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ETHIOPIA When Protection Shrinks

How humanitarian funding cuts increase risks for refugee children

A case study developed through collaboration between UNHCR and Nuffield College, University of Oxford

November 2026

Understanding the findings

Funding levels are one of several factors shaping protection outcomes. UNHCR operations and partners respond to resource constraints through prioritization, programme adjustments, partnerships and continued fundraising. These measures can mitigate some of the effects of funding shortfalls. The case study takes these efforts into account while examining what happens when available resources are nevertheless insufficient to maintain child protection capacity and coverage.

The analysis does not assume that funding reductions automatically result in trafficking or other forms of exploitation. Rather, it examines how reduced protection capacity can weaken established safeguards, reduce opportunities to prevent, identify and respond to abuse and compound vulnerabilities known to increase children's exposure to trafficking and exploitation.

The case study applies the Framework of Analysis for Modern Slavery & Human Trafficking: A Tool for Prevention, developed through Nuffield College's work with the Global Commission on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking, to assess how funding-related reductions in protection capacity may increase trafficking vulnerabilities.



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Executive summary

Developed jointly by UNHCR and Nuffield College, University of Oxford, this case study combines operational evidence and independent analysis to support action to protect refugee children from trafficking and other abuses.

As of August 2026, Ethiopia hosts 1,129,183 refugees and asylum-seekers, chiefly from South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan, making it the third-largest refugee-hosting country in Africa. Children represent 52 per cent of the refugee population, underscoring the scale of protection needs among refugee children.[1] Yet, Ethiopia's refugee response is confronting a widening gap between child protection needs and available resources. The case study finds that funding cuts are not simply reducing service delivery; they are weakening the network of protection actors, community structures and referral pathways that help keep refugee children visible and safe.

For refugee children, protection is rarely a single intervention. It may be a frontline staff identifying a child at risk. A caseworker assessing the child's best interests and addressing those risks. A safe space where abuse and violence can be disclosed. Support that helps a family avoid sending a child to work or arranging a child marriage. Alternative care for a child separated from their parents. Documentation that enables access to school. Or assistance to reunite a child safely with family members.

When humanitarian funding contracts, these safeguards can weaken simultaneously and, in some locations, may disappear altogether. The result is not only a reduction in services, but a deterioration of the wider protective environment around refugee children, leaving those already exposed to separation, discrimination, poverty, food insecurity, and unsafe onward movement at greater risk of trafficking and other forms of abuse and exploitation.

These impacts are also gendered. Refugee girls, boys and children with diverse characteristics face different protection risks. In Ethiopia, refugee girls face heightened risks of sexual violence, child marriage, female genital mutilation, and school dropout. Cuts to safe spaces, outreach and case management limit opportunities to disclose abuse and reduce the capacity to identify risks, make referrals and provide follow-up support. While funding cuts do not automatically result in trafficking, the simultaneous weakening of multiple protection safeguards increases risks for refugee children and limits their access to support and opportunities. The findings underscore that child protection is an investment in prevention. Sustained, flexible and predictable funding is essential to reduce vulnerability, prevent trafficking and exploitation, and support pathways to safety, resilience and solutions for refugee children and their families.

Further cuts are likely to compromise UNHCR's ability to identify risks, support vulnerable individuals and provide timely protection interventions. Investment in protection is therefore not only a humanitarian imperative; it is also a cost-effective means of preventing trafficking, exploitation, and other protection harms.

1 UNHCR, Operational Data Portal -Ethiopia, Last updated 31 August 2026.



At a glance:

Refugees and asylum-seekers hosted in Ethiopia

More than
1.1 million (52%)
are children

At least
31,000 Unaccompanied and separated refugee children

USD
14.3 million Child protection funding gap in 2025

Impact of the funding cuts

Best interests procedures: **-33%** decline in coverage between 2025 and 2024

Alternative care for unaccompanied children: **-47%** decline in coverage between 2025 and 2024

Psychosocial support: **-28.6%** decline in coverage between 2025 and 2024

Family strengthening programmes: **-46.7%** decline in coverage between 2025 and 2024

Partnership and methodology



UNHCR and Nuffield College, University of Oxford, jointly developed this case study to examine how reductions in humanitarian funding may weaken protection safeguards and compound vulnerability to human trafficking. The collaboration combines UNHCR's operational evidence, field experience and multidisciplinary protection expertise with Nuffield College's independent academic analysis, methodological rigour and expertise on modern slavery and human trafficking.

