ChildFund Alliance World Index 2026

SAFE ENOUGH TO HAVE A FUTURE

The Gap Between Protection On Paper And The Safety Children Live Every Day

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





Report summary

An analysis that brings together a structural ranking of 134 countries and the voices of more than 3,000 children across 27 countries.

AT A GLANCE

- **THE CENTRAL MESSAGE:** children's safety cannot be assessed only by asking whether laws, services or institutions exist; it must be assessed by asking whether children can reach them, trust them and believe they can receive help when it matters.
- **TRUST DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY BECOME PERCEIVED ACCESS TO HELP:** more than one in five children who find it very easy to talk to a trusted adult still do not feel able to obtain support in a crisis.
- **CHILDREN IDENTIFY SAFETY THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS AND ROUTES:** home is cited as the safest place by 74%, family by 54% and school by 45%, yet roads and home-to-school journeys repeatedly emerge as unsafe spaces.
- **DISADVANTAGE COMPOUNDS ACROSS GENDER, DISABILITY AND AGE:** the most consistently disadvantaged profile is a younger girl with a disability, showing how protection gaps accumulate rather than appear in isolation.
- **134 COUNTRIES, 30 INDICATORS, THREE SUB-INDICES:** the World Index shows that rights implementation is improving, but too slowly and unevenly, with the global average rising from 60.7 in 2015 to 65.1 in 2026.
- **ONE IN THREE CHILDREN WORLDWIDE** — 2.5 billion — live in countries where women's and children's rights are implemented only at a limited or minimal level, alongside around 2.3 billion women.
- **PROGRESS IS MEASURABLE BUT FRAGILE:** access to information improved sharply (+29%), while conflict, democratic quality and environmental conditions either deteriorated or stagnated.
- **WOMEN'S RIGHTS REMAIN THE WEAKEST STRUCTURAL AREA:** Women's Education is the lowest-scoring dimension of the Index at 37.3, while current trends would take 173 years to eliminate the measured forms of gender-based violence.
- **POLYCRISIS NARROWS CHILDREN'S SENSE OF THE FUTURE:** climate shocks, conflict, violence and economic insecurity are experienced through daily disruptions to mobility, school, health, play and emotional wellbeing.
- **THE POLICY IMPLICATION IS PRACTICAL:** strengthen the pathways that connect children's trust to real response — referral systems, frontline capacity, local actors, schools and services that keep working under pressure.

1. Who Childfund Alliance Is, And Why This Research

ChildFund Alliance is a global network of child-focused organisations working across more than 60 countries. Its mandate, set out in the FY2026–2030 strategic framework, rests on three interconnected pillars: ending violence against children; child-sensitive humanitarian action; and child rights in a changing climate. Across all three, the Alliance prioritises the systems that shape children's everyday environments — families, schools, communities and institutions — and treats children not only as recipients of protection, but as contributors to knowledge about the things that affect them.

The World Index is the instrument through which the Alliance measures, year on year, the implementation of women's and children's rights around the world. The 2026 edition starts from a practical question: **what conditions make it possible for children to experience safety in everyday life?** The answer cannot be limited to the existence of laws, institutions or services. It also requires attention to whether children can recognise, reach and benefit from them in the contexts where they live.

The research is designed to inform policy, programming and advocacy by identifying where protection can be strengthened before risks materialise, and how interventions need to adapt when systems are already under strain. It is therefore not only a descriptive exercise, but an evidence base intended to support more targeted and responsive action.

> *"Parents, teachers, and the government should work together to ensure safe environments for children."*
> — a boy in Tanzania

2. The Right To The Future And The Safety Lens

The report is grounded in the concept of the **right to the future**, introduced by the Alliance in the 2024 edition of the World Index and further developed here. **It is not an abstract aspiration, but the concrete possibility for children to build meaningful life trajectories: to grow up in conditions that support safety, learning and play; to form aspirations; and to have the agency and opportunities to pursue them.** Although not a standalone codified right, the concept rests on a human rights-based approach and on the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This right is not equally available to all. It is shaped by the social, institutional and environmental conditions surrounding children, and it is most constrained for those whose access to protection, participation and resources is already limited.

Safety and protection are not the same thing

The distinction runs through the whole report. **Protection** refers to the systems, institutions, relationships and practices — formal and informal — established to prevent and respond to harm. **Safety** is instead a situated condition: it concerns whether a child is able to live without violence, navigate risks, seek help and exercise agency within the concrete environments and relationships of their everyday life.

