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## Protecting Ghana's children in the polycrisis

Social spending and innovative financing  
are vital to shield Ghana's children from  
multiple shocks

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### Partner spotlight

The National Development Planning  
Commission leads initiatives to protect  
Ghana's children during the polycrisis



# Championing Change for Children

**A UNICEF Ghana bulletin**





## INTRODUCTION

UNICEF Representative to Ghana,  
**Mr Osama Makkawi Khogali**

In nearly every crisis, children are most at risk of suffering the deepest impact: whether it be through environmental pollution, a disease outbreak, conflict or an economic shock, vulnerable children bear the brunt of the impact.

Ghana has made important steps forward in improving children's lives – it was the first country in the world to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in February 1990, and has shown continued commitment to advancing child rights in the three decades since. However, the converging crises currently unfolding in Ghana and worldwide – the polycrisis – threaten to stall this progress and set back the development of an equitable, healthy and sustainable environment for the country's children.

This is why, in this first edition of *Championing Change for Children*, we focus on the impacts of the polycrisis – and what we can do to help. We hope that this new bulletin will help to



raise awareness of the polycrisis, and perhaps lead to a broader debate, both within and beyond UNICEF, on how to respond to the challenges it creates. Solutions exist, and it is these we must focus on.

To address challenges and deliver results, from expanding social safety nets to improving service delivery, UNICEF Ghana collaborates closely with government, civil society and private sector and development partners. In this inaugural edition, we spotlight one such partner: the National Development Planning Commission.

Also in this edition, the UN Resident Coordinator outlines how we work alongside our sister United Nations agencies in Ghana on cross-cutting issues such as economic transformation and access to services.

Over the longer term, we remain committed to all Ghanaian children realizing their full potential. Social spending is key, and must be protected to shield children and families from the impacts of crises. Supporting social spending will also allow us to continue our work to build the capacity of both individuals and institutions to achieve Ghana's vision for its own development, allowing us all to move towards a more stable, secure future for Ghana.

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# Protecting Ghana's children in the polycrisis



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**The polycrisis threatens progress for children, globally and in Ghana. Economic shocks, climate change impacts and potential regional instability are putting child rights at risk. To protect Ghana's children from the worst impacts of the polycrisis, sustained social spending and innovative financing are vital.**

**Ghana's children, 73 per cent of whom are multidimensionally poor, are already being affected by the polycrisis.**

United Nations Member States have committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 – but, with just six years to go, progress towards the SDGs is threatened by the impacts of the polycrisis. Arising from multiple, interconnected and overlapping shocks at the global, national and local levels, the polycrisis is affecting social and economic progress worldwide, and hindering efforts to prepare for and respond to the impacts of climate change.

Ghana's children, 73 per cent of whom are multidimensionally poor,<sup>1</sup> are already being affected by the polycrisis. While the Government of Ghana and its partners are working to address the critical economic challenges the country faces – exacerbated by inflation and global

energy and food security crises – the pressure on social spending grows, leaving Ghana's vulnerable children and families with limited support. This situation threatens child rights and risks reversing Ghana's progress in improving child welfare.

To shield many Ghanaian children and families from the impacts of the polycrisis, UNICEF is advocating for the government to protect social sector spending, improve efficiency and budget credibility and to enhance new and existing sources of funds for services for the most vulnerable.

## **Polycrisis drives interlinked challenges**

UNICEF research shows that the COVID-19 pandemic caused rapidly worsening job and income insecurity in Ghana. By December 2021,

<sup>1</sup> National Development Planning Commission, 'Multi-Dimensional Child Poverty in Ghana', 2020.





### In 2022, increasing prices and economic disruption pushed an additional 850,000 Ghanaians into poverty.

more than two-thirds of households were reporting a lower income than before the arrival of COVID-19.<sup>2</sup> The impact was greatest on the poorest households, with almost 50 per cent being forced to survive on less than half of their pre-pandemic income. At the same time, the real value of household income fell as food prices rose, leading to more than 40 per cent of households skipping at least one meal every day.<sup>3</sup>

From 2021, rising fuel and water costs placed further pressure on struggling households. In 2022, increasing prices and economic disruption pushed an additional 850,000 Ghanaians into poverty; overall, around one quarter of Ghana's population of nearly 31 million was classed as food insecure, according to data collected by the World Bank.<sup>4</sup>

These challenges put the wellbeing of children at risk, impacting all aspects of their lives, from school readiness and educational attainment to their overall health. Children in lower income households are also more likely to engage in child labour, which may have long-term consequences for their education, health and future income.