UNHCR staff from the Ethiopia country operation, the Regional Bureau for Eastern and Southern Africa and the Division of International Protection and Solutions contributed operational evidence, field knowledge and contextual analysis. Their contributions brought together expertise in legal protection, child protection, community-based protection, gender-based violence, asylum, mixed and onward movements and route-based approaches.

Nuffield College led the research and analysis in close collaboration with UNHCR. The study draws on quantitative and qualitative evidence, relevant literature and stakeholder consultations, operational data, protection analysis and field observations from the Ethiopia operation.

Drawing on Nuffield College's work with the Global Commission on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking, the research applies the Framework of Analysis for Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking: A Tool for Prevention to examine how reduced protection capacity can compound existing trafficking risks for refugees, especially for children. The approach adapts the atrocity prevention framework developed by Adama Dieng, former United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide. The Framework examines how structural, legal, social, economic and protection-related factors interact to shape vulnerability. It is used to assess how funding reductions may weaken established safeguards and compound existing vulnerabilities, without assuming a direct causal relationship between funding cuts and trafficking.

By linking frontline evidence with independent analysis, the collaboration helps identify the protection functions that are most important to preserve when resources are constrained. The findings are intended to inform operational prioritization and support evidence-based engagement with governments, donors, humanitarian partners and other stakeholders.

A global protection gap

Children represent more than 39 per cent of people forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2025. Yet child protection resources have been contracting just as needs have grown.[2]

In 2025, UNHCR child protection programming had declined by 35 per cent globally. Over the year, child protection services reached 1.4 million children and caregivers, representing a 4 per cent decline compared to the previous year.[3] More concerningly, the gap between needs and capacity widened significantly: while UNHCR reached around 65 per cent of its 2.3 million target in 2024, it reached only about 52 per cent of its 2.7 million target in 2025.

The decline comes on top of chronic underfunding. Global UNHCR child protection funding gaps reached 49 per cent in 2022[4] and have widened every year since, to 53 per cent in 2023,[5] about 56 per cent in 2024[6] and 66 per cent in 2025.[7]

Funding shortfalls and challenging operating environments have constrained progress on child protection globally. Reduced funding has forced UNHCR to prioritize and scale back core child protection services, including best interests procedures case management, alternative care for

2 UNHCR, Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2025, 11 June 206 p.3.
3 UNHCR, Global Report 2025, Outcome Area Child Protection, p.3.
4 UNHCR, Global Report 2022, p.141.
5 UNHCR, Global Report 2023, p.109.
6 UNHCR, Global Report 2024, p.181.
7 UNHCR, Global Report 2025, Outcome Area Child Protection, p.3.



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Forcibly displaced children

Children represent more than **39 per cent** of people forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2025.



Widening child protection funding gap

UNHCR's global child protection funding gap widened **from 49 per cent in 2022 to 66 per cent in 2025**, leaving nearly two-thirds of financial requirements unmet.

Detected child trafficking victims



According to UNODC's latest data, **children represented 38 per cent of detected trafficking victims worldwide in 2022**, almost three times their share in 2004, with a particular surge in the number of girls detected.

unaccompanied and separated children and other critical prevention and risk-mitigation efforts that help identify children at risk, reduce their exposure to harm and strengthen safeguards against trafficking.

According to UNODC's latest data, children represented 38 per cent of detected trafficking victims worldwide in 2022, almost three times their share in 2004, with a particular surge in the number of girls detected.[8] Refugee children face heightened trafficking risks, especially unaccompanied and separated children, where child protection services are weak and humanitarian assistance is limited.[9]

These trends matter because child protection is preventive. When case management, family support, community outreach, safe spaces and referral systems weaken, children who are already exposed to displacement, poverty and violence lose layers of protection simultaneously.

8 UNODC, Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024.

9 Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, Siobhán Mullally, Child trafficking in the context of statelessness, migration and forced displacement, A/HRC/62/41, 18 May 2026, paragraphs 8–9.

