

Left Behind: The Funding Gap for Young Children in Crisis



Introduction

Global aid budgets are tightening, just as more young children than ever are growing up amid crisis.

In fragile settings, the earliest years of life carry the highest stakes. From conception to age five, children undergo a rapid period of brain development that shapes their lifelong health, learning, and well-being. They need more than survival, they need nurturing care, safety, nutrition, and opportunities to explore, play, and connect. These are the building blocks of resilience and recovery.

The Nurturing Care Framework¹, launched by WHO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, provides a roadmap for this dual imperative. It identifies five essential components: good health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving, and early learning. Together, these enable children not just to survive, but to thrive.

Yet despite this imperative for societal growth and progress, funding for early childhood development in emergencies (ECDiE) remains overlooked. Most resources are still directed toward immediate relief. Services that support the full developmental needs of young children are chronically underfunded, especially in displacement, conflict, and climate-affected contexts.

To address this gap, the Moving Minds Alliance commissioned new research by Causal Design to track international funding flows to ECDiE, identify persistent shortfalls, and equip advocates and policymakers with the evidence needed to push for stronger, more consistent, and more equitable investments in the youngest children living through crisis.

¹ See full report here: <https://nurturing-care.org/ncf-for-eed>

Methodology

To map and project funding for ECDiE, we combine cutting-edge technology with trusted global data sources. Using **natural language processing and large language models**, we uncover hidden patterns in hundreds of thousands of humanitarian and development project descriptions, allowing us to identify and categorize ECDiE funding with unprecedented precision.

To look ahead, we pair this with **scenario modeling** that blends recent funding trends, macro-level patterns, and expert insights to forecast likely trajectories of ECDiE financing through 2030.

Because the methodology tracks funds flowing to countries in crisis without distinguishing whether they reach children in crisis or those in more stable areas, these figures may somewhat overstate actual funding directly reaching refugees, migrants, and displaced populations.

Data sources: Our analysis is powered by the UN OCHA Financial Tracking Service for humanitarian flows and the OECD Creditor Reporting Service for development flows as well as expert interviews and inputs from 8 experts.



3.7%

of development funds
in crisis-affected
countries go to ECD
annually



4.9%

of humanitarian funds
go to ECD annually

A Narrow Window For Transformative Investment

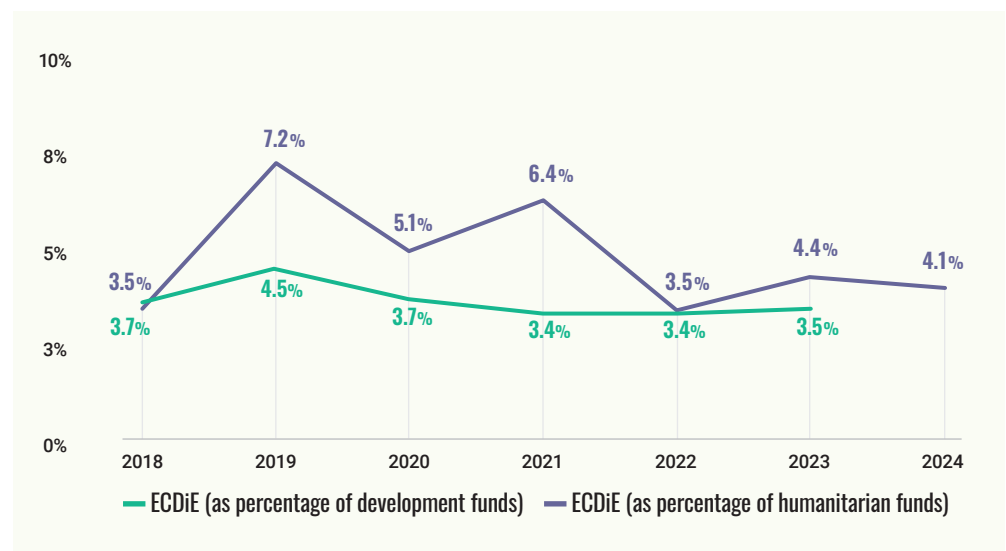
From 2018 to 2023, just **3.8 percent of total aid to crisis-affected countries** supported early childhood development (ECD) services.