The two are connected, but they do not always coincide. A protection system may be formally present while remaining difficult for children to access; at the same time, children may experience safety through trusted relationships that are not visible in formal indicators. Looking at the right to the future through the lens of safety therefore shifts attention from the existence of protection to the conditions that make protection usable in practice.

3. Methodology

The report adopts an integrated approach combining structural and participatory evidence. The two sources describe different dimensions of the same reality: neither, on its own, offers a complete picture.

The three components

- **The World Index.** A composite index comparing 134 countries across 30 indicators, organised into three sub-indices (Context, Children, Women). It measures rights implementation through the legal, institutional and policy conditions of each country.
- **The survey.** A structured questionnaire with 2,344 children and adolescents (aged 8–18) across 27 countries, covering education, play, adult support, exposure to violence, wellbeing and aspirations. It does not produce nationally representative estimates, but identifies patterns in perceptions and reported experiences.
- **The Safety Mapping.** 76 participatory group exercises with 834 children (aged 8–18) across 21 countries. A qualitative and spatial method: children draw maps of their community, identify safe and unsafe spaces, name the actors they see as responsible, and propose solutions.

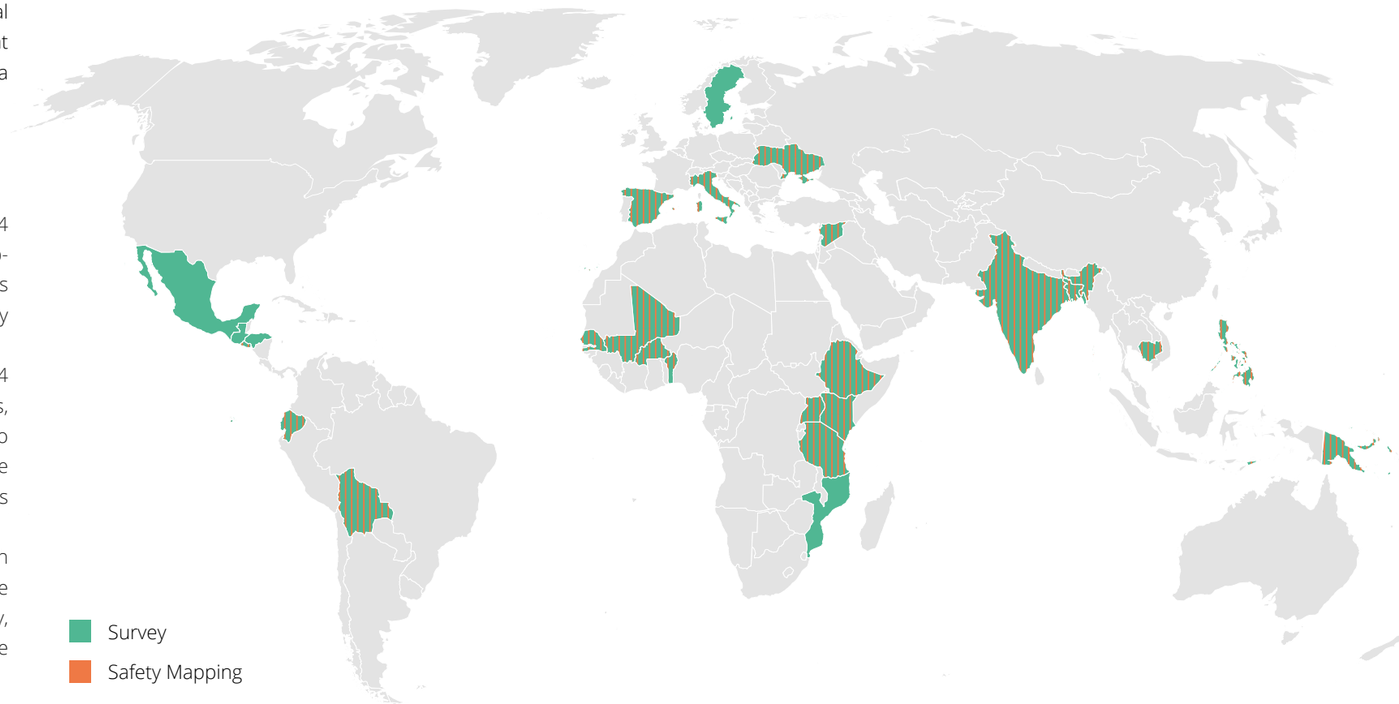
The three sources are read together through triangulation, but they are not interchangeable. In this edition children's lived experience is the entry point of the analysis, while the World Index describes, independently, the structural context of the same countries.