Before the pandemic, Ghana was one of the world's fastest-growing economies,<sup>5</sup> but the events of the last few years have halted this progress; GDP per capita in 2024 is projected to be barely above that of 2014. The stalling economy has led to fewer jobs, reduced household income and – crucially, for children and families impacted by the polycrisis – a plateau in government funding for social services, with a risk that spending in this sector will decline as the Government prioritizes servicing its debt.

The Government of Ghana has had to make difficult choices in times of crisis. While the Government has taken significant steps to regain economic stability, further challenges could place Ghana at risk of a more severe

economic crisis. UNICEF is committed to working with the Government to safeguard social spending to ensure equitable access to social services and protection for children, according to Pauliina Sarvilahti, UNICEF Ghana chief for social policy and inclusion. Economic uncertainty could lead to underinvestment in the country's children, leaving their rights and needs unmet.

The current situation of insecurity and violence in the Sahel may spread south and has the potential to adversely impact the lives of people in Ghana, as well as the country's economic stability. This 'Sahel spillover' risks destabilizing Ghana and other countries in the region, driving people to cross borders in search of safety, undermining trade, and raising the possibility of the spread of conflict.

In addition to economic and social shocks, and the potential impacts of instability in the region, children in Ghana are at increasing risk from the impacts of the climate crisis, particularly unpredictable rainfall, flooding in the south and drought in the north of the country. Globally, Ghana ranks low in readiness and high for vulnerability to climate shocks, compared to other countries (according to the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative index). It is possible that the government may be forced to divert further funds to climate adaptation and emergency response, at the cost of reduced social spending on children and families. This represents a growing threat to the welfare of Ghana's children, and to the country's progress towards achieving the SDGs.

### To improve the resilience of Ghana's most vulnerable children and families – to bolster their ability to withstand the wide-ranging impacts of the polycrisis – social spending must be protected.

2 Ghana Statistical Service, 'Household and Job Tracker Survey, wave 3', 2021.

3 Ibid.

4 World Bank, *Ghana Economic Update, 7th Edition. Price Surge: Unraveling inflation's toll on poverty and food security*, 2023.

5 IMF World Economic Outlook, April 2023.

## Protect social spending, protect children

To improve the resilience of Ghana's most vulnerable children and families – to bolster their ability to withstand the wide-ranging impacts of the polycrisis – social spending must be protected. It is vital that spending is protected in real, per capita terms, and is focused on those actions with the greatest impact and highest returns; these include social protection, such as the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) programme and the Ghana School Feeding Programme, education services and health care (immunization and maternal and neonatal health). Focused social sector spending has proven high rates of return – in fact, reductions in social investment can eventually cost a government more than they save, according to Pauliina Sarvilahti.

To ensure that it can continue to fund social spending, the Government of Ghana could aim to enhance domestic revenue generation for the sustainable provision of essential services, which would avoid imposing additional burdens on vulnerable children and families. All possibilities for funding sources, both traditional and innovative, should be explored. For example, official development assistance, private sector investments, public-

## WHAT IS THE POLYCRISIS?

The term 'polycrisis' refers to the presence of multiple, interconnected global crises occurring simultaneously. In our globalized world, these crises are interdependent and compound one another. The polycrisis has arisen from events including the COVID-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine, climate change impacts, soaring food and energy prices, high inflation and high debt burdens.

This convergence of crises creates a volatile, uncertain environment with drastic impacts on children worldwide. Rising costs of living, food insecurity, health challenges and economic instability can disrupt children's education, nutrition and family stability. The climate crisis threatens to displace children and risks their health.

