



Ali, 13, at home in an IDP camp in Gedaref, Sudan.
Photo @ Save the Children

Driving a Child-Sensitive Humanitarian Agenda at the European Union

A Paper by World Vision Ireland, UNICEF Ireland, Plan International Ireland and Save the Children

Background and Purpose

Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU) takes place at a critical moment for children. Between July and December 2026, a number of pivotal policy and budget decisions will be advanced and shaped, with far-reaching implications for the future direction of the EU's external action. Over these six months, the foundations will be laid for how the EU chooses to value and protect children affected by crisis across the globe.

Children are at the centre of today's humanitarian crises, and their survival and protection must be central to all humanitarian planning, budgeting, and response. This paper makes the case for a child-sensitive EU humanitarian agenda by articulating the disproportionate impact of conflict and crisis on children today and outlining concrete recommendations for decisive EU policies, within the timeframe of Ireland's Presidency, to drive this forward.

This paper builds on a collaborative process led by the coalition of international child rights agencies in Ireland, comprising World Vision Ireland, UNICEF Ireland, Plan International Ireland and Save the

Children in Ireland. It draws on an original discussion paper, *The Role of the EU in Ensuring Enhanced Protection for Children in Crisis*, and a high-level policy roundtable held in Dublin in May 2026, which brought together policymakers, civil society, academia, young people and humanitarian organisations to explore how protection for children affected by crisis can be strengthened at EU level. The perspectives and insights shared during that discussion have informed and strengthened the analysis and recommendations in this paper.

Driving a Child-Sensitive Humanitarian Agenda during Ireland's EU Presidency

Ireland is uniquely placed during this Presidency of the Council of the European Union to advance a child-sensitive humanitarian agenda within EU institutions. An engaged Irish Presidency for children in crisis would:

- **Prioritise** investment in children across the Global Europe pillar within Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF).

- **Ensure** strong commitments on children's unique vulnerabilities and lower threshold of harm in the Council Conclusions of the Joint Humanitarian Communication.
- **Emphasise** the importance of Education in Emergencies (EiE) as a lifesaving humanitarian intervention and call for the maintenance of a 10% funding earmark.
- **Progress** a child-centred approach to humanitarian diplomacy that foregrounds children's district rights, risks and needs, and recognises harm to children as an early warning of wider civilian harm.
- **Advocate** for the implementation of a humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach that centres children and prioritises locally-led development in fragile contexts.
- **Encourage** an intersectional approach to child-sensitive humanitarian action that recognises heightened risks to girls, LGBTQI+ children and children with disabilities, and actively promotes gender equality and tackles gender-based violence.
- **Champion** the meaningful participation of children affected by crisis in EU policy processes, including leading by example with structured participation throughout the Presidency.

operating environments in recent history. Rising needs are being met with declining resources, forcing humanitarian organisations to reduce or suspend life-saving services in many contexts. Growing disregard for international humanitarian law (IHL) and established norms of civilian protection is further eroding the safeguards intended to protect children from the worst effects of conflict and crisis.

Against this backdrop, children cannot be treated as a secondary consideration within a wider humanitarian response. Rather, to ensure adequate protection of all civilians, it is imperative that children's unique rights and needs are mainstreamed across the humanitarian agenda.

Children in Crisis: An Unprecedented Sale of Need

- 200 million children across 133 countries and territories require humanitarian assistance in 2026.
- 473 million children, nearly one in five globally, live in areas affected by conflict.
- 38,558 grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict were verified by the United Nations in 2025.

Childhood in Crisis

We are living in a time of multi-faceted and intensifying global crises. Armed conflicts are becoming more protracted, urban and lethal in nature, climate shocks are increasing in frequency and severity, displacement has reached record levels, and given recent cuts to development assistance, humanitarian needs are outstripping the resources available to respond.

