

UNICEF Australia Pre-Budget Submission for the 2020-21 Budget 24 August 2020

UNICEF Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a short Pre-Budget Submission for the 2020-21 Budget.

About UNICEF

UNICEF is a multilateral organisation that works in over 190 countries to promote and protect the rights of children. UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, clean water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, abuse and HIV. UNICEF is unique among world organisations for our rights based and participatory approach to working with children and young people. UNICEF Australia is a national committee of UNICEF which advocates for the rights of all children and works to improve public and government support for child rights and international development.

Four key budget priorities for child and youth wellbeing

UNICEF Australia believes in a fair chance for every child.

As advocates for the rights and wellbeing of children and young people in Australia and the Asia Pacific region, UNICEF Australia wishes to highlight four critical areas for consideration in planning Federal budget expenditure.

Considering the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF Australia believes strong investment in the following areas is in the best interests of children and young people for both recovery and long-term stability.

1. Increase access to Early Childhood Education and Care

More than 85 per cent of a child's brain development occurs within the first five years of life. Despite a comparatively high standard of living in Australia, one in five Australian children is starting school with developmental vulnerabilities. Improving access to quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is key to addressing this problem.

Access to quality and affordable ECEC for all children delivers benefits for a child's health, development, educational attainment, and lifetime earnings.

There are clear productivity gains to be made including through boosting parents' workforce participation. A 2019 study by the Front Project and PWC calculated participation of children in quality, early learning delivers a return on investment of 2:1, an ROI that can be increased through increasing participation. This research also identified \$4.74 billion in benefits associated with children attending just one year of preschool or kindergarten.

UNICEF Australia recommends the following measures to increase the participation in quality early education and care, especially for disadvantaged families:

- Increase affordability and access to early learning by lifting the taper rate for low income households from 85% to 95% and removing the activity test for families
- Provide free early learning to families with a healthcare card
- Simplify access to Additional Child Care Subsidy benefits for children at risk
- Transition to provision of two days of free preschool/kindergarten for children aged three and four years old

2. Protect Australia's children from poverty

In Australia, poverty affects children more than any other age group, including those aged 65 years and over. The most recent available data shows that living in poverty was a reality for one in six (17.3%) Australian children aged 0-14 years (739,000 children in 2015-16).

Australian children who experience childhood poverty are at greater risk of poorer outcomes in adulthood.

The economic pressures caused by the pandemic have put Australian families under greater strain than ever before, particularly as a result of employment losses and uncertainty. One in five families¹ has a parent receiving Government financial support, including JobSeeker and Single Parent Payments.

UNICEF Australia recommends measures to protect Australian children from poverty and support vulnerable families by:

- A permanent and adequate increase to JobSeeker, Youth Allowance and related payments (such as the Parenting Payment) to ensure families can afford the basic cost of living. This includes single parents, who need a Single Parent Supplement to cover their additional costs, as well as restoration of wage indexation to the Family Tax Benefit.

These measures would afford disadvantaged Australian families with access to safe and stable housing; nutritious food; educational supports; health care and medical supports; mental health and emotional wellbeing supports for children and caregivers; and family environments that have reduced levels of financial stress.

3. Youth unemployment

More than 16 per cent of young Australians are unemployed. This is an increase of almost five per cent since Q1, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to see this figure rise.

Reducing this figure and helping young Australians to realise their potential will require a sustained effort, including strong investment in creating employment opportunities and pathways for young people.

UNICEF Australia recommends the following spending for youth employment initiatives:

- Invest in a national program for mobilising and unlocking the capacity of our young people by providing them with opportunity and purpose, as well as supporting the wider economic recovery. This national program would:
 - i. Strengthen the pathways towards skill development and job readiness
 - ii. Turbocharge job creation and entrepreneurship

¹ [Senate Committee on COVID-19 Answers to Questions on Notice #269](#) published on 19 August

- iii. Foster and incentivise connections between employers and young people. Create workplace-based opportunities and mentoring to develop the knowledge, networks, skills, experience and confidence they need to succeed in the workforce and contribute to the national recovery effort.
- iv. Provide a minimum viable safety net
- Establish a working group on youth employment and economic recovery, comprised of the private sector, government, community sector, and young people which would be responsible for creating new opportunities for school and university leavers facing the toughest labour market for decades. The group would be tasked to identify good practice and programs that work, identify gaps in existing programs and supports, whilst thinking up new ways to empower and support young Australians to enter the workforce. This would be an opportunity to re-image our education and training systems and create new pathways into employment so we can unleash the full potential of Australia's young people and in ways that turbo charges our economic recovery.

4. Protecting children and Australia's interests through international aid and development policy

Strengthening support for vulnerable children in the Asia Pacific region is vital to Australia's health security. Australia has a critical role to play in assisting our neighbouring countries to contain and suppress the pandemic while working to strengthen health systems.

UNICEF Australia:

1. Endorses the recommendations made by the Australian Council for International Development in its [budget submission](#)
2. Encourages an international development policy framework that:
 - a. makes substantial social capital investments to assist states to build healthier and better educated populations, and to address the challenges which flow from poverty and inequality
 - b. Prioritises children and young people in the International Development Policy, recognising that investment in the early years and in the emerging capacities of adolescents represents good value for money and contributes to sustainable futures and nation building.
 - c. Brings strong leadership and a focus on results in achieving gender equality, the empowerment of women and girls, and disability inclusion.
 - d. Ensures that the International Development Policy is responding to the challenge of climate change and environmental degradation in a way which effectively mitigates the worsening impacts and builds resilience to withstand future shocks.
 - e. Involves children in relevant planning and decision-making to enhance the accountability and effectiveness of Australian development and humanitarian assistance.
 - f. Works with partners to build public understanding of, and support for, the development program.
3. Stresses the importance of the following measures to End COVID for All, noting that funding should be **additional** to existing ODA commitments:

Protect the world's most vulnerable

- Contribute our fair share of global humanitarian funding and increase support to crisis areas.

- Prevent a second crisis of communicable disease outbreak – like malaria, ebola and polio – by increasing our investment in global health programs.
- Fund equitable and timely access to a COVID-19 vaccine.

Strengthen Health Systems

- Provide testing kits, PPE, information campaigns, and medical equipment.
- Ensure health care is made accessible and inclusive to people with disabilities and other marginalised groups.
- Continue supporting ongoing health programs that are critical and cannot stop – including water projects, maternal and child health and sexual and reproductive health.

Kick start economic recovery

- Lead the safe, staged resumption of regional economic ties including increased support for Pacific workers in Australia.
- Provide low-cost loans for the Pacific to finance vital health infrastructure and kick-start economic recovery.
- Secure an immediate halt on debt interest payments for developing countries.

UNICEF Australia appreciates that this is a time of intense financial strain for the Government and many thousands of Australians. It is for this reason that we have highlighted essential spending to support our most vulnerable in Australia and our near neighbouring countries. We believe this spending is critical in supporting younger generations through this crisis and equipping them to successfully manage the unprecedented challenges that lie ahead.

Contact information

Oliver White, Head of Government Relations
UNICEF Australia
Email: owhite@unicef.org.au