Responding to any one of these challenges is complicated by interactions with other simultaneous crises. This makes addressing the polycrisis exceptionally complex, requiring coordinated global action to mitigate the compounded threats facing the world's children.

private partnerships, and blended finance and climate financing options all hold the potential to support Ghana's ability to protect social spending. At

the same time, the government could seek to ensure that its expenditure is as transparent as possible, with comprehensive information on the use of public funds made accessible to citizens.

**Ghana's successes in social sector investment include high coverage of childhood vaccination, steady progress in reducing infant and maternal mortality, high rates of school enrolment.**

## Building resilience during and after the polycrisis

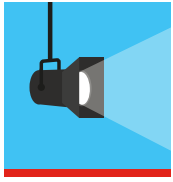
Ghana is strongly committed to the achievement of the SDGs and initially made good progress in several important areas, including education and child protection.

Ghana's successes in social sector investment include high coverage of childhood vaccination, steady progress in reducing infant and maternal mortality, high rates of school enrolment, and, among low- and lower-middle-income countries, leading the way in cash transfers, national health insurance and school feeding.

Unfortunately, the polycrisis is a real and immediate threat to these successes in improving child welfare and child rights – it is already stalling progress and may soon reverse gains. Work to address the multiple challenges is underway but must be accelerated if Ghana is to achieve the SDGs by 2030 and protect child rights and welfare at the same time.







## UNICEF PARTNER SPOTLIGHT:

# The National Development Planning Commission

Ghana has made significant strides in advancing child rights and welfare, but the global events of the polycrisis – particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and economic crises – threaten to reverse this hard-won progress. One of UNICEF’s key partners in tackling these challenges and delivering results for children is Ghana’s National Development Planning Commission (NDPC). The NDPC leads the way on the country’s short, medium and long-term planning and strategic development, and its experts carry out studies to provide vital information to government policymakers.

The NDPC’s responsibilities include ensuring that resources are effectively

**“If we want to see the development of the country, we need to focus on the development of children.”**

**Dr Kodjo Esseim Mensah-Abrampa,**  
Director-General, NDPC

used and allocated, supporting programmes of work, and monitoring and reporting on government projects. Alongside partners, the NDPC aims to make the most of Ghana’s ‘demographic dividend’ – a population that is both becoming younger and growing more slowly than in the past – to help bring the country out of poverty, including by supporting



Ghanaian children to realise their rights and enabling them to achieve their potential.

Dr Kodjo Esseim Mensah-Abrampa, Director-General of the NDPC, believes that it is vital that events and circumstances that could constrain the development of the country’s people are addressed or avoided – and that this should begin in childhood. “Children are key to achieving many of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those relating to education, WASH, health and nutrition,” says Dr Mensah-Abrampa. “Supporting the children of Ghana today will also help the country to reach its target of becoming a higher middle-income country by 2030.”

To address the impacts of the pandemic and to accelerate progress, the NDPC and UNICEF undertook two interlinked actions: developing integrated social services (ISS) and bringing together government ministries involved in the delivery of social services, in social protection, child protection and health. This allowed the ministries to learn from one another and to begin to coordinate their actions.

It is unusual for ministries in Ghana to come together in this way and the pace of change in the public service system is often slow. However, under the leadership of the Government of Ghana, the NDPC and other ministries,



with UNICEF's support, referrals and efficiency of service delivery has improved and planning and budgeting is better integrated. According to Dr Mensah-Abrampa, "Many other institutions have asked to work with the NDPC thanks to this success." In future, the NDPC and UNICEF plan to expand the ISS model to include education, a stronger health and nutrition component and eventually WASH.

**"The NDPC and UNICEF have a very good relationship. Our work together on integrated social services has given hope to other institutions and encouraged them to coordinate more with the NDPC in areas such as child labour and WASH."**

**Dr Kodjo Esseim Mensah-Abrampa,**  
Director-General, NDPC

UNICEF's technical support and advocacy helped to place social spending at the heart of the Long-term National Development Plan (2018–2057) produced by the NDPC and adopted by the Government of Ghana.

