

Global crisis in early years childcare highlighted by report

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The international children's charity Theirworld has painted a devastating picture of the early childhood of most of the world's children.

The charity, which is pledged to “ending the global education crisis and unleashing the potential of the next generation”, began its recent report, *“Act for Early Years—A call for a global movement to support the world's youngest children”*, with the following assessment:

“Around the world, the situation for the youngest members of society and the people who take care of them—parents, carers, nursery teachers, teaching assistants—is worsening and suffering from a lack of investment and interest. There is truly a global crisis in the early years.”

The study collated stark findings on conditions currently facing the world's population under the age of five:

- Malnutrition and stunting impact an estimated 250 million children under five years-of-age, “thwarting their development at a critical moment in their lives” (Ndayizigiye, et al 2022).

- Of the global population of 100 million displaced people, almost 12 million are estimated to be children under the age of five (Moving Minds Alliance, 2022).

- Almost half of all children (250 million) under five years-of-age, in low and middle-income countries, are at risk of not reaching their “development potential” (*The Lancet*, 2016).

- 350 million children below primary-school entry age globally do not have access to needed childcare (World Bank, 2021).

- Over 175 million children globally (almost half of all pre-primary-age children) are not enrolled in pre-school. In low-income countries, the figure rises to four in five (UNICEF, 2019).

- In European countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),

children under the age of three years in low-income households are one-third less likely to be able to participate in early childhood education and care than those in high-income households (OECD, 2020).

- In Cameroon, 69 percent of the richest percentile of three to four-year-olds attend pre-school compared to 2 percent of the poorest. In Malawi, 67 percent of the richest percentile attend pre-school compared to 27 percent of the poorest (World Inequality Database on Education).

- The share of humanitarian aid supporting early childhood development in emergencies is just 2 percent (Moving Minds Alliance, 2020).

The report acknowledges that much of this data has already been superseded by world events—most notably by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic—and social conditions for the world's youngest inhabitants has undergone a drastic deterioration, as the world's governments withdrew from even the modest commitments of former years.

The study does not allude to the stratospheric rises in military spending of these same governments while they eviscerate social programmes for their populations. OECD countries (which in 2017, collectively comprised 42.8 percent of global GDP) spend on average of only 0.7 percent of GDP on early childhood education and care (OECD, 2022); the US and the UK spend less—0.3 percent and 0.5 percent respectively. Even before the recent massive increases in military budgets to wage war against Russia in Ukraine, OECD states spent on average 2.4 percent of their GDP on their military. Central and Western European military budgets have now climbed to a combined \$345 billion; 30 percent higher than a decade ago.

As part of the study, a survey was commissioned by Theirworld, and conducted by Hall + Partners. The survey talked to more than 7,000 parents and carers in the UK,

US, Nigeria, Brazil, Turkey, India and the Netherlands; the countries being chosen to “represent geographically and economically diverse regions.”

The authors describe “a global early years crisis in which children are being deprived of education and care in their most formative years due to the spiralling cost of nursery and preschool fees.”

Unaffordable childcare fees have forced most parents to take on more work, or either reduce or entirely abandon accessing formal childcare.

- Eight in 10 parents in Nigeria (85 percent) have had to make major financial sacrifices in order to afford childcare, along with 82 percent in India, 81 percent in Turkey, 73 percent in Brazil, 66 percent in the US and 65 percent in the UK.

- A rising proportion of parents with children under five are being forced to quit employment or drop out of higher education to avoid paying childcare fees.

- A third of parents in India (33 percent) have had to do so, while in the US, the figure stands at 27 percent; in the UK, 23 percent; in the Netherlands, 22 percent; in Brazil, 17 percent; in Turkey, 16 percent; and in Nigeria, 13 percent.

Parents in the UK face a “tougher struggle” to afford nursery and child-minder fees than those in the Netherlands, US, India, Brazil, Turkey and Nigeria.

- Almost three-quarters of UK parents (74 percent) said they find it difficult to meet childcare costs, compared to 52 percent in India, 57 percent in the Netherlands, 60 percent in Nigeria, 68 percent in the US and Brazil, and 72 percent in Turkey.

This last statistic points directly to the decade of social austerity in which around 1,500 children’s centres—predominantly in the poorest areas of the UK, have closed since 2010. Recent freedom of information requests to local authorities in Birmingham (the UK’s second largest city with a population of over 1 million) show that in 2010 there were 189 council-run children centres, but only 75 remained by 2021.

The cull continues. In January, Kent County Council announced plans to close 35 children’s centres as part of an operation by its Conservative Party leaders to save £6 million this year.

An estimated 43,000 working mothers dropped out of the UK workforce during 2022 to look after family. Net childcare costs represented almost a third of the income of a family on the average UK wage, according to OECD figures, compared to 1 percent in Germany. This is due to the lack of free childcare from ages one to three years.

The OECD found that that Britain had slipped down five places to 14th among wealthy nations on the table of women in work. Some women workers might not even show up in the statistics as economically inactive if they work fewer hours to fill childcare gaps.

Theirworld’s report offers only the most timid prescriptions that would hardly inconvenience the world’s governments. The foreword to the study was written by Theirworld’s current chair, Sarah Brown; the wife of former UK prime minister and chancellor, Gordon Brown. As prime minister during the global financial crisis of 2007-2009, Brown enacted the multi-billion pound bailout of the failing banks. At its peak, the cash cost of these interventions was £137 billion.

Broadly similar measures were implemented by governments in the US and the European Union. In addition to the vast cash subvention to the banks, the Brown government enacted financial guarantees with the aim of restoring confidence which the National Audit Office estimated at over £1 trillion at peak support.

This constituted the then largest redistribution of wealth from the working class to the financial elite in British history. It inaugurated an era of mass austerity carried out by every government since, with Brown’s government announcing that the National Health Service had to find 20 billion in efficiency savings.

Brown was previously chancellor in the Tony Blair’s government and co-architect with him of “New Labour”. They carried out a Thatcherite privatisation binge across whole swathes of society, including education and the early year children’s services.

The household of current Conservative government Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was recently discovered to be directly profiteering from the privatisation of children’s services. Sunak’s wife, heiress and multi-hundred millionaire Akshata Murty, is a shareholder in Koru Kids, which stands to financially benefit from a government policy announced in the last budget.

When the most powerful in society carry out such a merciless assault on the conditions and life chances of society’s most vulnerable members—the very youngest—the social order condemns itself.



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