This includes:

- 4.9 percent of humanitarian assistance per year on average between 2018-2024, roughly \$665 million out of \$14 billion per year
- 3.7 percent of development assistance per year on average between 2018-2023, about \$3.4 billion of nearly \$100 billion per year

While ECDiE funding grew in moments, peaking at 7.2 percent of humanitarian aid in 2019, it has since fluctuated, dipping to 3.5 percent in 2022 before modest recovery to 4.1 percent in 2024. The largest bilateral and multilateral donors were the United States, the World Bank, and Germany.

ECDiE flows as a share of total funds distributed to countries with crisis settings



Despite rising demand and growing evidence of cost-effectiveness, only a fraction of international assistance directly supports the development of children and their families, spending less than 3 cents on the dollar in the most difficult places around the world.

The bulk of ECDiE funding remains concentrated in health and nutrition, with responsive caregiving and early learning receiving just 15 percent of the total share of ECD humanitarian funds. As a share of total aid to crisis-affected countries, early learning and responsive caregiving account for less than half of one percent of funds (0.43 percent).

As conflict, climate shocks, and displacement increase, there is an opportunity to act. These numbers show both the fragility of current investments and the potential to scale smarter.

What is in the Data?



Humanitarian Funding

Included all **paid contributions** (i.e. excluded commitments and pledges) reported to the OCHA's FTS.

Excluded projects with descriptions of four words or shorter, due to the difficulty in categorizing them as ECD-related or not.



Development Funding

Included **all ODA and private development finance net paid disbursements made to crisis-affected countries** (defined as a country with an emergency response plan) **plus any disbursements with a conflict-related keyword** in the description.

Funding to crisis-affected countries may not target crisis-affected populations. Only 10 percent of projects in crisis-affected countries had an emergency-related keyword.

Also included all regional flows to the South of Sahara and Middle East regions, where many countries were affected by crises. All other regional flows were excluded from the analysis.

All funds to Afghanistan were excluded from the analysis, since they had no project descriptions with which to classify funds as ECD-related or not. Similarly, projects with descriptions of 4 words or less were excluded.

Funding reported to OECD's CRS as humanitarian aid was excluded, to prevent double-counting with the funds reported to OCHA's FTS

These data sources above do not include household spending or spending by recipient countries on early childhood development in crisis areas.

Who is paying for ECD in Humanitarian Funding?

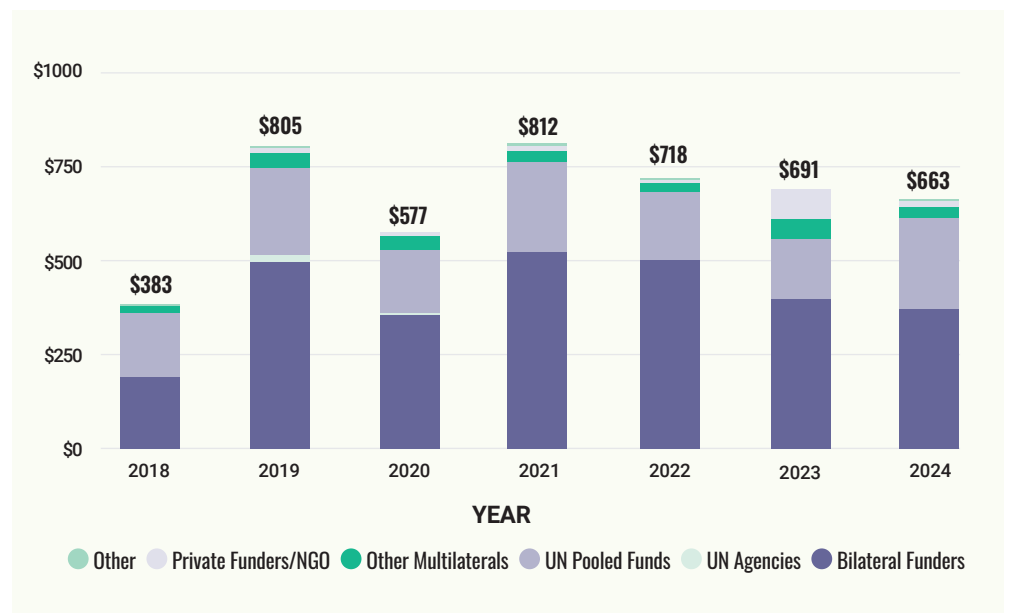
Humanitarian funding for ECDiE has fluctuated considerably between 2018 and 2024.