Ethiopia: a closer look

Ethiopia hosts one of Africa's largest refugee populations, while facing significant capacity, resource, and development challenges of its own. There are more than 1.1 million refugees and asylum-seekers. Some 52 per cent are children.[10] The country continues to receive people fleeing conflict and insecurity in South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan, while refugee-hosting communities face economic pressure, food insecurity and climate shocks of their own.

Legal and administrative barriers further compound these pressures. Since 2021, registration of new arrivals has been suspended by the authorities for most asylum seekers and refugees, with exceptions for specified emergency arrivals. Children awaiting registration face obstacles in accessing education and other essential services, leaving them at heightened risk of exploitation, abuse, and trafficking. Their families, many of whom avoid seeking assistance due to fears of detention or other protection risks, have increasingly limited access to livelihoods, humanitarian support, and basic services, exacerbating vulnerabilities across entire households.

Yet the resources available to respond have fallen dramatically. Ethiopia is one of UNHCR's largest operations globally. As of September 2026, however, only 25 per cent of its required overall

10 UNHCR, Operational Data Portal -Ethiopia. Last updated 31 August 2026.





Child protection funding gap

In 2025, Ethiopia faced a **USD 14.3 million funding gap** for child protection, leaving only 18% of planned requirements covered.



Individual support to children at risk reduced by 33%

The number of children targeted for Best Interests Procedures (BIP) fell **from 11,513 in 2024 to 7,669 in 2025**, reducing planned coverage for children at risk.



Alternative care reduced by 47%

The number of unaccompanied children covered by alternative care fell **from 16,988 in 2024 to 8,937 in 2025**.



Family tracing and reunification more than halved

The number of children reached through family tracing and reunification dropped **from 4,071 in 2024 to 1,887 in 2025**, weakening a critical safeguard for separated children.



Frontline protection workforce reduced by 48%

Across six UNHCR implementing partners in Ethiopia, approximately **48% of staff were lost** as a result of funding cuts, reducing the capacity to identify, refer and support children at risk.

$341 million budget for the year had been funded. Child protection has been particularly affected. The scale of contraction is evident in child protection funding.[11] In 2025, Ethiopia faced a US $ 14,3 million child protection funding gap, leaving only 18 per cent of the planned requirements covered for services that help keep refugee children safe.

The funding gap is affecting several protective systems at once. Reductions and delays in food assistance have increased pressure on refugee households, while 57 primary schools serving approximately 110,000 refugee children faced severe funding cuts by December 2025, jeopardizing access to education and the protective environment that schools provide. UNHCR, the Government of Ethiopia's Refugees and Returnees Service and WFP warned that disruption to these protective environments would place children at immediate risk of child labour, early marriage and trafficking.[12]

At least 31,000 unaccompanied and separated refugee children have been identified in Ethiopia, with many other children without adequate parental

11 UNHCR, Ethiopia Funding Update 2026, 30 September 2026.

12 UNHCR, Annual Results Report Ethiopia 2025.

care still unidentified.[13] For these children, functioning protection systems are essential safeguards against trafficking and other abuses.

Despite clear and acute needs, the funding cuts have translated into a sharp contraction across multiple layers of the child protection system in Ethiopia.

Family tracing and reunification, a critical safeguard for children separated from their parents and caregivers, was reduced by more than half, from 4,071 to 1,887 children. Other services intended to keep children safe within families and communities have also been significantly scaled back in 2025 compared to the previous year. Alternative care for unaccompanied children fell by 47 per cent, from 16,988 to 8,937 children, while family strengthening programmes saw an almost identical reduction, from 30,313 to 16,150.[14] These cuts are especially concerning given the significant number of unaccompanied and separated refugee children, many embarking on risky journeys to reunite with their families.

At the same time, the capacity to identify and respond to individual children at heightened risk has also diminished. The number of children targeted through Best Interests Procedure (child protection case management) declined by 33 per cent, from 11,513 to 7,669.[15] Psychosocial support was reduced by 29 per cent, reaching 5,179 children compared with 7,251 before the cuts.[16]

The consequences extend beyond the number of children reached. Reduced Child-Friendly Spaces and Safe Healing and Learning Spaces mean fewer opportunities for preventive engagement, psychosocial support, and early identification of children at risk. At the same time, fewer staff and partners are managing growing caseloads, contributing to longer follow-up intervals and delays in Best Interests Procedure, including Best Interests Determinations. This weakens the ability to identify the most appropriate support for the child, refer and respond to serious protection concerns early, including violence and abuse, trafficking, child marriage and other harmful practices.

