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Why Australian aid should prioritise children

By Mercy Chipo Jumo
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Nearly thirty years ago, on 20 November 1989, world leaders gathered at the United Nations to make a stand for children by signing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). This convention acknowledges the shifting and intersecting levels of vulnerability that children experience. 169 UN Member States, including Australia have now signed. The Convention encompasses both domestic and international obligations. As such, Australia has a responsibility to support children's rights internationally, particularly through the aid program. At a time when other population groups such as women and people living with disabilities have been recognised as [requiring](#) special attention, support and measurable [outcomes](#), Australia has failed to prioritise children's rights in the same way. This must change if the aid program is to deliver for the most vulnerable children, both boys and girls.

As an advisor and advocate for child rights at World Vision Australia, I argue that taking children seriously in our aid program is essential for four key reasons:

1. **Children make up half of the world's poor**

The focus of Australian Aid is to reduce poverty and foster sustainable development. While constituting only one third of the global population, [children represent half of the world's 1.3 billion people living in poverty](#). According to UNICEF, about 387 million (or 19.5% of the world's children) live in extreme poverty on \$1.90 per person per day compared to 9.2% of adults.

2. **Children experience inequality and poverty in different ways to adults, often with long term consequences**

Childhood is when an [individual's lifelong health, cognitive development](#) and growth is shaped. The foundation and building blocks of a person's life are laid in the first 1,000 days of life. Childhood experiences of multi-dimensional poverty often lead to stunting, mental health, behavioural and social problems that extend well into adulthood. According to the World Bank one of the [smartest investments](#) a

country can make is to invest in children early to minimise intergenerational transmission of poverty. Children are the future of their countries, and effective support for them now helps to break the cycle of imminent poverty. Every dollar spent on children is an investment in the future human capital of a nation.

3. Children have the right to be protected

Violence against children in any form jeopardises their education, health and future survival. The total costs of violence against children in the Asia-Pacific region is [estimated at US\\$160 billion or 2% of regional GDP](#), and yet [only around 2.5% of Australian Aid goes toward the cause](#). High costs resulting from the physical and psychological violence against children today and in their adult lives underscore the importance of prioritising and mainstreaming child rights and wellbeing targets as indicators in development.

4. Children have the right to be heard and taken seriously

Children not only make up half the world's poor, they are individuals and rights holders. They are citizens, beneficiaries, consumers, the human capital of tomorrow, and dependent on adults for support, protection and welfare.

[Article 4 of the CRC](#) requires donor Governments to, “undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognized in the present Convention. With regard to economic, social and cultural rights ... to the maximum extent of their available resources ... within the framework of international co-operation.”

The Convention is built on four pillars. First, the principle of non-discrimination, second, the best interest of the child, third, the right to life, survival and development, and fourth, the child's right to be heard and taken seriously with guidance from caregivers, parents and community members, in line with the child's evolving capacities. The Government should use these pillars alongside the child related indicators in the Sustainable Development Goals framework to strengthen Australia's commitment to children through the aid program.

Work has been done to strengthen Australia's action for women, and people with disabilities. This effort should be extended to children. The inclusion of girls in some women and gender related programs does not go far enough as girls are not really the focus. Measurable child-specific targets should be established across all sectors of development to enable considerations of how aid investments impact on boys and girls to be made.

The Nordic countries and the European Union provide interesting case studies on how to put children at the centre of development assistance. The [Swedish Government passed a bill](#) to fully incorporate the CRC into law by 1 January 2020. [Finland has guidance](#) on how its workforce can prioritise children and [the European Commission established](#) a coordinator

for the rights of the child to make sure that children's rights are properly considered in all relevant policies and actions.

As outlined by myself and other co-authors in World Vision's recent [budget submission](#), the Australian Government could take children more seriously in the aid program by:

1. **Establishing a unit to develop and oversee a child rights strategy** and mainstreaming children's rights across the aid program. This would ensure all aid interventions consider and prioritize the impact on children in the same way that gender and inclusion, women, girls and people with disabilities are prioritised and accounted for in development.
2. **Introducing child wellbeing as a metric for poverty reduction** and ensuring that at least 80% of investments of the aid program, regardless of their objectives, effectively support, protect and empower children in their implementation.
3. **Identifying and tracking how much aid money is spent on children** and child-focused interventions, because what gets measured gets done.
4. **Ensuring that grant recipients listen to and capture the views and experiences of children** so that their perspectives can help inform the Australian aid program and policymaking at local, national and global levels.

The Sustainable Development Goals can only be realised, and poverty truly eliminated, if aid and development interventions leave no one behind, especially children.

About the author/s

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