Overall allocations ranged from \$383 million in 2018 to a peak of \$812 million in 2021, before declining to \$663 million in 2024. Funding for ECDiE nearly doubled between 2018 and 2019, largely due to sharp increases in contributions from national governments and UN pooled funds. This upward momentum carried through to 2021, which marked the highest year of support.

After 2021, however, funding contracted and fell steadily by an average of nearly 6.5 percent per year. By 2024, allocations had stabilized somewhat at \$663 million, but remained well below the peak levels seen earlier in the period.

Across all years, bilateral donors consistently provided the largest share of humanitarian ECDiE funding, forming the foundation of the resource envelope. UN pooled funds served as the second-largest channel and were particularly important in years of high overall funding, such as 2019, 2021, and 2024. Contributions from private funders, NGOs, and other multilateral donors were comparatively modest, though they increased noticeably in 2023. Meanwhile, UN agencies and “other” sources remained marginal throughout the period. These figures do not capture domestic government spending within their own borders, meaning the estimates presented here reflect only international humanitarian and development assistance.

Humanitarian Funding for ECDiE by Donor Channel, USD\$ Millions



In 2023, the largest contributors to ECD in emergencies the United States (\$224 million or over 32 percent of all ECDiE funding), the United Kingdom, and Japan, alongside key pooled funds such as the Central Emergency Response Fund and the European Commission. While bilateral donors accounted for the majority of funding, multilateral mechanisms and private funders also played a significant role, often with higher shares of their portfolios directed to ECDiE.

For example, South Sudan’s Humanitarian Fund allocated nearly 30 percent of its resources to ECDiE, and private groups such the Disasters Emergency Committee also contributed 24 percent of its humanitarian portfolio to ECD. Donors such as Norway and Switzerland have increased their contributions to ECDiE considerably in the two years between 2021 and 2023, as well as Multilaterals such as Education Cannot Wait Fund and several National Committees of UNICEF.