Limitations

Both participatory components were implemented within the Alliance's programme areas and are not statistically representative of national populations: the sample is weighted towards contexts of vulnerability. The World Index, based on secondary data, operates at national level and cannot capture disparities within countries. The aim is not statistical generalisation, but contextualised, programmatically relevant evidence.

Map

Countries involved in the research with children



COUNTRY	ALLIANCE MEMBER RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RESEARCH
Bangladesh	educo
Benin	educo
Bolivia	educo, ChildFund International
Burkina Faso	WeWorld
Cambodia	ChildFund Australia, WeWorld
Ecuador	ChildFund International
El Salvador	educo
Ethiopia	ChildFund International
Guatemala	ChildFund International
Honduras	ChildFund International
India	Children Believe
Italy	WeWorld
Kenya	WeWorld
Mali	WeWorld
Mexico	ChildFund International
Mozambique	WeWorld
Palestine	WeWorld
Papua New Guinea	ChildFund Australia
The Philippines	educo
Senegal	ChildFund International
Spain	educo
Sweden	barnfonden
Syria	WeWorld
Tanzania	WeWorld
Timor-Leste	ChildFund Australia
Uganda	ChildFund International
Ukraine	ChildFund Deutschland, WeWorld

4. Findings

4.1 Where children feel safe, and where they do not

Children tend to describe safety in relational and concrete terms. Home is the most frequently cited safe space (74%), followed by family (54%) and school (45%). However, the significance of these places depends on the relationships and forms of protection available within them. A classroom, for example, is experienced as safe when adults are present, attentive and able to respond.

> *"If the teacher is present, no one can hurt us."* — a girl of 12 in Mali

Figure 1

Where do you usually feel safest? (multiple responses permitted)

PLACE	%
At home or where I live now	74%
With my family (parents, caregivers, relatives)	54%
At school, learning centre, or daycare	45%
With friends	28%
In my community (parks, playgrounds, youth clubs, places of worship)	13%
In a safe space or child-friendly space	8%
While travelling with trusted adults	3%
In shelters, camps, or temporary housing	3%
At places where we get help or supplies	2%
I don't feel safe anywhere right now	1%

For reference: Mali 1.9%, Italy 9.0%, Sweden 3.2%.

The Safety Mapping shows clearly where protection breaks down. **Roads and home-to-school routes** are among the most consistently identified unsafe spaces: traffic, poor lighting, dangerous encounters, and in conflict settings also unexploded ordnance and checkpoints. Children are often protected at their destinations but exposed on the journeys between them — a space for which no single sector is fully responsible.

School emerges as a crucial protective space, especially where other systems are fragile or disrupted: it offers continuity, routine and access to trusted adults. But its protective function depends on the quality of relationships within it, not on the mere presence of a building or rules. Where adults are perceived as attentive and able to respond, the environment is experienced as safer; where they are experienced as distant or punitive, formal protection is not enough to make it so.

> *"A safe place is a place where you feel happy. A place where you are free and no one does bad things to you."*
> — a girl in Tanzania

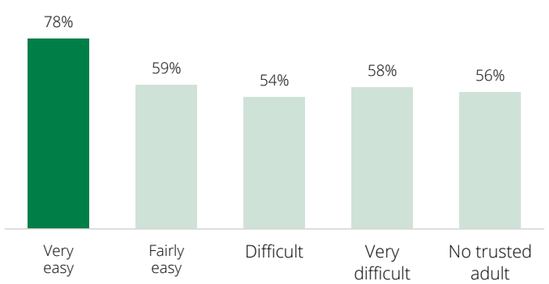
4.2 From trust to help: the missing link is perceived capacity

A central finding of the report concerns the relationship between trust and access to help. Being able to talk to a trusted adult is an important condition for protection, but the data suggest that it does not, by itself, ensure that children believe they could obtain support in a crisis.



