Save the Children

Our history

At the beginning of the 20th century, two sisters had a vision to achieve and protect the rights of children. Almost 100 years later, that vision continues to guide all our work.

Beginnings: Arrested in London

Save the Children's founder, Eglantyne Jebb.

After the First World War war ended, Britain kept up a blockade that left children in cities like Berlin and Vienna starving. Malnutrition was common and rickets were rife.

Dr Hector Munro, who witnessed the effects of the famine, reported that "children's bones were like rubber. Tuberculosis was terribly rife. Clothing was utterly lacking. In the hospitals there was nothing but paper bandages."

Save the Children's founder, Eglantyne Jebb, and her sister Dorothy Buxton were part of the Fight the Famine movement, spreading information about what was happening in Europe.

In 1919, Jebb was arrested for distributing leaflets in Trafalgar Square. They bore shocking images of children affected by famine in Europe, and the headline: ‘Our Blockade has caused this – millions of children are starving to death'. When Jebb was tried for her protest and found guilty, the prosecuting counsel was so impressed with her that he offered to pay the £5 fine himself.

Soon, the sisters decided that campaigning alone would not be enough - direct action was needed. In May 1919, the Save the Children Fund was set up at a packed public meeting in London's Royal Albert Hall.

This was just the start - over the next decades Save the Children would grow to become a global organisation saving thousands of children's lives each year.

Early years: Fighting the famine

Russian children fed by Save the Children during the 1921 famine.

In 1921, one refugee child described how he had carried his youngest brother among thousands of sick, tired and hungry people. He said, "One day I saw that he was not moving or crying for bread any more. I showed him to my mother and she saw that he was dead. We were glad that he was dead because we had nothing to feed him on."

Save the Children soon raised considerable funds for these children in desperate need. Single donations ranged from two shillings to £10,000. It gave the money to organisations working to feed and educate children in Germany, Austria, France, Belgium, Hungary, the Balkans and for Armenian refugees in Turkey.

Later, famine in Russia saw children struggling in dire conditions.

To raise money for these children, Jebb and her colleagues used page-length advertisements in national newspapers and footage of famine and disaster work in operation. Films showing the conditions children were facing, screened in cinemas up and down the country, were unlike anything else seen at the time.

With the funds raised, Jebb and her colleagues filled a ship with 600 tons of aid bound for Russia. From winter 1921 through much of 1922, daily meals provided by Save the Children helped keep 300,000 children and more than 350,000 adults alive - for just a shilling per person per week.

Save the Children had not been set up as a permanent organisation, but it was soon became one after it was called on to deal with emergency after emergency.

As Buxton moved to focus on political campaigning, the charismatic Eglantyne Jebb, as honorary secretary, became a force to be reckoned with. Persuasive and committed, Jebb quickly established Save the Children as a highly effective relief agency, able to provide food, clothing and money quickly and inexpensively.

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1920s: Children's rights

In the 1920s, we started working here at home, in Britain.

Armed with ideas ahead of their time, Eglantyne Jebb wanted to make the rights and welfare of children something that everyone took responsibility for.

She said: "I believe we should claim certain rights for the children and labour for their universal recognition, so that everybody - not merely the small number of people who are in a position to contribute to relief funds, but everybody who in any way comes into contact with children, that is to say the vast majority of mankind - may be in a position to help forward the movement."

Jebb's 'Declaration of the Rights of the Child' was adopted by the The League of Nations, a forerunner to the UN, and it inspired today's UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

After 1923, with fewer emergencies to deal with, Save the Children focused on research and children's rights projects.

In the UK, we opened a recuperative school at Fairfield House in Kent for children from inner-city areas, and helped young miners' families in poverty-striken parts of Wales and Cornwall. In Hungary, we supported a school based on the principle of cooperation and children having a say in the running of the school.

Eglantyne Jebb died in 1928, leaving behind a powerful vision of ending the cycle of poverty that blighted so many children's lives.

She said: "If we accept our premise, that the Save the Children Fund must work for its own extinction, it must seek to abolish, for good and for all, the poverty which makes children suffer and stunts the race of which they are the parents.

"It must not be content to save children from the hardships of life - it must abolish these hardships; nor think it suffices to save them from immediate menace - it must place in their hands the means of saving themselves and so of saving the world."

1930s: A growing organisation

The 1930s saw us expand our work beyond Europe for the first time.