The contraction of these services also has implications for gender-based violence. Protection analysis in Ethiopia identifies sexual violence, child and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation among the risks affecting refugee children, with adolescent girls facing particular concerns. These risks may be aggravated by overcrowding, inadequate lighting, unsafe sanitation facilities, limited security and the absence of adequate care for unaccompanied and separated children.[17] Even before the 2025 funding cuts, shortages of specialized staff and services for child survivors of GBV limited access to appropriate care, case management and recovery support. Further reductions in safe spaces, community outreach and specialized support can leave children with fewer trusted opportunities to disclose violence, while heavier caseloads can delay confidential referral, case management and follow-up. This does not mean that gender-based violence or harmful practices necessarily constitute trafficking. However, where violence intersects with separation, economic hardship, unsafe work or dependence on abusive actors, children may face greater exposure to exploitation and protection services may be less able to identify and address it.

The ability to address these interconnected risks depends on the people, organizations and community structures delivering protection services. Yet these capacities have also been affected by the funding cuts. Across six UNHCR implementing partners in Ethiopia, approximately 48 per cent of staff were reduced as a result of the funding impact, while around 23 per cent of refugee incentive workers

13 UNHCR Ethiopia
14 UNHCR, Compass data numerator and Outcome Area 5.3, 2025
15 UNHCR, Annual Results Report Ethiopia 2025, p.15; UNHCR, Compass data numerator and Outcome Area 5.1, 2025
16 Ibid.
17 UNHCR, Protection Brief on Gender-Based Violence in the Sudan Refugee Response in Ethiopia (August 2024), available through the UNHCR Operational Data Portal, https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/eth.



supporting services within refugee communities were affected. One operational partner halted its interventions entirely in Melkadida and parts of Gambella, two important refugee-hosting areas for people fleeing Somalia and South Sudan respectively. Beyond their operational impact, these reductions risk reversing progress towards localisation by eroding the capacity of national and refugee-led actors that are often best placed to identify and respond to child protection concerns. As trained staff leave and community structures weaken, critical expertise and trust built over years may be lost, undermining both the sustainability and effectiveness of protection systems for refugee children.

These reductions are occurring in a context where child labour risks are already high. At the national level, child labour prevalence in Ethiopia was estimated at 45 per cent between 2014 and 2022, among the highest levels recorded globally.[18]

Taken together, these reductions reveal a broader effect: the contraction is occurring across prevention, identification, response, and solutions at the same time. A child may have less or no access to a safe space, while the caseworker responsible for identifying and following up protection concerns carries a larger caseload, the family caring for that child may receive less or no support and, if the child is separated from their parents, family tracing and reunification may take longer. It is this simultaneous weakening of several layers of protection that leaves already vulnerable children with fewer opportunities for support and fewer pathways to timely assistance, and, in some locations, no access to timely assistance.

18 UNICEF Country Data–Ethiopia; UNICEF–Data Brief on Child Labour in Eastern and Southern Africa, February 2026.

From reduced protection to increased risk

Funding reductions do not automatically result in trafficking. However, they can weaken the safeguards that help prevent exploitation, identify children at risk and support timely response. In Ethiopia, the concern is that several protective factors and response services are being constrained at once: food assistance, education, family support, community-based protection, case management and access to services.

These conditions can be exploited by traffickers and other abusive actors. Reduced assistance, weakened protection services and limited livelihood opportunities deepen household precarity, while severe economic pressure may contribute to child labour practices as a means of family survival. For refugee children, the simultaneous erosion of several protective factors can increase exposure to hazardous and potentially exploitative work.

Community-based protection is central to risk mitigation and prevention. Child and Youth-Friendly Spaces, Safe Healing and Learning Spaces, refugee incentive workers, and partner staff provide regular points of contact through which risks can be identified and referrals for protection interventions





Fewer pathways to safety, greater risks for girls

Refugee girls face heightened risks of sexual violence, child marriage and female genital mutilation. As safe spaces, outreach and specialized services shrink, girls have fewer opportunities to seek protection, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation, including trafficking for sexual exploitation.



