Rise Up Policy Brief

2026

Building the Investment Case for Ending Child Abuse and Neglect: From Evidence to Financed Action

Executive summary

Governments have legal and moral obligations to protect children, yet child abuse and neglect remain widespread and prevention and response systems persistently underfunded.

One reason for this under-investment is that that the costs of inaction are often less visible than the immediate costs of child protection services. These wider costs are spread across children and families, health and education systems, social welfare and justice services, labour markets, public revenues and future generations.

An investment case makes these consequences visible by bringing together evidence on the scale of child abuse and neglect, the costs of inaction, a credible solution, the resources required and the benefits of investment. This brief explains how investment cases are developed and used to inform policy, advocacy, planning and budgeting, and introduces two new ISPCAN tools for generating indicative estimates of the economic costs of child abuse and neglect and the potential benefits of prevention.

Five key messages:

The costs of inaction are high: Child abuse and neglect cause lifelong harm and impose substantial costs on families, public services, governments and economies.
Investment can deliver substantial returns: Effective prevention and response can protect children, strengthen human capital, improve the value of existing social expenditure and reduce future costs.
Evidence strengthens advocacy: Investment case evidence can help move ending violence against children from political commitment to costed and financed action.
Integrated action produces wider benefits: The benefits of prevention accrue across health, education, justice, child protection, social protection and the wider economy.
The new ISPCAN tools provide an entry point: Indicative estimates of costs and potential benefits can help countries start investment case discussions, identify evidence gaps and build momentum for more comprehensive analysis and advocacy.

The questions we sought to answer

- What is an investment case, and why is it needed to support greater investment in ending child abuse and neglect?
- What evidence and analysis are required to build a credible investment case, and how can investment case evidence be used to influence policy, planning and budget decisions?
- How can countries begin generating indicative evidence and advocacy using the new ISPCAN tools?

A public health approach to child protection

This policy brief addresses the following ISPCAN public health and system-strengthening pillars:

- Data driven and evidence-based solutions
- Funding, a national action plan, capacity building and scaled solutions
- Effective governance and multisectoral coordination

The problem: child abuse and neglect are widespread, costly and underfunded

Child abuse and neglect remain a global crisis - one with significant social and economic costs

More than half the world's children experience some form of violence every year. However, the impacts of child abuse and neglect do not end with the incident itself, often affecting physical and mental health, cognitive development, educational attainment, and future economic opportunities long after exposure. These consequences accumulate across the life-course: neglect in infancy may compromise early development; child abuse may result in toxic stress, and poor health outcomes; and violence in or around school may contribute to absenteeism and dropout. These effects can later reduce labour market participation, earnings and productivity, while increasing the likelihood that violence and disadvantage continue into the next generation.

The consequences also extend beyond individual children and families - governments face greater demands on social services; investments already made in health, education and human development may be undermined; and economies bear losses through poorer health, reduced labour market participation and lower productivity. Economic estimates capture only part of this burden, as pain, suffering, reduced quality of life and intergenerational harm are difficult to value in monetary terms. Yet even partial estimates are substantial: global estimates place the economic cost of violence against children at more than $7 trillion, equivalent to more than 8% of global GDP.

Yet despite the scale of these human and economic costs, investment remains far below what is needed: among 155 countries surveyed, 80 per cent had at least one national action plan to prevent violence against children, but fewer than one in four had fully funded their plans.

Why does under-investment persist?

A chief reason is that the economic consequences of child abuse and neglect, and the benefits of prevention, are often dispersed across sectors and over long periods. A ministry responsible for child protection may bear the immediate cost of expanding services, while many of the benefits accrue later through lower health and justice costs, better educational outcomes, increased productivity and higher public revenues. Responsibility for service delivery is similarly dispersed - prevention and response require action across child protection, health, education, justice, social protection and other sectors, while government plans and budgets are generally developed through separate institutional processes. Weak or incomplete prevalence, service, expenditure and outcome data can make the case for additional resources even more difficult to demonstrate.