Eglantyne Jebb's ambition had been to extend the work of Save the Children outside Europe. In the decade after her death, we went on to establish the Child Protection Committee, which lobbied for the rights of children in Africa and Asia throughout the decade.

We established a nursery school in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1936, and we set up nursery schools in several areas in Britain, including the first nursery school in Wales.

Our 1933, research report, 'Unemployment and the Child: An Enquiry', showed that mass unemployment affects children's nutrition. We campaigned for children's right to adequate nutrition until the Education Act of 1944 provided school meals and milk throughout the UK.

We also worked with refugees from the Spanish Civil War. And we were part of the Inter Aid committee which organised the rescue mission of predominantly Jewish children from continental Europe to Britain just before the outbreak of the Second World War.

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1940s: Another war

Our experience working with children in conflict started in the UK during the World War II.

During the Second World War we were forced to withdraw from projects in occupied Europe.
In the UK, we set up residential nurseries for young children who had been evacuated from the cities and day nurseries for children whose parents were working in wartime industries.

In large cities, we created playcentres in air-raid shelters, as well as junior clubs for older children who often played unsupervised on bombsites. We also launched Hopscotch - the first playgroup in the UK, that would be the start of a major area of work for many years.

Save the Children started planning for post-war overseas work in 1942, publishing the report 'Children in Bondage'. It painted a picture of widespread violations of children's rights and consequent suffering. In India, we supported a child welfare centre in Kolkata, and we set up health centre in Ibadan, Nigeria.

But the majority of Save the Children's work outside the UK concerned planning for the needs of children in Europe after the war. By the autumn of 1946, we were working with children, displaced people, refugees and concentration camp survivors in devastated areas of France, Yugoslavia, Poland and Greece.

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1950s: Work in Asia

A Save the Children worker with children and mothers in the aftermath of the Korean War.

The Korean War began in 1950. It left many children destitute and living unaccompanied on the streets. Malnutrition and associated diseases were rife. In 1952, the first Save the Children workers arrived. They stayed for more than 20 years.

In 1959, Save the Children and Oxfam produced the film *A Far Cry*, which showed how far Korean children still were from achieving basic housing, food, education and healthcare. The BBC showed the film on Easter Sunday that year.

Throughout the 1950s there were still many displaced families in Europe. Save the Children continued working in Germany, Austria, Italy and Greece. It sent extra teams to Austria in 1956 to help Hungarian refugees fleeing after the failed revolution.

Outside Europe, in what was to become Malaysia, the Serendah project gave orphaned boys an education, training and a safe place to live. By the end of the 1950s, most of the organisation's money was going towards work in Asia.

Save the Children is non-political and non-sectarian, and has a philosophy of international co-operation. However, international politics do affect the organisation.

The Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union compelled us to withdraw from some areas in post-war Eastern Europe, such as Poland, Yugoslavia and Hungary. And we were forced to leave some areas in the Middle East following the Suez crisis in 1956.