Unaccompanied and separated children at greater risk of trafficking

Cuts to alternative care, family tracing and reunification, and individual support weaken essential safeguards, leaving unaccompanied and separated children more exposed to hazardous work, abuse and trafficking.



Limited livelihoods and barriers to solutions fuel trafficking risks

Limited access to livelihoods and declining humanitarian support place growing pressure on refugee families. As hardship deepens, children face increased risks of hazardous labour and trafficking, highlighting the need for greater investment in livelihoods and solutions that help families meet their basic needs.

can be initiated. When these structures are reduced, children engaged in hazardous work, moving without family support or exposed to abuse may become less visible to protection actors.

Against this backdrop, field observations provide concerning indications of what these compounding pressures can mean in practice. UNHCR staff have reported a rise in child labour practices in Gambella and Assosa, where refugee children have been observed working in harvesting and cultivation for surrounding host communities and, in some cases, travelling towards gold-mining areas. Field colleagues have linked these developments to a combination of pressures, including reductions and delays in food assistance.

Reports of children moving towards mining areas are especially concerning because such environments had already been identified as presenting serious protection risks. Refugee communities previously reported that insufficient care and support for unaccompanied and separated children, young women and girls could lead them to seek work in dangerous informal gold-mining areas, increasing their exposure to forced labour and sexual exploitation and abuse. Recent observations suggest that these pre-existing vulnerabilities may be intensifying, with heightened risks of exploitation and abuse that vary according to age, gender and family situation, while the capacity to prevent, identify and respond to exploitation is contracting.

Child labour should not be equated with trafficking. However, where children move away from family and community protection, enter hazardous or informal work, or become dependent on other actors who control accommodation, transport or access to income, their exposure to exploitation can increase. In such contexts, the worst forms of child labour and potential trafficking for forced labour, sexual exploitation and other purposes become more difficult to prevent and detect, especially when protection services are reduced at the same time.

Key priorities for continued interventions include:

- Provide sustained, flexible and predictable funding to ensure that UNHCR and partners have the personnel, operational capacity and resources needed to maintain an integrated child protection response.
- Maintain registration and documentation so refugee children remain visible and able to access education, assistance and protection.
- Sustain Best Interests Procedure case management, family tracing and reunification, alternative care and family strengthening, prioritizing unaccompanied and separated children.
- Protect mental health and psychosocial support, child- and youth-friendly spaces and other protection services that help prevent harm and identify children at risk.
- Preserve education, food assistance and household support to reduce pressures associated with school dropout, child labour, child marriage and unsafe onward movement.
- Maintain legal assistance, access to justice and child-sensitive referral pathways for children who experience or are at risk of violence, abuse, exploitation or trafficking.
- Preserve frontline and community-based protection capacity, including trained caseworkers, partner personnel and refugee incentive workers responsible for identification, referral and follow-up.
- Promote the inclusion of refugee children in national child protection systems and ensure appropriate child-sensitive responses to child labour, child marriage, and trafficking.



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Conclusion

The evidence from Ethiopia reinforces an important lesson for humanitarian action: child protection is one of the most effective investments in prevention, including to combat trafficking and smuggling risks and reduce reliance on dangerous irregular movement. This evidence demonstrates that the consequences of humanitarian funding cuts extend far beyond reduced programme budgets or fewer services delivered. They affect the systems that help keep refugee children safe.

Services such as registration, documentation, family strengthening, mental health and psychosocial support, child and youth-friendly spaces, case management, family tracing and reunification are not only responses to vulnerability; they are safeguards that help prevent children from falling into situations of exploitation, abuse, hazardous labour, child marriage and trafficking in the first place. These practical measures help restore dignity, safety, and children's futures.

Humanitarian actors continue to adapt, prioritize and build partnerships to preserve critical services under severe resource constraints. But adaptation has limits when needs continue to grow while the protective architecture around children contracts.

At a time when displacement is reaching unprecedented levels and humanitarian resources are constrained, sustained investment in child protection is a strategic investment in prevention, resilience and solutions.

Protecting children today helps reduce future vulnerabilities and strengthen families and communities, making sustained investment in child protection essential to ensure refugee children have the safeguards they need to survive, recover and thrive.



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