This matters particularly in constrained fiscal environments, as child protection competes with many other legitimate demands for limited public resources. Decision-makers therefore need credible evidence not only that a problem exists, but also about what should be done, what it will cost and what can be achieved through investment.

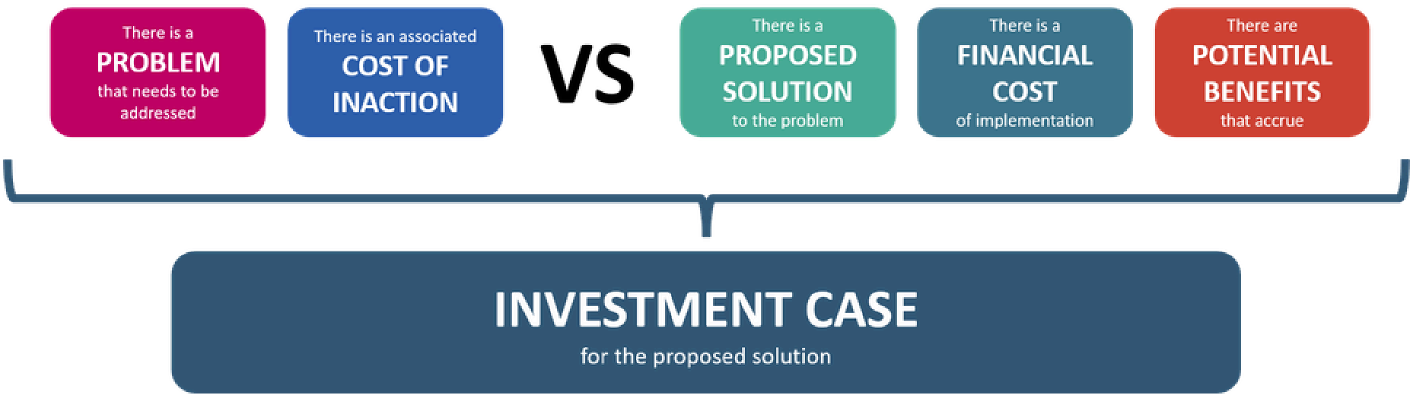
The solution: developing an investment case for ending child abuse and neglect

An investment case brings these different forms of evidence together into a coherent argument for action. It uses economic and other evidence to demonstrate the scale of a problem, identify a credible response, estimate the resources required and assess the benefits that could be generated.

A strong investment case answers five connected questions:

1. **The Problem:** What forms of child abuse and neglect persist, who is most affected, and where are the principal service or system gaps?
2. **The Cost of Inaction:** What are the human, social, fiscal and economic consequences of failing to act?
3. **The Solution:** What evidence-informed interventions, services and system reforms are required?
4. **The Implementation Cost:** What resources are required, over what period, and how affordable is the proposed investment?
5. **The Potential Benefits:** What harm could be prevented, what public costs could be avoided, and what gains in health, education, human capital and wellbeing could be achieved?

The value of the investment case lies in the coherence of the complete argument - the proposed solution must respond to the problem identified; its cost must reflect a realistic implementation plan; and estimates of impact and benefits must be grounded in credible evidence.



Implementation recommendations

1. Establish the mandate and government leadership
Identify the legal and policy commitments, the decision or financing opportunity the investment case should influence, and the government institution responsible for leading the process. Secure a senior political or administrative champion and engage finance and planning authorities from the outset.
Rationale: Investment cases are more influential when they respond to a real policy or budget decision and are owned by government rather than presented as an external research product.

2. Build a cross-government coalition
Development of the investment case should bring together child protection, finance, planning, health, education, justice, social protection and other relevant authorities. Civil society, survivor groups, and implementing partners should also inform the process.
Rationale: Responsibility for preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect is spread across sectors. Developing the investment case together can build consensus around both the problem and the response.

3. Build the evidence base and map the starting point
Assess the nature and prevalence of child abuse and neglect, who is most affected, existing policies and services, system bottlenecks, current budgets and expenditure, and critical evidence gaps.
Rationale: A credible investment case must begin with a clear understanding of the problem, the existing response and where current resources are going. This establishes the baseline against which both needs and future investment can be assessed.