Within this increasingly volatile global order, children are paying a disproportionate price. More than [200 million](#) children are expected to require humanitarian assistance in 2026, while [one in five](#) children globally live in areas affected by conflict. Where conflict strikes, we know that children face increased protection risks, such as killing and maiming, recruitment by armed forces, sexual and gender-based violence, and other grave violations, and insecurity often intersects with climate shocks, hunger, and disease to further entrench poverty and restrict a child's access to the services they need to survive and thrive. Crisis does not just affect a child's life today, but shapes their health, wellbeing, and outcomes for years, and even generations, to come.

These challenges are unfolding as the international humanitarian system faces one of its most difficult



Sali, 4, is enrolled in the feeding programme at Renk Transit Centre, South Sudan. Photo: @ World Vision

Children's Unique Vulnerabilities Require a Distinct Policy Response

Too often, and despite the scale of needs, children remain insufficiently visible within humanitarian planning, budgeting and response. The result is that children's distinct experiences and priorities become subsumed within wider population categories, limiting the effectiveness of both resource allocation and operational response. This challenge extends to political decision-making and prioritisation, where children are rarely treated as a distinct policy priority requiring targeted action, monitoring and accountability.

This is both a humanitarian oversight, and a strategic misstep for several compelling reasons.

- **Children are Rights-Holders.** The case for a distinct policy response begins with children's rights. Under international law, children are entitled to specific rights and protections, including in situations of armed conflict and crisis. This covers basic needs, like the right to survival, development, and protection from violence, but includes also a child's education and their rights to have their views heard in decisions that affect them.
- **Children have a Lower Threshold of Harm in Crisis Settings.** Children are uniquely, not equally, vulnerable to the impacts of crisis and conflict. They suffer more acutely than adults, sooner, and with harms that persist long after the hostilities or crisis ends. Their bodies deteriorate faster from dehydration and malnutrition where food systems are undermined, or humanitarian access is denied. Their minds, still forming their sense of self, safety and understanding of the world, absorb trauma differently and more deeply. Their survival and development depend on caregivers, specialist services, and functioning civilian systems in ways that go far beyond adult dependency.



3 year old Narjes and 4 year old Malika at Omar Faroukh school in Beirut where IDPs are staying. Photo @ UNICEF

- **Children's Harm as an Early Warning for Broader Population Harm.** Safeguarding the most vulnerable members of a population has a de facto cascading effect on the protection of the entire community. Building and resourcing a humanitarian response system that is capable of meeting the urgent needs of a child is a strategic approach to delivering a stronger, more efficient response for all civilians. For example, in contexts of severe food insecurity, child malnutrition rates provide early warning signals for the broader community. A child-sensitive approach to humanitarian action enhances protection for an entire population.
- **A Smart Investment in Peace and Stability.** Mainstreaming children's unique rights, risk, and needs across humanitarian planning and response is not simply a moral imperative, but a smart and necessary investment in the future peace and stability of the global world order. Today's children are tomorrow's adults. They are the future of their communities. Investment in systems that protect children and ensure their development (from health care, to education, psychosocial, and livelihoods) helps protect the foundations on which longer-term recovery in fragile and conflict-affected contexts depends. Treating child-sensitive humanitarian action as siloed from broader peace and security efforts is a strategic misstep. Safeguarding children's protection and rights today is essential to securing peace and prosperity in the future.
- **Children are not a Homogenous Group.** Children's experiences of crisis vary significantly according to their protected characteristics - age, gender and disability, and more. Adolescent girls frequently face heightened risks of sexual violence, early and forced marriage, trafficking and exclusion from education, while boys may be at greater risk of recruitment by armed actors or hazardous labour. Children with disabilities frequently encounter barriers in accessing humanitarian assistance and protection services, while LGBTIQ+ children may face discrimination, violence and exclusion from services, especially in contexts where diverse sexual orientations or gender identities/expressions are not socially or legally accepted. Children's vulnerabilities also shift across different ages and stages of development, with the [first 1,000 days of life](#) representing the period of greatest vulnerability to malnutrition, for example. Effective humanitarian responses, therefore, do not treat children as a single, homogenous vulnerable category, but mainstream child-sensitive diversity across all policy and budget planning.