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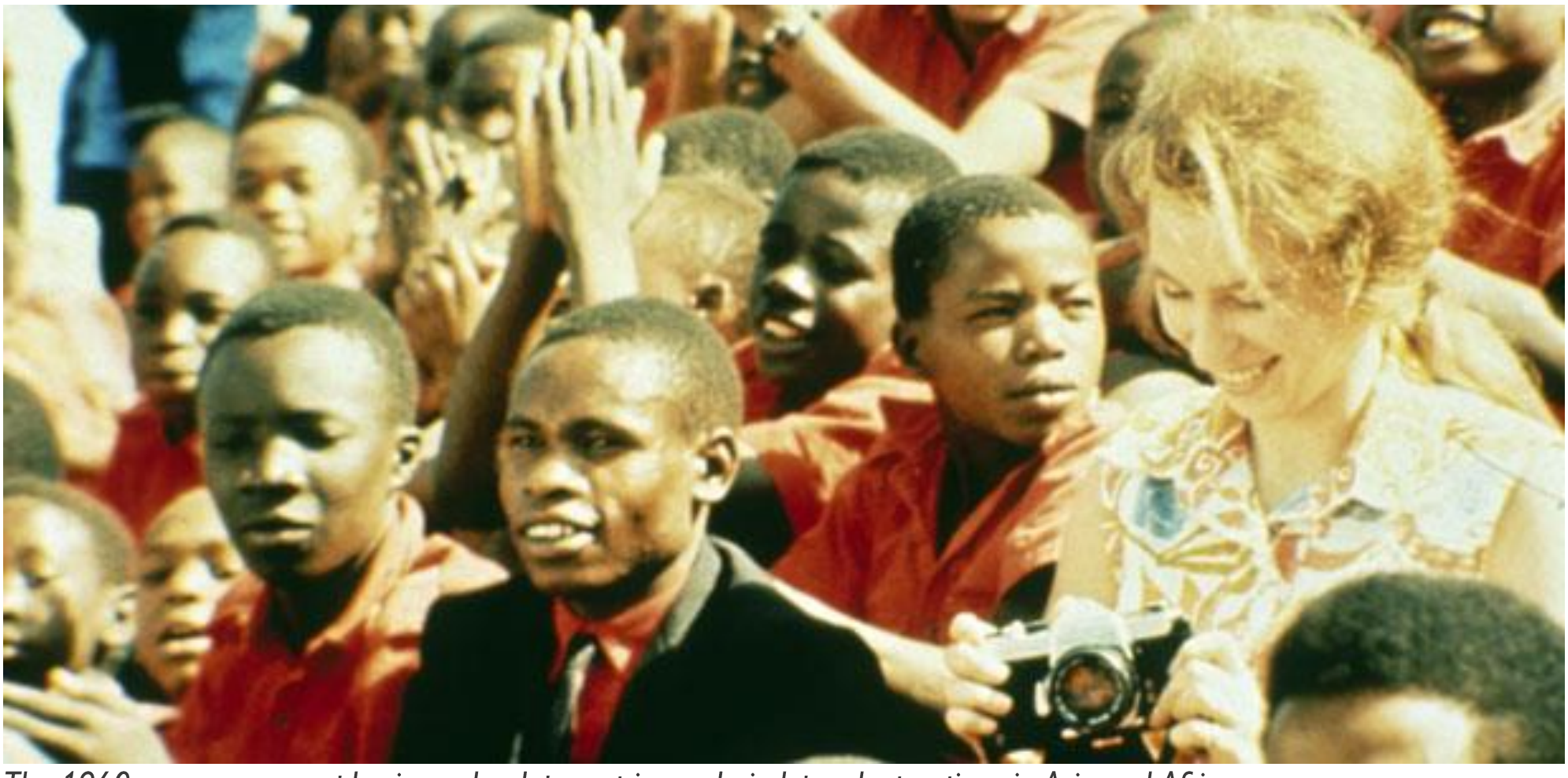
1960s: The development decade



The 1960s saw a new emphasis on development in newly independent nations in Asia and Africa.

The 1960s were hailed as the 'development decade', as Western governments and the public were prepared to give money and resources for development projects.

By this time, Save the Children had full medical and welfare teams in 17 countries and its work extended to 26 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and the West Indies.