4. Estimate the social and economic costs of inaction
Assess how child abuse and neglect affects children, families, public services and the wider economy. Where data allow, quantify costs through health, education, justice, social welfare, lost productivity, reduced earnings and other relevant pathways.
Rationale: The cost of inaction analysis makes visible consequences that are often dispersed across sectors and over time. It helps decision-makers understand the scale of the loss associated with continued under-investment.

5. Develop realistic implementation and scale-up scenarios
Translate the proposed solution into practical scenarios for implementation. Define who will deliver each component, which population groups will be reached, the pace and scale of expansion, and the institutional and workforce requirements.
Rationale: Scenario development bridges the gap between identifying "what works" and determining what government could realistically implement at scale.

6. Cost the proposed solution and assess affordability
Estimate the financial resources required under each implementation scenario, including personnel, infrastructure, training, operating and other costs. Compare these requirements with current spending, available fiscal space and potential financing gaps.
Rationale: A costed implementation plan turns a policy proposal into a concrete budget request and enables finance ministries to assess affordability and fiscal sustainability.

7. Estimate the impacts, benefits and potential returns
Estimate how implementation could change outcomes, including the number of children reached, cases of abuse and neglect prevented, improvements in health and education, avoided service costs and wider economic benefits. Where appropriate, compare these benefits with implementation costs.
Rationale: Estimating benefits completes the investment logic by showing what additional resources can achieve and the violence prevention dividend that could result from effective investment.

8. Turn the investment case into financed action
Bring the evidence together into a clear advocacy proposition and tailor it to the decisions that different audiences control. Use the findings to influence national and sector plans, medium-term expenditure frameworks and annual budgets, and establish mechanisms to monitor financing, implementation and results.
Rationale: The investment case succeeds when analysis changes decisions. The process should therefore culminate in sustained financing, implementation and accountability rather than publication of a report alone.

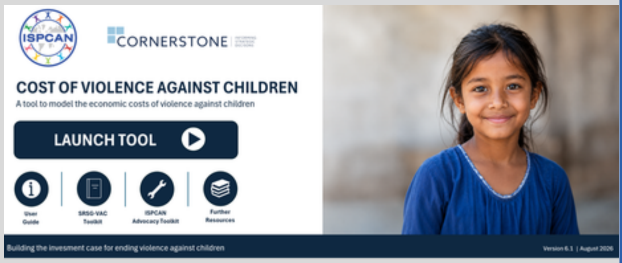
A full investment case - as detailed above - requires substantial country-specific evidence, analysis and government engagement. Two new ISPCAN tools complement this process by providing a rapid, accessible starting point.

Cost of Violence Against Children Tool
Generates indicative estimates of the economic costs associated with child abuse and neglect in a specified country or regional context.

Economic Benefits / Return-on-Investment Tool
Generates indicative estimates of the potential economic benefits of preventing child abuse and neglect in a specified country context.

Use the tools carefully: The tools generate indicative, order-of-magnitude estimates of selected costs and benefits. They are designed to start the investment case conversation, not replace the full investment case process set out in the SRSG-VAC Toolkit (see the page below).

Two new tools to initiate country action



Case study: The investment case for strengthening the child protection social service workforce in Zambia

The investment case for strengthening Zambia's social service workforce illustrates how the different components can combine into a persuasive argument to mobilize investment in child protection. These components are outlined below:

The Problem
Children in Zambia continue to experience various forms of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. A detailed survey of VAC found that 50.3% of boys and 49.0% of girls experienced some form of violence prior to the age of 18 years. Despite the high prevalence of violence against children in Zambia, only 4% of boys and 7% of girls who are victims of violence receive adequate support services, which suggests that child protection services are under-resourced and under-funded.

This is evidenced in the fact that, in 2023, the government employed about 1 437 social workers and community development assistants to work on child protection issue - equivalent to only 17.5 workers per 100 000 children, which is insufficient to address the significant demand for child protection services. In 2023, the government allocated ZMK185 million, or 0.11% of the total government budget, to fund the social service workforce.