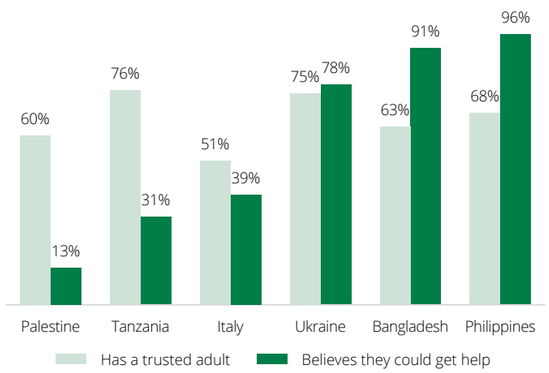
More **than 1 in 5** children who find it **"very easy"** to talk to a trusted adult still **do not believe they could obtain help** in a crisis.

Figure 2
Share of children who believe they could ask for help, by how easy it is to talk to a trusted adult. Beyond a certain threshold, the degree of trust makes little difference: what matters are the pathways connecting trust to a real response.



The decisive factor is often the connection between trusted relationships and functioning systems: accessible services, referral pathways, trained frontline actors and coordination between institutions. Trust can make it easier for a child to disclose a concern or ask for support, but the effectiveness of protection depends on whether that request can move through a response system that is available and able to act.

Figure 3
Trusted adult and perceived capacity to obtain help, selected countries. The two measures do not move together.



> *"The Barangay officials are the ones who will help us improve the things we feel unsafe or uncomfortable about."*
> — a girl of 12 in the Philippines

4.3 The world children live in

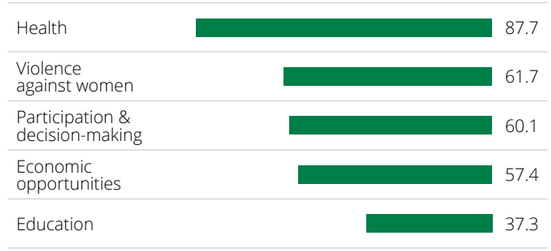
The 2026 edition describes a context in which the implementation of women's and children's rights remains highly uneven. Almost one country in four (23.9%) guarantees only a Limited or Minimal level of implementation. In population terms, this corresponds to a very large share of the world's children and women.



2.5 billion children — one in three worldwide — and around **2.3 billion women live** in countries where **rights implementation is limited or minimal**.

The overall trend points to gradual improvement, but the pattern is uneven across dimensions. The global average rose from 60.7 in 2015 to 65.1 in 2026. Access to information increased markedly (+29%), while conflict and democratic quality have deteriorated and the environmental dimension has remained broadly stagnant. The Women's sub-index continues to be the weakest area, with Women's Education recording the lowest score of the entire Index (37.3).

Figure 4
Women's sub-index 2026, by dimension (0–100). Women's education remains the most critical dimension.





In the case of gender-based violence, projections suggest that reaching **full eradication** of the forms of violence measured by the World Index would take **approximately 173 years** at the current pace of change.

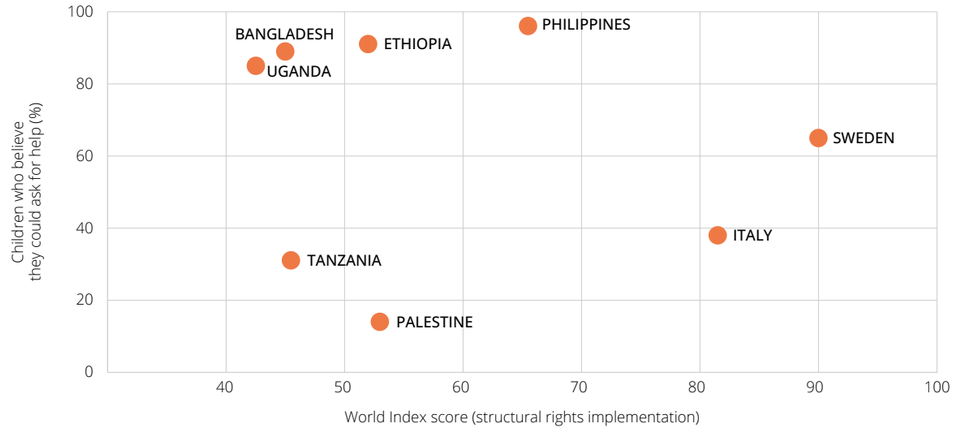

Nitanga Tchandrou Photography

4.4 Structural conditions and lived experience do not coincide

A country's World Index score and its children's perceived capacity to seek help do not move together. Italy scores 81.6/100, yet only 39% of children believe they could ask for help; Bangladesh scores 52.4, yet the share rises to 91%. The Philippines records the highest value in the sample (96%).