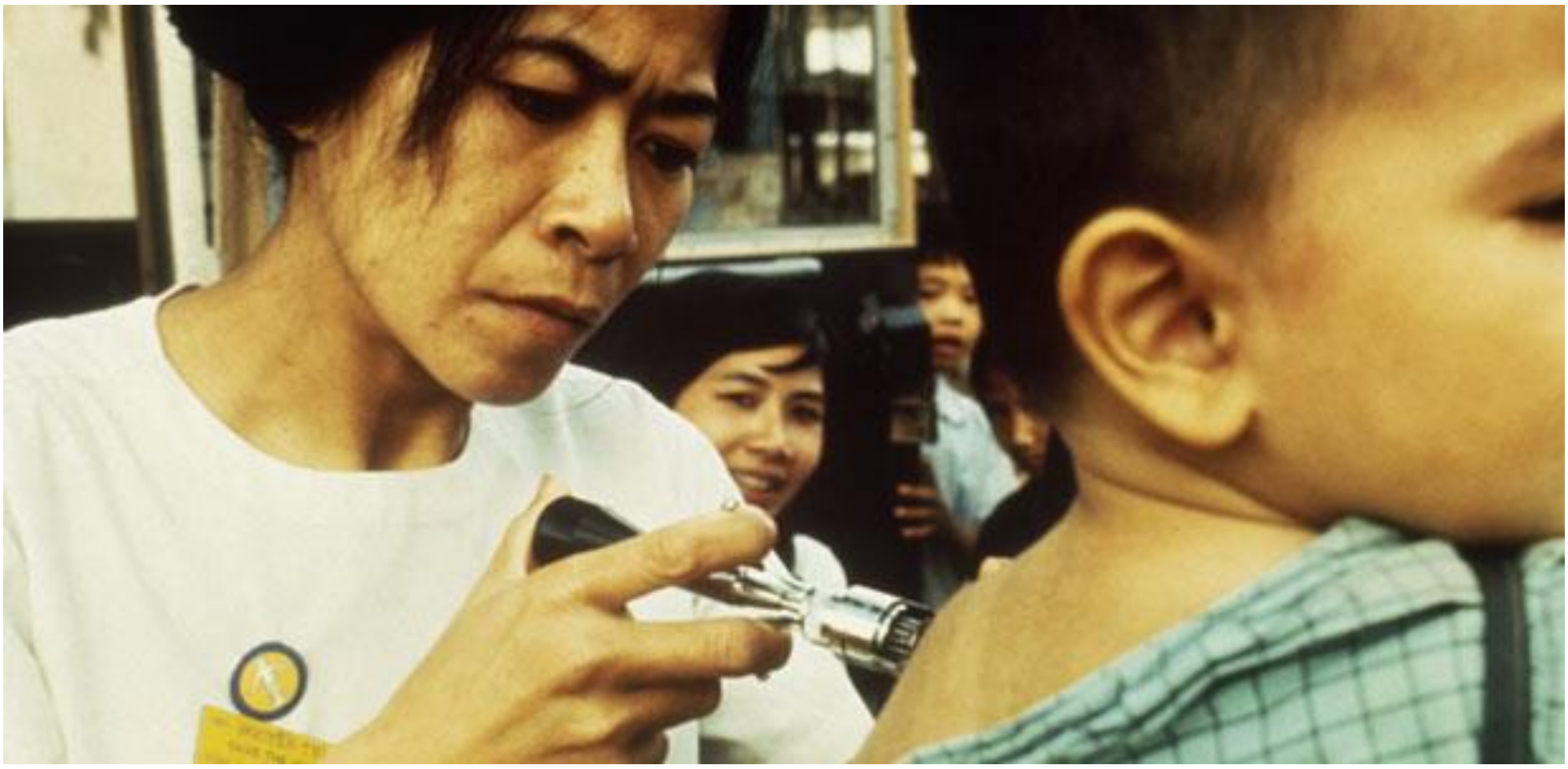
In Korea, Morocco, Nigeria and the West Indies, our Freedom from Hunger projects, which aimed to prevent the causes of famine and food shortages, were beginning to show results.

We were able to get more funding for long-term development projects and emergency responses. We worked with refugees from the Chinese invasion of Tibet, children in Vietnam and children on both sides of the civil war in Nigeria.

In Malaysia and Somalia, we handed projects over to local management, and we started new work in other areas, such as the Mwanamugimu project at Mulago Hospital, Uganda, which taught mothers about nutrition.

We also started the first hospital play group in the UK at the Brook Hospital, London, in 1963. The same year saw the death of Save the Children's co-founder, Dorothy Buxton.

1970s: Around the world and at home



A Save the Children worker vaccinates a child against polio.

HRH the Princess Royal, Princess Anne, became President of Save the Children in 1970 - the first major charity with which she had been closely associated.

In 1972, Save the Children organisations in several countries, including Norway, Sweden, Denmark and the USA, formed the International Save the Children Alliance.

Throughout the 1970s we ran development programmes and emergency responses in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Honduras and the Sahel region of Africa.

During the civil unrest in Northern Ireland, we worked for young people from both Nationalist and Unionist areas. Our Coates Street play centre brought together children from the two communities, as described in Save the Children Northern Ireland's 1971 annual report:

> "These children, drawn from both sides of the Peace Line, play together most successfully with no sign of animosity. The mothers too are meeting in a friendly relaxed way, which is helping to foster a better relationship in this district of rioting."

In the UK, we began working on projects with Gypsy and Traveller children, and helped provide for unaccompanied children arriving from Vietnam.

In 1979, we launched the Stop Polio Campaign as part of an attempt to eradicate polio worldwide.