Meral, 9, and friends play together in Nuseirat Gaza.
Photo: © UNICEF

The Role of the EU in Driving a Child-Sensitive Humanitarian Agenda

The EU has a critical role to play as a global humanitarian actor in a volatile moment, using its global influence and resources to protect children affected by crisis and conflict. The existing institutional frameworks and toolkits provide a strong foundation for child-sensitive action, coupled with increasing recognition of the need to link humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

The ask is therefore not to create additional commitments and workstreams, but to strengthen the implementation of those already in place and ensure that children are consistently mainstreamed across EU external action.

- **Leading by example as the world's largest humanitarian donor.** In 2024, together with Member States, the EU provided over €88 million, or [42%](#), of global funding for development. As the world's largest humanitarian donor, the EU has a vital role to play in ensuring that children experiencing crises around the world have access to the services and support that they need to survive, thrive, and learn. In a global context of aid cuts, there is both a responsibility and opportunity for the EU to lead by example in pioneering a mainstreamed, child-sensitive humanitarian agenda that overcomes siloes, enhances humanitarian diplomacy, and increases protection for all civilians.

- **Promoting Peace and Prosperity, and Realising European Values.** As outlined in the [Joint Communication on Humanitarian Aid](#), adopted by the Commission in May 2026, humanitarian aid reflects the EU's values of humanity, peace, and solidarity. Supporting children in crisis is central to upholding these values: the EU falls short of the values – and of obligations under international law – when it overlooks the most vulnerable and treats children instead as part of a homogenous civilian whole. Similarly, investing in children today is a long-term investment in the objectives of EU external action – peace, prosperity, and security – by supporting future generations to build resilient, stable societies.
- **Upholding commitments under international humanitarian law.** As outlined above, children are afforded special status and protections in conflict and crisis settings under international law in acknowledgment of their unique rights, risks, and needs. Nevertheless, by every available metric, warfare is becoming more, not less, dangerous for children – in part, because their special protections are not being given effect. Foundational to the EU's identity and external-action mandate is the “*strict observance and the development of international law*”¹ – along with copious other commitments and mentions of human rights and the rule of law across the Treaty of Europe and institutional frameworks. To honour these commitments and ensure that children are afforded their full suite of rights, the EU must pursue and promote a child-sensitive interpretation and application of IHL, as outlined in the [Staff Working Documents](#) of the [Joint Communication on Humanitarian Aid](#).

¹ Art 3(5), Treaty of the European Union, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?from=EN&uri=OJ%3AC%3A2016%3A202%3AFULL&utm_source=chatgpt.com

- **Centring children humanises humanitarian action.** At a time when international cooperation and humanitarian spending face growing political pressure, maintaining public understanding of why international humanitarian intervention matters, is increasingly important. 91% of respondents to an EU survey in 2024 thought it was important that the EU funded humanitarian aid,² and this trend was similarly reflected in an Irish [public survey](#) ahead of the Presidency, showing widespread support for efforts towards peace, human rights and social inclusion. Centring children in the dialogue on EU humanitarian obligations can help challenge harmful narratives and connect humanitarian action with widely held values of solidarity, justice and human dignity.
- **Moving from promise to practice through enhanced implementation.** The EU already has a strong normative and policy framework for the protection of children affected by crisis. This includes the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Children, the Joint Communication on Humanitarian Aid³ (with some promising commitments for children), the EU updated Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) and EU external action, including Humanitarian Diplomacy. Yet, strong commitments are not translating into meaningful prioritisation and action for children, and the issue at EU level is increasingly one of implementation.

Opportunities to Drive this Agenda during Ireland's Presidency of the EU

Ireland is uniquely placed to establish itself as a leading global champion of children affected by crisis and conflict, building on a strong foundation of principled humanitarian action and a commitment to Official Development Assistance (ODA), international law and the rules-based order. Ireland is one of only [13 States](#) to have committed to all international instruments that protect children in conflict, from the Geneva Conventions, to the Safe Schools Declaration and the Paris Principles, and Ireland's term on the United Nations Security Council 2021-22, and leadership on the Political Declaration on [EWIPA](#) (explosive weapons), demonstrated the State's ability to drive innovation and progress on politically challenging issues.