These gaps do not indicate that one source is more valid than the other: they show that structural indicators and lived experience measure different aspects of protection. What keeps systems accessible under pressure recurs in three conditions: **institutional continuity** (schools and services that keep functioning through shocks), **local embedding** (actors personally known to children) and **prior legitimacy** (previous experience that those systems actually respond).

Figure 5
World Index score (horizontal axis) and perceived capacity to ask for help (vertical axis), selected countries. No linear correspondence.



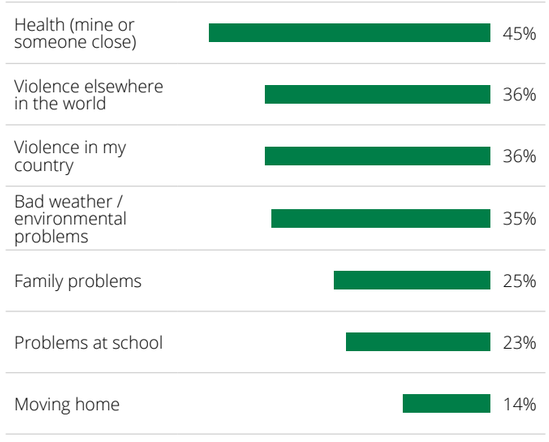
4.5 Living under polycrisis: climate, conflict, emotions

For many children, crisis is not experienced as a temporary interruption of everyday life, but as part of the context in which childhood unfolds. Climate-related events, conflict, social violence, economic insecurity and institutional fragility often overlap and reinforce one another. Climate risks, in particular, are described through their practical effects — floods, extreme heat and impassable roads — which can make safety variable over time: a route may be safe in one season and dangerous in another.

> *"When it floods, we look for high places. There are no safe places to meet."*
> — a child in Ecuador

Asked how they feel about the difficulties they face, children report the most intense emotional burden around health, followed by violence and conflict — including distant conflict, learned through the media — and environmental events.

Figure 6
Share of children reporting they feel "very worried" or "mostly sad or scared", by type of difficulty. Survey, 27 countries.



The Safety Mapping also shows that children's proposed solutions can indicate how much room for change they perceive. Where children suggest structural and civic responses, they appear to see collective action as possible. Where responses are limited to adaptation, avoidance or immediate protection — or where proposals become very narrow — this may signal that the perceived space for future change is contracting.

These indications can appear before similar shifts are visible in conventional indicators, such as school closures.

> *"The subway is a safe place during war."*
> — a boy of 11 in Ukraine

4.6 Compounding disadvantage: gender, disability, generations

Vulnerabilities are not distributed evenly across children. Children with disabilities report higher distress across every risk category, are less likely to have a trusted adult, and rely more heavily on formal institutions when family support is absent. Girls describe a different configuration of risk: they more often restrict their own movement, time their routes by daylight and avoid spaces that feel safe only when accompanied.

Across the data, younger girls with disabilities appear particularly exposed to overlapping disadvantages.

Girls' expectations about their own futures, moreover, are associated with the structural conditions of the women around them more than with child-specific indicators: a sign of the intergenerational dimension of inequality, which links women's present to girls' futures.

4.7 Participation, the future and children's proposals

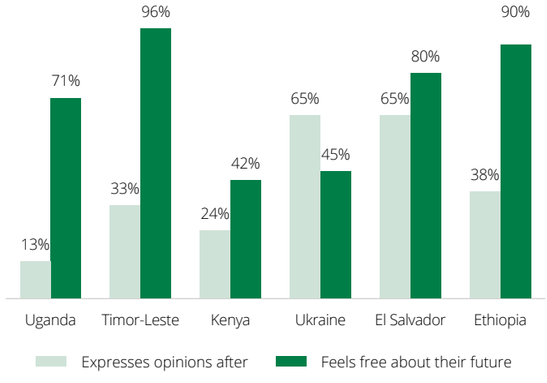
The right to the future is not only a conceptual frame. The research asks children whether, thinking about their future, they feel free to choose what to become: 67% say "yes", 17% "maybe", 10% "no", and a further 1% report that they do not think about their future at all. Small as it is, this last response is the most telling: it signals a relationship to the future that differs both from uncertainty and from perceived constraint.

