline:
US\$190 million
↓ (57% drop)

Consequence:
Millions of children
lose their only daily meal,
impacting health and learning.

Girls' education

Decline:
US\$123 million
↓ (28% drop)

Consequence:
Reversal of gains in
gender parity, especially in
least developed countries.

Education in emergencies

Decline:
US\$745 million
↓ (24% drop)

Consequence: Crisis-affected countries
(e.g., Central African Republic, Haiti, Somalia,
State of Palestine) risk losing aid equivalent to over
10% of public education budgets.

System strengthening

Decline:
US\$500 million
↓ (20% drop)

Consequence: Loss of skilled teachers,
weakened policymaking and
monitoring systems,
widening data and evidence gaps.