Ireland's Presidency comes at a time when a number of significant budgetary and policy processes will be shaped and progressed, with significant implications for children around the world. While honouring the role of honest broker, Ireland's Presidency presents a significant opportunity to bring principled humanitarian leadership to the heart of EU policymaking and build on Ireland's reputation as a champion of child

rights to drive forward a child-sensitive humanitarian agenda.

1. Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034

The strength, resilience and future prosperity of the EU depend on the well-being and potential of all children, wherever they are and wherever they come from. As negotiations for the next Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034 continue, the EU must prioritise investments in children across its humanitarian aid and development cooperation efforts. By investing in children and addressing both their immediate needs and their long-term development, the EU not only contributes to the protection of their rights, but also strengthens the resilience of crisis-affected regions and promotes sustainable and inclusive growth in partner countries – ultimately contributing to a more stable, equitable, and prosperous world for all. Investing in children means building healthy, educated and resilient societies. With the commitment to 0.7%, and increased ODA budgets against the global trend, Ireland is well placed to champion principled donorship in the MFF that protects children in crisis.

Recommendations:

- Lead by example with Ireland's approach of furthest behind first: put the most vulnerable children at the centre of the external dimension of the MFF, prioritising their rights, protection, and development.
- Ensure an ambitious scale and quality of child-focused ODA funding across Global Europe -
 - Protect the €25 billion to humanitarian aid as a guaranteed minimum – any decrease would significantly undermine the ability of the EU to respond to humanitarian crises.
 - Reinstate the 20% ODA target for human development, with a clear child rights dimension. In a moment of fiscal constraint and ODA reduction, investing in children is the most valuable investment, with high returns and a long-term impact on the whole society.
 - Establish a child marker, similar to the gender marker, to track all EU external action spending on children and to show the added value of EU's action.
- Ensure that development funding and programme delivery are not conditional on migration control, readmission, or return-related cooperation.
- Champion the added value of CSOs and partners in reinforcing the legitimacy, impact and reach of the EU's external action, especially in Fragile and Conflict Affected Settings.

² <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2976>

³ https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/downloads/joint_communication_on_humanitarian_aid.pdf

2. Council Conclusions on the Humanitarian Communication

The Joint Communication on Humanitarian Aid, adopted by the Commission in May 2026, included some promising language on principled humanitarian action and support for international humanitarian law. The Council Conclusions on the Communication, on which Ireland will lead negotiations during the Presidency, offer a unique opportunity to strengthen commitments specifically for children. We are urging the Irish Government to seize this opportunity to highlight children's lower threshold of harm and embed child-sensitivity at the heart of EU policy on humanitarian action.

Recommendations:

In negotiating and finalising the Council Conclusions, Ireland must:

- Acknowledge that children have a substantially lower threshold for harm in conflict and crisis – they are seven times more likely to die from explosive weapons, their bodies deteriorate faster from dehydration and starvation, and their cognitive development means that they suffer different and long-term impacts of trauma, displacement, and loss.
- Emphasise the existing suite of tools at the EU's disposal to respond to and support children in crisis, including the Children and Armed Conflict agenda and particularly tools to address gender-specific concerns, such as sexual violence.
- Call for grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict to be systematically considered in humanitarian diplomacy efforts and engagement aimed at protecting civilians.
- Underline the importance of taking into account the specific needs, rights, and vulnerabilities of children in the application of IHL, and encourage the mainstreaming of a child-sensitive IHL interpretation into diplomatic and military staff training, as noted in the [SWD](#) of the new Joint Humanitarian Communication.
- Call for children to be recognised as a distinct category in humanitarian needs assessments and analysis, including through the use of age-, gender- and disability-disaggregated data.
- Recognise education in emergencies as an essential and life-saving component of a child-sensitive humanitarian response, delivering protection and supporting resilience, recovery and long-term development.
- Encourage the prioritisation of meaningful, safe, and age-appropriate participation of children in the design, implementation and evaluation of humanitarian response.