Participation is one of the pathways through which children develop the sense that their actions matter, but its relationship with future agency is not automatic. 46% report expressing their opinion often, 29% "sometimes", 24% "rarely or never". Across countries, however, how often children speak and their confidence in the future barely move together: what matters is not how often a child speaks, but whether anyone responds.



67% of children feel free to make choices about their own future. Yet the share answering "no" reaches 55% in Kenya and 29% in Burkina Faso; children with disabilities report the lowest agency (in Bangladesh, 14% against 58%).

Figure 7
Expressing an opinion often and feeling free to choose one's own future, selected countries. The two measures do not move together.



The gaps make this clear. In Uganda only 13% express their opinion often, yet 71% feel free to choose their future; in Ukraine the reverse holds (65% against 45%). Frequent participation without response — "extractive" participation — can even reinforce the perception that speaking makes no difference. It is the quality of listening that counts, not its frequency.

> *"I hope that the adults will also listen."*
> — a girl of 10 in the Philippines

In the Safety Mapping, children do not simply name risks: they propose solutions and identify who should act. The type of proposal reveals how much scope for change they perceive. Where they propose **structural and civic change** — community organisation, institutional accountability, youth participation — they continue to see collective action as possible. Where proposals shift towards **adaptation and protection** (fencing canals, safer playgrounds, avoiding going out), they signal adaptation to risks they do not expect to be addressed. Where proposals narrow or disappear, the perceived space for the future contracts.

The type of crisis also shapes the content of proposals: faced with climate pressures, children mainly ask to keep using existing spaces under changing conditions; faced with conflict, they ask for the restoration of basic conditions — safety, freedom of movement, access to school.

> *"Safe environment, safe life."*
> — a girl in Tanzania


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5. Recommendations

The findings suggest that safety should not be understood as a fixed characteristic of a country or a system. It depends on the interaction between structural capacity, trusted relationships and accessible response pathways in children's everyday lives. On this basis, the report identifies six areas for action.

- **STRENGTHEN THE PATHWAYS THAT CONNECT CHILDREN TO HELP.**
  Invest in referral mechanisms, frontline capacity and response systems, so that relationships of trust translate into real protection.

- **MAINTAIN PROTECTION SYSTEMS UNDER CRISIS AND UNCERTAINTY.**
  Ensure continuity of essential services before, during and after emergencies.

- **INTEGRATE CHILD PROTECTION INTO CLIMATE ACTION.**
  Recognise climate-related pressures as drivers of risk and include children's experience in adaptation strategies.

- **STRENGTHEN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF VIOLENCE-PREVENTION LAWS AND POLICIES.**
  So that formal commitments become effective practice.

- **USE CHILDREN'S OWN KNOWLEDGE AS EVIDENCE.**
  Value their identification of risks and protective factors in planning and prevention.

- **ADOPT GENDER- AND GENERATION-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES.**
  Act on the social, educational and institutional conditions that shape girls' futures across generations.

> *"You need to listen to children and not assume they don't have a valid point just because they're younger."*
> — a girl, Italy

Ending violence against children requires more than establishing protection systems: it requires ensuring that children can access, navigate and experience those systems as meaningful sources of safety.


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ChildFund Alliance

ChildFund Alliance is a global network of 11 child-focused development and humanitarian organizations reaching nearly 30 million children and family members in more than 70 countries. Members work to end violence and exploitation against children; provide expertise in emergencies and disasters to ease the harmful impact on children and their communities; and engage children, families and communities to create lasting change.

With more than 80 years of collective experience, our commitment, resources, innovation, and expertise serve as a powerful force to help children and families around the world transform their lives.

MISSION

We work in partnership with children and their communities to create lasting change, and the participation of children themselves is a key component of our approach. Our commitment, resources, innovation, knowledge and expertise serve as a powerful force to transform the lives of children. Annually, our investment in children is more than $500M USD.

ChildFund's **VISION** is for a world in which all children enjoy their rights and achieve their full potential. Our mission focuses on working together with children to create sustainable solutions that protect and advance their rights and well-being. The collective strength of our members helps us serve as a global voice with and for children, to highlight the issues children care about, and to mobilize effectively to address threats to their lives, safety and well-being.