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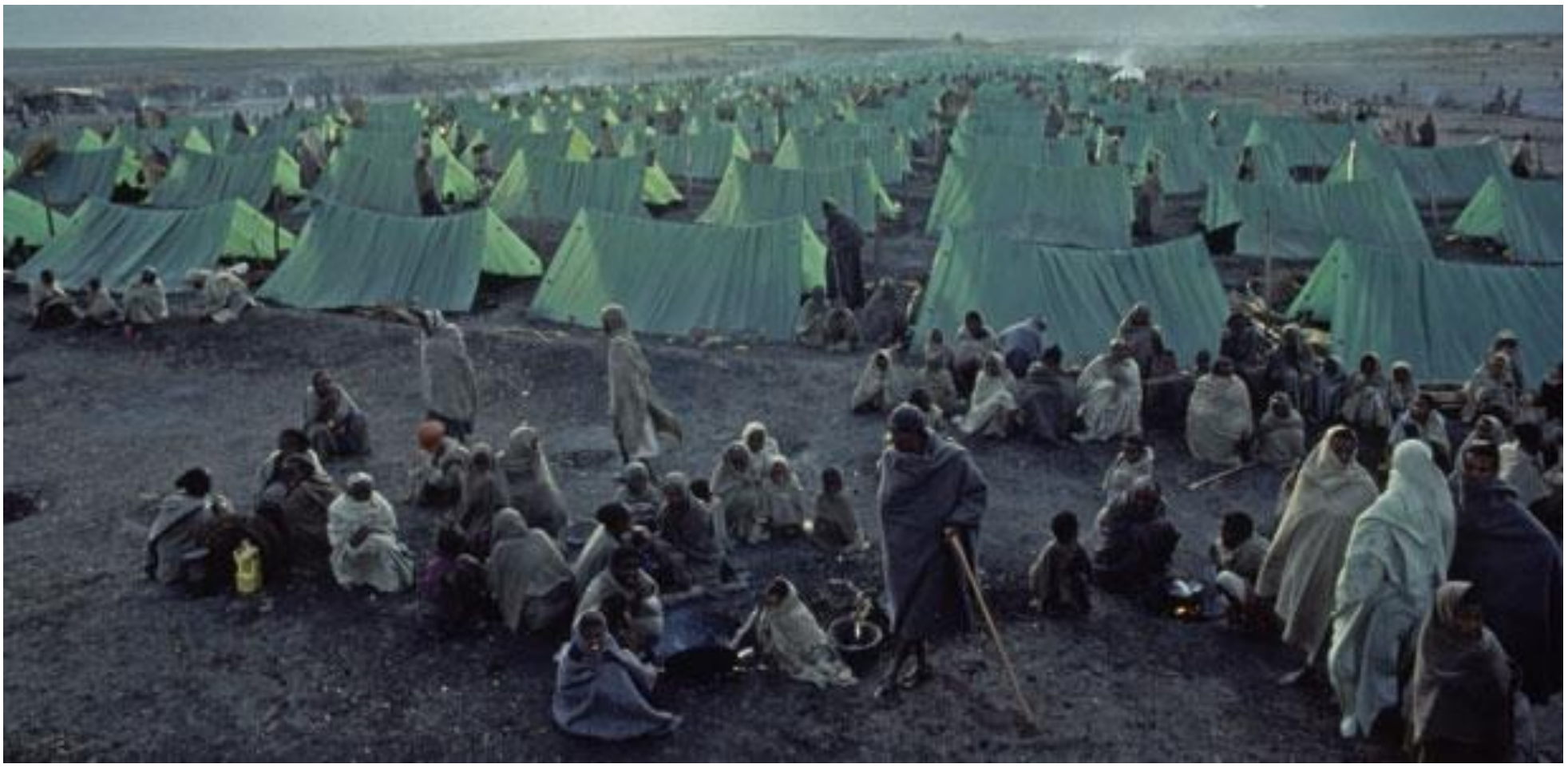
1980s: Protecting people's dignity



A camp for displaced people during the 1984 Ethiopia famine.

Disasters dominated the 1980s, with the most high-profile emergency being the 1984 famine in Ethiopia. TV coverage of this and other disasters caught public attention. Donations to Save the Children increased and we were able to work more widely around the around the world.

In Mali, thirteen-year-old Athi said: "During the bad years when people suffered from hunger, Save the Children came."