Girls study at their school in Marsabit county, Kenya.
Photo: @ Plan International

3. Education in Emergencies as a Life-Saving Intervention

Education is one of the most powerful investments the EU can make to promote stability, resilience, and sustainable development in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Education is also a key mitigation tool for the greater risks faced by children: schools provide physical safety, psychosocial stability, and protection from recruitment and exploitation. However, in the context of global funding cuts, education is often deprioritised in humanitarian responses despite its critical role. Its absence during crises has disproportionate and lasting consequences for children's development and economic prospects. Education must therefore be integrated as a life-saving intervention from the outset of crises and tailored to the differentiated risks faced by girls and boys: while boys may face heightened risks of recruitment by armed actors, girls are often more exposed to sexual violence, child marriage and early pregnancy. As a global leader on Education, Ireland has an important role to play at EU level in ensuring that education continues to be understood as a life-saving intervention.

Recommendations:

- Support maintaining the EU's commitment to allocate 10% of its humanitarian funding for Education in Emergencies
- Champion sustained investment in education across the nexus. The Irish Presidency should support a future EU budget that protects investments in basic education and ensures continuity of learning for children affected by conflict, displacement and protracted crises, complementing the EU's commitment to Education in Emergencies.

4. Children as a Common Ground Entry Point for Humanitarian Diplomacy

Diplomatic efforts to address the denial of humanitarian access have proliferated in recent years, yet they have largely failed to deliver meaningful change for civilians⁴. Recent [research](#) by Save the Children indicates that children are perhaps the most compelling, and least politicised, entry point for access negotiations – and a proven one. This is especially important at a moment when the trust underpinning negotiations is under significant strain. Moreover, the disproportionate harm that children suffer when access fails also serves as an early warning of wider civilian harm to come.

Recommendations:

- Adopt child-specific Denial of Humanitarian Access indicators as triggers for diplomatic action, recognising harm to children as an early warning of wider civilian harm.
- Adopt a child-centred approach to humanitarian diplomacy that consistently foregrounds children's distinct rights, risks, and needs in access negotiations, multilateral engagements, resolutions and statements. The universality of children's rights is a rare space where interests can align to strengthen community-wide access.
- Ensure that grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict are systematically considered in humanitarian diplomacy efforts and engagement aimed at protecting civilians.

5. Fragility

The EU must take an integrated, long-term and people-centred approach to fragile contexts, that links humanitarian, development and peace action. Reducing humanitarian needs requires sustained attention to the root causes of crises, including conflict, weak governance, human rights violations, climate shocks and limited access to economic and educational opportunities. Within this, the EU must place children at the centre of its action, recognising that children are disproportionately affected by fragility, poverty, displacement, protection risks and disruptions to the services that are critical to their wellbeing, resilience and future prospects.

Recommendations:

- Implementation of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus must be reinforced through improved coordination between the European Commission services and Member States, in line with the Team Europe approach.

- Locally-led development must be advanced and rendered inclusive, so that youth-led and child-focused organisation can be explicitly included in the EU's external action through adapted funding and partnership models.
- The EU should increase predictable, flexible and multi-year funding for child-focused services in fragile contexts, ensuring continuity between humanitarian response and longer-term recovery efforts.
- The EU should prioritise investments that build children's resilience to climate and conflict-related shocks, including through climate adaptation, social protection and community-based approaches that help reduce future humanitarian needs.
- The EU should ensure that actions addressing fragility explicitly target the needs of the most marginalised children, including displaced children, children with disabilities, girls, and children living in extreme poverty or conflict-affected areas.



Khadra, 13 washes dishes at an IDP camp in Somalia.
Photo: @ Plan International

6. Girls in Crisis: Protecting Progress

Every day, girls and women face discrimination and violations of their rights. In conflict, displacement and climate-related emergencies, gender inequalities intensify, increasing their exposure to violence, child and early marriage, exploitation, trafficking, disrupted education, and loss of essential health and protection services. The consequences will be felt first and most severely by girls facing intersecting inequalities, including girls with disabilities, displaced and refugee girls, and those from marginalised communities. Yet humanitarian action often groups girls with either women or children, overlooking adolescent girls' distinct needs and excluding their voices from decisions.