Top Humanitarian Donors in 2023 by Investment in ECDiE

Bilateral Donors	UN Pooled Funds and Multilaterals	Private Donors /NGOs
United States (\$224 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 24% Share to ECD 2023: 4.9%	Central Emergency Response Fund (\$48 million) Change from 2021: ↓ 39% Share to ECD 2023: 6.9%	Disasters Emergency Committee (\$14 million) Change from 2021: NA Share to ECD 2023: 24%
United Kingdom (\$31 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 29% Share to ECD 2023: 4.4%	European Commission (\$41 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 86% Share to ECD 2023: 6.4%	United States Fund for UNICEF (\$9 million) Change from 2021: NA Share to ECD 2023: 17%
Japan (\$29 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 103% Share to ECD 2023: 2.7%	Sudan Humanitarian Fund (\$27 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 218% Share to ECD 2023: 50%	GAVI Alliance (\$9 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 5% Share to ECD 2023: 8.6%
Canada (\$19 million) Change from 2021: ↓ 51% Share to ECD 2023: 5.7%	Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund (\$23 million) Change from 2021: ↓ 3% Share to ECD 2023: 21%	UNICEF National Committee Japan (\$5 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 164179% Share to ECD 2023: 16%
Norway (\$18 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 110% Share to ECD 2023: 3.4%	Yemen Humanitarian Fund (\$17 million) Change from 2021: ↓ 44% Share to ECD 2023: 25%	Qatar Charity (\$5 million) Change from 2021: NA Share to ECD 2023: 9.3%
Switzerland (\$14 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 409% Share to ECD 2023: 6.3%	South Sudan Humanitarian Fund (\$15 million) Change from 2021: ↓ 42% Share to ECD 2023: 29%	Private individuals & organizations (\$5 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 170% Share to ECD 2023: 2.2%
Germany (\$12 million) Change from 2021: ↓ 50% Share to ECD 2023: 1.4%	Education Cannot Wait Fund (\$9 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 5276% Share to ECD 2023: 7.3%	Mohamad Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation (\$4 million) Change from 2021: NA Share to ECD 2023: 32%
France (\$12 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 61% Share to ECD 2023: 6.9%	Occupied Palestinian Territory Humanitarian Fund (\$7 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 154% Share to ECD 2023: 13%	UNICEF National Committee Switzerland (\$3 million) Change from 2021: NA Share to ECD 2023: 26%
Sweden (\$12 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 76% Share to ECD 2023: 10.4%	Central African Republic Humanitarian Fund (\$6 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 62% Share to ECD 2023: 37%	Radiohjälpen (Radio Aid Sweden) (\$3 million) Change from 2021: NA Share to ECD 2023: 100%
Australia (\$6 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 194% Share to ECD 2023: 3.3%	The Commonwealth (\$5 million) Change from 2021: NA Share to ECD 2023: 100%	UNICEF National Committee Germany (\$3 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 635% Share to ECD 2023: 6.5%



Sustained, coordinated advocacy is needed to reinforce that emergencies are a critical window of opportunity for young children — if missed, the losses cannot be regained. Messaging must shift from ‘optional’ to ‘non-negotiable’.

EXPERT FROM A DONOR ORGANIZATION

Cuts to U.S. Foreign Assistance

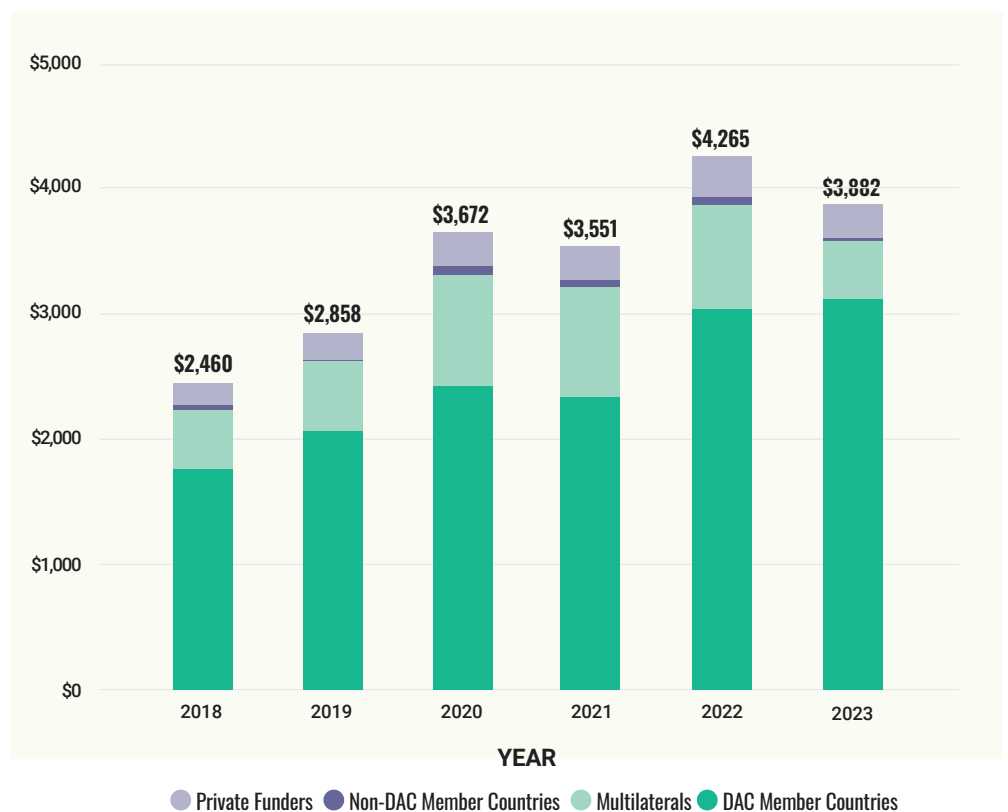
The United States is especially consequential, both as the largest bilateral donor to ECDiE in 2023, contributing nearly \$1,804 million across development and humanitarian funding, comprising over 39 percent of total ECDiE funding from both funding sources, and as one of the governments planning the most severe reductions.