The Cost of Inaction
An analysis of the economic costs - combining direct medical costs, direct non-medical costs, indirect costs and intangible costs - associated with the current prevalence of violence against children in Zambia found that these costs amounted to ZMK40.4 billion in 2021, equivalent to 9.12% of GDP in that year.

The Solution
To strengthen the provision of child protection service, it was proposed that the government should increase the size of the social service workforce to around 7 400 workers over an eight-year period, ultimately achieving a worker-to-child ratio of 90 child protection social workers per 100 000 children.

The Cost of the Solution
A dedicated costing model was developed to estimate the size and distribution of the social service workforce, and to cost different scenarios in this regard. At full scale-up, the cost of employing the expanded social service workforce was estimated at ZMK1.7 billion, equivalent to 0.98% of the total government budget.

The Potential Benefits
The potential benefits of improved child protection service coverage were estimated - under the modelled scenario, the annual economic cost of violence fell by ZMK22.7 billion, equivalent to 5.12 per cent of GDP.

The Final Advocacy Message
"For less than 1% of the total budget, government can address a problem that affects 4.1 million children and is costing Zambia 9.12% of GDP"

Results
Based on the evidence generated by the investment case, the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services announced an explicit intention to hire an additional 5 000 social workers in Zambia, in addition to undertaking various further recommendations for improving service delivery.

Building the full case: The SRSG-VAC Investment Case Toolkit

The Zambia investment case applied the structured approach set out on the previous page, and elaborated in full in the SRSG-VAC Investment Case Toolkit. The Toolkit is the go-to guide for countries seeking to develop a full, government-owned investment case, taking users step by step through situation analysis, budget and expenditure review, estimation of the costs of inaction, selection and costing of solutions, estimation of impacts and benefits, and advocacy.

The two new ISPCAN tools introduced on the previous page serve a different but complementary purpose. They provide a plug-and-play entry point, generating indicative estimates of costs and potential benefits that can help start the investment case discussion, identify evidence gaps and build momentum for the more comprehensive country process.

Those seeking to use investment case evidence to secure greater investment in preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect need to approach advocacy strategically. The evidence must engage the right actors, respond to the decisions they control, and connect directly to the planning and budgeting systems through which government resources are allocated.

1. Identify and engage the agents of change

Securing greater investment requires action from actors across government and beyond. Their roles are complementary, and engagement should begin during the development of the investment case rather than only once the analysis has been completed.

Government leaders: Establish the mandate, appoint an accountable lead and champion an integrated response.

Finance, planning and budget ministries: Assess affordability and financing needs, and connect the investment case to plans and budgets.

Sector ministries and local authorities: Translate the proposed response into services, activities, staffing requirements and performance targets.

Civil society, survivors and oversight bodies: Bring lived experience into the process, safeguard rights and equity, build demand and strengthen accountability

Researchers and development partners: Strengthen the evidence base, analytical capacity and implementation support, while aligning assistance with national priorities.

2. Tailor the evidence to the decision and decision-maker

Different actors control different decisions, so the same evidence should not be presented in the same way to every audience:

Audience	Decision to influence	Evidence to lead with
Finance and planning	Whether and how much to fund	Economic and fiscal burden; affordability; financing gaps; phased costs; expected benefits
Sector ministries and local authorities	What to prioritise and how to deliver it	Prevalence; service and workforce gaps; intervention effectiveness; implementation requirements
Political leaders, civil society and the public	Whether to champion and demand action	Rights and commitments; scale of the problem; clear headline costs and benefits; a concrete policy and financing ask

3. Integrate the investment case into public finance management

Advocacy should ultimately extend beyond securing a once-off increase in funding. The stronger objective is to embed prevention and response to child abuse and neglect within the routine systems through which governments set priorities, allocate resources, manage personnel and monitor performance.

National planning: Position preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect as a national development priority, supported by an integrated strategy that is linked to national and sector development plans.

Economic growth strategy: Use evidence on the economic costs of child abuse and neglect to demonstrate how prevention can contribute to human capital development, productivity, poverty reduction and economic growth.