Now, estimated cuts of over [USD \\$60 billion](#) to overseas development assistance, could mean up to \$25bn less funding every year for gender equality⁵.

⁴ For example, see UN Security Council Resolution 2417 (2018) on use of starvation as a method of warfare and UN Security Council Resolution 2730 (2024) on protection of humanitarian personnel in conflict-affected countries.

⁵ This number has been calculated considering that an estimated 42% of ODA goes to projects that have gender equality as one of their objectives.

Only 4% of ODA currently supports programmes with gender equality as their primary objective. These cuts, combined with a growing anti-rights movement, shrinking civic space and multiple complex crises, threaten to reverse hard-won progress in girls' rights. They also further restrict funding for local women, girl and youth-led organisations, despite their central role in identifying needs, reaching affected communities and advancing sustainable change.

Ireland has made significant strides towards mainstreaming gender across foreign policy and development cooperation initiatives, but there is a need to disaggregate this approach by age to ensure that girls are not left behind. During its EU Presidency, it should build on this leadership through an age-responsive approach that protects dedicated funding for girls, supports essential services and enables girls to shape humanitarian decisions affecting them.

Recommendations:

- Protect funding for girls' rights. Amid global ODA cuts, Ireland and EU partners should ensure dedicated resources for programmes that specifically support adolescent girls.
- Prioritise girls in crisis contexts. MFF initiatives should safeguard girls' access to education, health, and protection services in fragile and humanitarian settings.
- Promote girls' participation and leadership. Create structured opportunities for girls and young women to influence EU-funded policies and programmes.

- Reinforce rights-based advocacy. Ireland can help drive strong EU commitments to counter anti-rights trends and sustain progress on girls' empowerment.
- Reinforce the systematic use of age-disaggregated gender analysis. While strong commitments exist, EU funding can further ensure that programmes consistently track and respond to the specific needs of girls within broader gender equality efforts.
- Ensure protection of gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights in light of the Mexico City Policy (PHFFA - Global Gag Rule).

7. Participation

Meaningful participation of children and civil society is essential to ensure that EU policies and programmes respond to the realities of those most affected by crisis. Participation is a core principle of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, yet children, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, and local civil society organisations remain underrepresented in EU decision-making processes.

Ireland has made significant progress in embedding child participation and developing systematic participation mechanisms. The Presidency provides an opportunity to build on this experience and strengthen inclusive, rights-based participation across EU external action, in line with the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Team Europe approach.



Twins Shadi & Basil (8) play football close to their tent in Gaza.
Photo: @ Save the Children

Recommendations:

- Champion structured child participation during the Presidency. Support safe, inclusive mechanisms for children, particularly those affected by crisis, to inform EU discussions, including through consultations linked to key policy processes such as the MFF and humanitarian policy development.
- Strengthen civil society engagement. Ensure that child-focused and local civil society organisations are systematically consulted and adequately resourced to support meaningful participation in EU external action, including through the integration of participation requirements within EU funding instruments and associated monitoring and accountability frameworks.

Conclusion

Ireland's Presidency offers a unique opportunity to translate a strong suite of EU commitments into meaningful action for children affected by conflict and crisis. At a time of rising humanitarian need, shrinking resources, and growing pressure on the rules-based order, Ireland can use its reputation as a principled actor to call for children to be centred in external action decision-making, and in doing so, spearhead an innovative child-sensitive humanitarian agenda. Children continue to be overlooked and underestimated in humanitarian response, with implications not just for children's individual survival and outcomes, but for peace and stability across the globe. Ireland has long championed the motto of *Leave No One Behind*, and the Presidency offers a critical opportunity to lead by example and ensure that children are central to how the EU understands, funds and responds to crisis.