Who is paying for ECD in Development Funding?

Development funding for ECDiE has grown steadily over the past six years, rising from \$2.5 billion in 2018 to nearly \$3.9 billion in 2023. The majority of this support consistently came from Development Assistance Committee (DAC) member countries (69 percent), though multilaterals also represented a significant and growing share. Contributions from non-DAC countries and private funders remained relatively small (9 percent combined), even as total funding increased. While the overall upward trend is encouraging, the concentration of funding in a narrow set of channels highlights the ongoing need to diversify and expand the base of support for ECDiE.

This is especially salient given the recent wave of donor announcements particularly troubling. As of June 2025, Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States had all confirmed cuts to official development assistance (ODA), which are expected to impact at least the years of 2025 – 2027 (OECD 2025).

Development Funding for ECDiE by Donor Channel, USD\$ Millions



In 2023, the largest development donors to ECD in crisis-affected countries were the United States (\$1,580 million), Germany (\$286 million), and Japan (\$258 million), with the United Kingdom, EU institutions, Canada, France, Sweden, Norway, and Korea also contributing significant amounts. Among multilateral donors, the World Bank’s International Development Association (\$265 million) was by far the largest source, while UNICEF also directed a notable share of its portfolios to investments for young children in countries with humanitarian crises (25 percent).

Considerable resources also came from private funders such as the Gates Foundation (13 percent of its reported portfolio), the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation (41 percent), and the Helmsley Charitable Trust (31 percent) with higher proportions of their giving going to ECD compared to bilateral and multilateral donors (see next table).