"Crises must be used as an opportunity for change, and to create innovation," says Dr Mensah-Abrampa. The NDPC continues to lead on multiple initiatives to protect children and families in Ghana from the impacts of the polycrisis. For example, the NDPC aims to help Ghana to become food secure by reducing reliance on imports and encouraging investment in domestic food production, focusing on foods with a short production time, such as cereals, vegetables and poultry. This is accompanied by development of 'direct access' routes for school feeding, to ensure that children receive a nutritious meal created from Ghanaian produce. The NDPC and UNICEF have also developed dietary guidelines for children.

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### The United Nations in Ghana: Stronger together

Innovation, capacity strengthening and empowerment are integral to the role of the United Nations in Ghana – and crucial to sustainable development, says the United Nations Resident Coordinator, Charles Abani. The United Nations integrates a 'leave no-one behind' human rights ethos into all of its work. In Ghana, "supporting the rights and capacities of women, children, persons with disabilities and young people," is fundamental to this, says Abani.

In April 2023, the United Nations in Ghana signed a new Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. Through it, the United Nations will deploy over US\$500 million over 2023–2025 to strengthen and build the capacity of individuals and institutions to achieve Ghana's own development vision.

The focus on capacity building is seen in work to support Ghana to transform its development, focusing on the key drivers, including its food systems, to become more sustainable by boosting employment, productivity and rural development.



**"We are making an intentional effort to move away from the UN 'doing' to the UN 'enabling' and strengthening the capacity of Ghanaians to lead."**

**Charles Abani,**  
United Nations Resident Coordinator,  
Ghana

For example, through United Nations initiatives, thousands of smallholder farmers have used improved seed, cutting post-harvest losses.

UNICEF, says Abani, is playing a leading role in improving education in Ghana. "UNICEF supports rafts of initiatives to support schools and communities, and vulnerable families – and to help build resilient school systems." These include science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) for girls; technical and vocational education and training; and improving school access for children and young people with disabilities, as well as important work on water and sanitation, a key element to ending low participation of girls.

In the current economic situation, protecting social spending is vital to ensure vulnerable children and families can meet their immediate needs. Social spending can also break the cycle of poverty and establish a foundation for long-term well-being. Abani highlights UNICEF's strong





## NEWS IN BRIEF continued

role in advocating for the protection of social budget and spending analysis.

Through initiatives spanning agriculture, climate action, education, health and more, the United Nations works towards enabling the country's people and institutions to lead their country's development. The goal, says Abani, is "not to advocate on behalf of poor people, but to strengthen their capacity so that they may advocate on

their own behalf." Abani is excited that this approach runs through the core of UNICEF's work in Ghana and beyond.

*As head of the Country Team, Charles Abani, United Nations Resident Coordinator (RC), is the highest-ranking United Nations representative in Ghana. The RC coordinates support to the government and people of Ghana to achieve their development priorities and to reach targets within the Sustainable Development Goals.*

**"Investing in children is not only a moral imperative but also makes economic sense."**

**Fiachra McAsey,**  
UNICEF Deputy Representative

## Social sector budget briefs reveal Government's efforts to protect the vulnerable

UNICEF has launched its 2023 Social Sector Budget Briefs for Ghana.<sup>6</sup> Developed via engagement with Ministries and District Authorities across Ghana, the Briefs analyse public finances allocated across health, education, water, sanitation and hygiene, and child and social protection.

The analyses show a 29 per cent nominal increase but just a 4 per cent real increase in social sector spending. Overall social sector budgets declined as a percentage of total government spending, from 21.1 per cent in 2022 to 18.2 per cent in 2023. Rates of investment declined in key areas, including education, health and social protection. However, in 2024, the Government is making positive efforts towards the education and social protection budgets.

"Children today live in a world impacted by [a polycrisis], in which the multifaceted effects of global



heating, destabilizing conflicts and humanitarian situations, economic hardship and severe learning loss left in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to compound already difficult development challenges which see SDG attainment pushed further away," said UNICEF Deputy Representative Fiachra McAsey.

"The Budget Briefs are a very useful tool to better understand current prioritization, across the sectors that matter most for children, such as education, health, social and child protection, water and sanitation.

"Even if there is limited fiscal space, children shouldn't be made to pay the price."

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Published by  
UNICEF Ghana Country Office  
4th – 8th Rangoon Close  
Accra

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