Departmental planning: Encourage relevant ministries and departments to incorporate specific prevention and response activities, outputs and performance targets into their plans, strengthening both visibility and accountability.

Budget reforms: Where programme-based budgeting is used or being introduced, ensure that programme structures make child abuse and neglect prevention and response activities, resource requirements and results clearly identifiable.

Budget formulation: Translate the costed response into the programmes and budget lines of the responsible ministries, clearly identifying how proposed interventions will be implemented and financed and the resources required over the medium term.

Budget approval: Present the costed implementation plan and investment case evidence to finance authorities, cabinet and parliament to support adequate allocations to the programmes responsible for delivery.

Budget execution: Track whether approved resources are released and spent as intended, identify implementation bottlenecks and use evidence on expenditure and delivery to strengthen future budget requests. Comparing budgets with actual expenditure can reveal important constraints in translating allocations into services.

Budget tagging: Where feasible, adapt the Chart of Accounts or related systems so that expenditure on preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect can be identified and tracked across government.

Human resource management: Formalise the definition and composition of the social service workforce, and ensure that relevant ministries and departments have sufficient approved posts to recruit and deploy the personnel needed to prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect.

Conclusion

Children's right to protection from abuse and neglect is not conditional on whether prevention produces a positive financial return. But in constrained fiscal environments, economic evidence can help governments translate that obligation into funded, implementable and accountable action. Investment cases can provide this important additional form of evidence by showing decision-makers the scale of the problem, estimating the magnitude of the consequences of inaction, defining what an effective response requires, demonstrating its affordability and making visible the benefits that investment can generate.

An investment case for ending child abuse and neglect is, therefore, not simply a technical study, but rather a strategic process for building political leadership, cross-sector consensus, and sustained public financing so that commitments to end violence against children are translated into funded, implementable and accountable action.

Data gaps can, however, make it difficult for countries to begin building this evidence base. The new ISPCAN tools provide a practical starting point for addressing this constraint by using available data and transparent assumptions to generate indicative estimates of the economic costs of child abuse and neglect and the potential benefits of prevention.

These estimates are not a substitute for a fully costed national investment case, but they can help initiate the discussion, provide indicative estimates for discussions with key stakeholders, identify the most important evidence gaps and build momentum for more comprehensive country-led analysis made using the established approaches outlined in the SRSG-VAC Investment Case Toolkit.

Further resources

- **The Cost of VAC Tool** can be used to generate indicative estimates of the economic cost of violence against children in various scenarios. *Note: This Tool remains under development - feedback is welcomed.*
- **The Benefits Tool** can be used to generate indicative estimates of the likely benefits of investing in prevention of violence against children in various scenarios. *Note: This Tool remains under development - feedback is welcomed.*
- **The ISPCAN Advocacy Toolkit** is a toolkit to support policy-makers and partners' efforts to build political will and sustainable financing for a public health approach to preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect.
- **The Investment Case Toolkit** was developed for the Office of the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children, and represents the key guiding document for developing fully costed investment case studies for ending violence against children.
- **UNICEF ESARO's Policy Brief** provides a detailed case study of the implementation of the approach from the OSRSG-VAC Toolkit to a child protection investment case study undertaken in Zambia and Kenya
- **The Violence Prevention Dividend** is a policy brief which outlines the logic of the violence prevention dividend and the economic argument for investing in child protection.

This tool was created in consultation with ISPCAN and the policy brief was authored by Simon Halvey, Senior Economist at Cornerstone Economic Research - a South African economic research organization which works at the interface between public finance and services for children, with a specific focus on child protection issues. You can read more about Cornerstone's work here: www.cornerstonesa.net

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This policy brief was prepared for the ISPCAN Rise Up Policy Forum 2026 and draws on the session titled '*Building the investment case for ending violence against children*'.

The ISPCAN Rise Up Policy Forum is a global initiative to catalyse progress in child protection through a public health and system strengthening approach. It brings together governments, researchers and practitioners in a community of practice and learning, to build on and translate into action the pledges made during the 2024 Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children.

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