Top Development Donors in 2023 by Investment in ECD in Crisis-Affected Countries

Bilateral Donors	Multilateral Donors	Private Donors/NGOs
United States (\$1,580 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 53% Share to ECD 2023: 8.2%	International Development Association (\$265 million) Change from 2021: ↓ 9% Share to ECD 2023: 1.8%	Gates Foundation (\$194 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 42% Share to ECD 2023: 13%
Germany (\$286million) Change from 2021: ↑ 10% Share to ECD 2023: 1.9%	Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (\$66 million) Change from 2021: ↓ 74% Share to ECD 2023: 4.8%	Conrad N. Hilton Foundation (\$32 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 52% Share to ECD 2023: 41%
Japan (\$258 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 169% Share to ECD 2023: 3.7%	Global Fund (\$60 million) Change from 2021: ↓ 77% Share to ECD 2023: 1.8%	Helmsley Charitable Trust (\$17 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 618% Share to ECD 2023: 31%
United Kingdom (\$194 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 85% Share to ECD 2023: 3.9%	UNICEF (\$35 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 14% Share to ECD 2023: 25%	Wellcome Trust (\$15 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 259% Share to ECD 2023: 7.4%
EU Institutions (\$145 million) Change from 2021: ↓ 8% Share to ECD 2023: 2.0%	Inter-American Development Bank (\$15 million) Change from 2021: ↓ 19% Share to ECD 2023: 1.9%	UBS Optimus Foundation (\$5 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 351 Share to ECD 2023: 9.4%
Canada (\$138 million) Change from 2021: ↓ 39% Share to ECD 2023: 4.9%	Asian Development Bank (\$13 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 653% Share to ECD 2023: 0.8%	Margaret A. Cargill Foundation (\$3 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 10% Share to ECD 2023: 81%
France (\$92 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 34% Share to ECD 2023: 2.3%	World Food Program (\$9 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 40% Share to ECD 2023: 40%	Children's Investment Fund Foundation (\$3 million) Change from 2021: ↓ 34% Share to ECD 2023: 2.5%
Sweden (\$72 million) Change from 2021: ↓ 60% Share to ECD 2023: 5.2%	African Development Fund (\$2 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 547% Share to ECD 2023: 0.2%	Howard G. Buffet Foundation (\$2 million) Change from 2021: NA Share to ECD 2023: 0.4%
Norway (\$63 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 72% Share to ECD 2023: 4.1%		Van Leer Foundation (\$1 million) Change from 2021: ↓ 49% Share to ECD 2023: 29%
Korea (\$44 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 31% Share to ECD 2023: 3.8%		La Caixa Banking Foundation (\$1 million) Change from 2021: ↑ 1,413% Share to ECD 2023: 11%

Experts expressed uncertainty about how other donors, and especially private foundations might respond to the announced ODA cuts. Some noted that while multilaterals could play a role in offsetting reduced bilateral commitments, there was little evidence of clear plans or sufficient scale to fill the gap. Similarly, though private actors and foundations are increasingly engaged in ECDiE, their contributions have historically been modest and fragmented, raising doubts about their capacity to fill significant gaps.



The Ministry of Health’s budget only covers vaccinations and child insurance, leaving other crucial ECD programs like Integrated Management of Newborn and Child Health illnesses, parenting programs, and early detection of developmental delays unfunded.

[RECIPIENT COUNTRY OFFICIAL](#)

Where Do These Funds Flow?

In 2023, ECD funding in crisis-affected countries was concentrated in a handful of contexts. The Democratic Republic of the Congo was the largest recipient, reflecting both the scale of need and sustained donor engagement over recent years. Other major recipients included Bangladesh, Nigeria, Syria, and Tanzania, which together accounted for 24 percent of overall resources.

Top Recipient Countries for ECDiE in 2023

Humanitarian Funding	Development Funding in Crisis-affected Countries
Bangladesh (\$205 million)	Democratic Republic of the Congo (\$332 million) Years with response plan: 2018-2023
Syrian Arab Republic (\$176 million)	Nigeria (\$270 million) Years with response plan: 2018-2023
South Sudan (\$95 million)	Tanzania (\$266 million) Years with response plan: 2020-2023
Sudan (\$94 million)	Mozambique (\$198 million) Years with response plan: 2019-2023
Nigeria (\$27 million)	Ethiopia (\$193 million) Years with response plan: 2018-2023
Yemen (\$20 million)	Kenya (\$171 million) Years with response plan: 2020-2023
Burkina Faso (\$15 million)	Ecuador (\$168 million) Years with response plan: 2019-2023
Occupied Palestinian Territory (\$11 million)	Zambia (\$143 million) Years with response plan: 2020-2023
Democratic Republic of the Congo (\$6 million)	Pakistan (\$142 million) Years with response plan: 2018-2023
Central African Republic (\$6 million)	Uganda (\$140 million) Years with response plan: 2020-2023



Child survival will be protected. Wider components like early learning, mental health, and play spaces will very much doubtfully receive urgent prioritization. The ‘thrive’ component will likely suffer.

EXPERT OPINION

In Which Sectors are ECDiE Funds Invested?

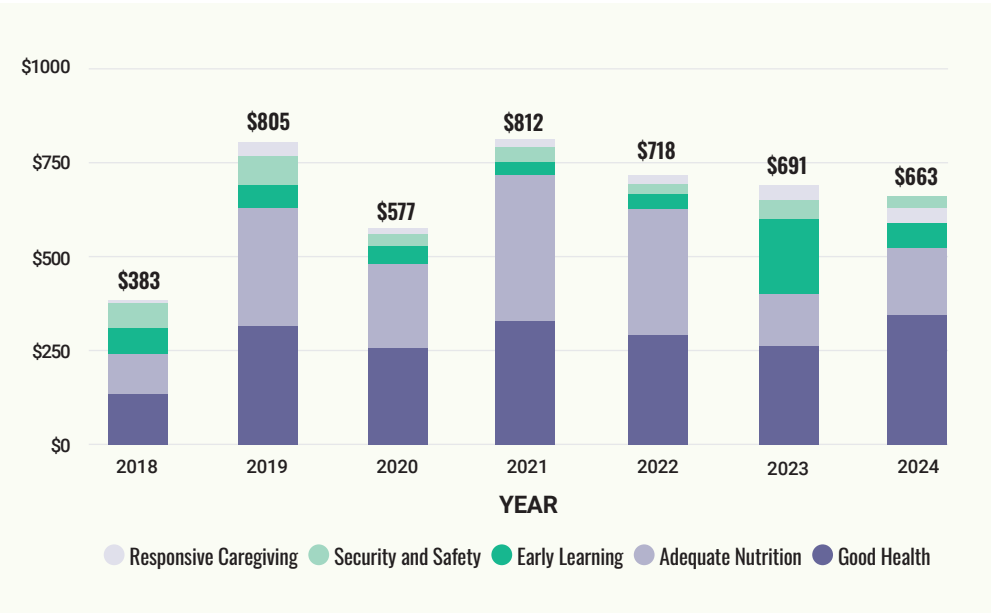
Humanitarian funding for ECDiE is highly unbalanced. Early childhood services were categorized by the following types of interventions that align with the widely accepted, holistic definition developed under the Nurturing Care Framework (WHO et al. 2018):

- **Health services** (e.g., maternal, newborn and child healthcare and hygiene);
- **Nutrition services** (e.g., exclusive breastfeeding, healthy eating);
- **Protection interventions** (e.g., birth registration, protection from violence);
- **Responsive caregiving support** (e.g., coaching caregivers on child development and caregiver responsiveness, caregiver mental health support); and
- **Early learning opportunities** (e.g., pre-school, childcare provision, learning through play).

Humanitarian funding for ECD services remains heavily concentrated in the health and nutrition domains of the Nurturing Care Framework. **Between 2018 and 2024, the bulk of resources (77 percent) consistently went to good health and adequate nutrition.**

By contrast, responsive caregiving, early learning, and child protection/security received only a fraction of overall support. For example, **responsive caregiving represented just 3.6 percent** of humanitarian ECD funding between 2018 and 2024 annually, with levels trending upwards in the past three years. **Early learning was nearly twelve percent of ECD in humanitarian settings annually** in the same time period. Because domestic budgets rarely cover these areas, they remain almost entirely dependent on external donor contributions.

Humanitarian Funding for ECDiE by Nurturing Care Framework Component, USD\$ Millions



Interviews with stakeholders in recipient countries suggested that cuts or stagnation in external support are likely to translate into reduced coverage and narrowing of services. Respondents noted that while governments may protect certain core health interventions, other ECD components, such as caregiver support and well-being, early learning through play, and psychosocial care, are particularly vulnerable to funding shortfalls. Officials also emphasized that domestic budgets are already under strain, leaving little flexibility to compensate for gaps left by donors.

Experts noted that **ECDiE is more likely to be funded when integrated into existing domestic health, nutrition, or protection programs, rather than treated as a stand-alone priority.** This cross-sectoral positioning may determine whether responsive caregiving, psychosocial support, and early learning are protected or left unfunded in the years ahead.



In a context of limited resources, ECD is often at risk of being deprioritized compared to sectors considered vital in the short term (health, food security, refugee management.)

RECIPIENT COUNTRY OFFICIAL

Shrinking Resources, Growing Needs

Total global development and humanitarian funding started to decrease in 2024 from a historic high-water mark 2023 and in 2025, the global community is experiencing unprecedented funding cuts internationally for development and humanitarian assistance. Based on recent budget announcements and a member survey, OECD has suggested **that by 2027, ODA could be nearly 30 percent lower compared to 2023 levels** (OECD 2025).

This deepens the strain on an aid system that is already stretched beyond its limits. Humanitarian appeals are already falling far short of needs: in 2024 only 42 cents of every dollar requested through humanitarian appeals was funded (OCHA 2024; Strucke and Cohen 2025). In 2025, the United Nations projected that 305 million people will require humanitarian assistance, including nearly 1 in 5 children (or 400 million children worldwide) who are living in or fleeing conflict zones (OCHA 2024).

For early childhood development in emergencies, the implications are stark. Even if ECDiE maintains its small share of total aid, **a projected 30 percent decline in overall humanitarian and development assistance would mean \$1.8 billion fewer dollars for young children in crisis settings in just two years—2026 and 2027—compared to 2024.**

That translates into significantly less funding for essential services like nutrition, caregiver support, and early learning. **Yet evidence shows that high-impact ECD programs can be delivered for under \$100 per child per year, making this high-return window in a child's life a profound missed opportunity for cost-effective impact.**

A Call To Protect The Youngest in Crisis

This analysis highlights both the importance and the fragility of current ECDiE financing historically. The share of aid that protects and nurtures the youngest children has remained consistently limited, even as global crises expand and the needs of families grow.

Looking ahead, **business as usual is not an option.** Without targeted and sustained investment, millions of young children in crisis will lose access to the nutrition, protection, caregiving, and early learning services that shape their lifelong outcomes.

Now is the moment to shift from fragmented external support to strategic, country-owned systems. Domestic public finance, local champions, and regional collaboration must become central pillars of the ECDiE agenda. That means equipping ministries, municipalities, and community actors with the tools, and the political will, to invest in ECD as part of crisis response, resilience, and recovery.

Although the momentum for ECD is growing, fueled by health workers, midwives, educators, and parents, it remains fragile. Without sustained and predictable resources from both domestic and external sources, recent gains may stall or reverse.

Protecting these funds is both a moral imperative and one of the most cost-effective ways to ensure resilience, recovery, and long-term human capital in communities facing crisis.

Prepared by Causal Design for



About Moving Minds Alliance

Moving Minds Alliance is a multi-stakeholder alliance advocating for early childhood development in every crisis response, leveraging the strengths of diverse actors from the local to the global.

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Limitations in This Study

This analysis is based on data reported by donors to the UN OCHA Financial Tracking Service and the OECD Creditor Reporting System. Because reporting is voluntary and project descriptions are often very short, the information available is incomplete and sometimes ambiguous. While our methodology uses advanced tools to capture patterns and meaning from these descriptions, it cannot detect details that are not reported. To mitigate the impact of incomplete descriptions, we excluded descriptions of four words or less from our analysis.

The analysis is also limited to international aid flows. Domestic government spending, private philanthropy, household contributions, and other funding sources are not systematically included, which means actual investment in ECDiE may be higher than shown here. Finally, when projects cover multiple sectors, it is not always possible to isolate the exact share of funding that goes to early childhood development.

Despite these limitations, the findings provide the clearest available picture of how much funding reaches young children in crisis, and where the gaps remain.