We also initiated new programmes designed to protect the dignity of children and their families. To combat the prejudice and misconception around the spread of HIV and AIDS, we set up education, prevention and treatment projects.

We carried out pioneering projects with prisoners' children, and worked towards alternatives to custody for young offenders. And in education, we focused on giving all children equal opportunity.

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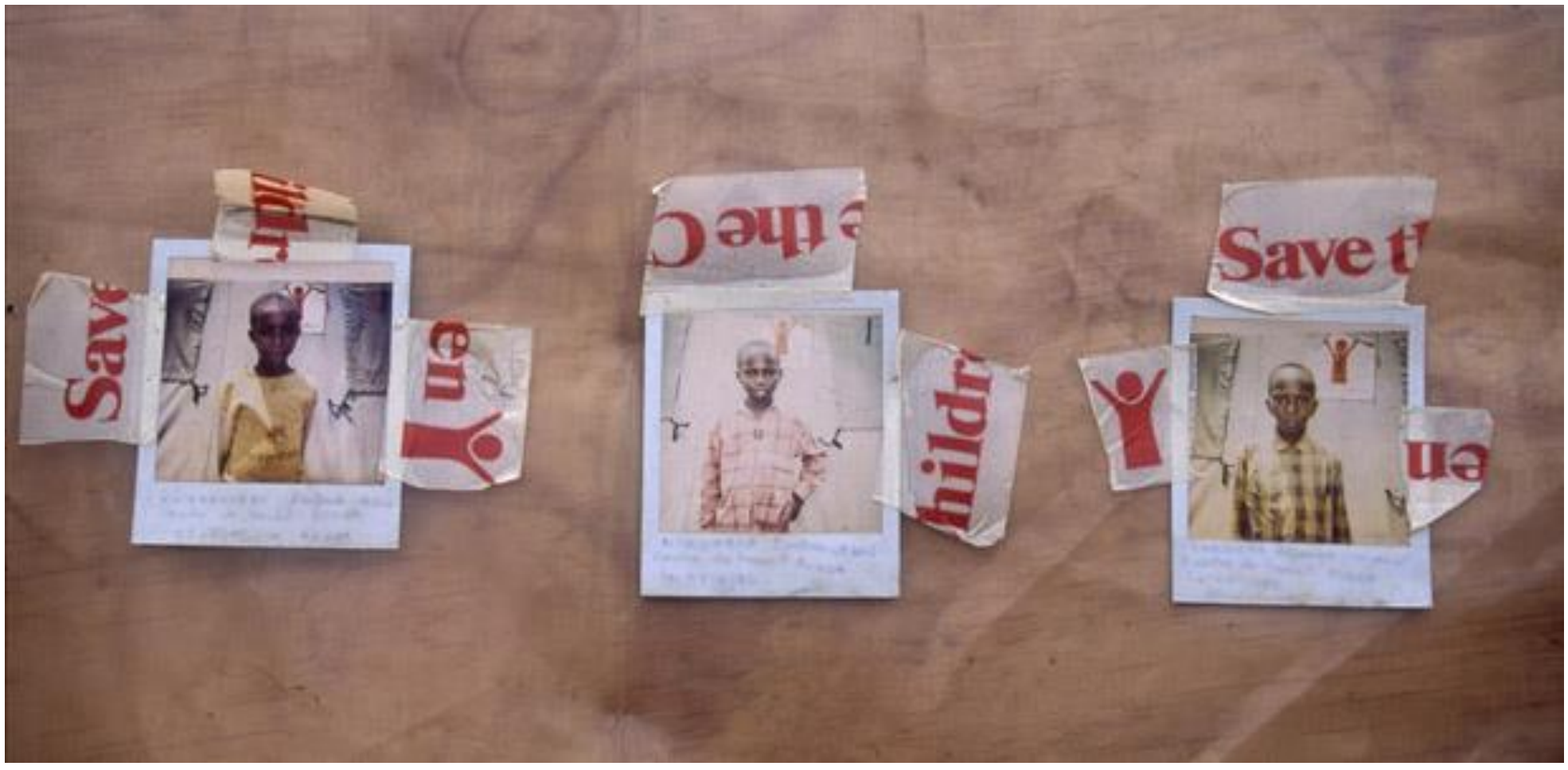
1990s: Responding to conflict



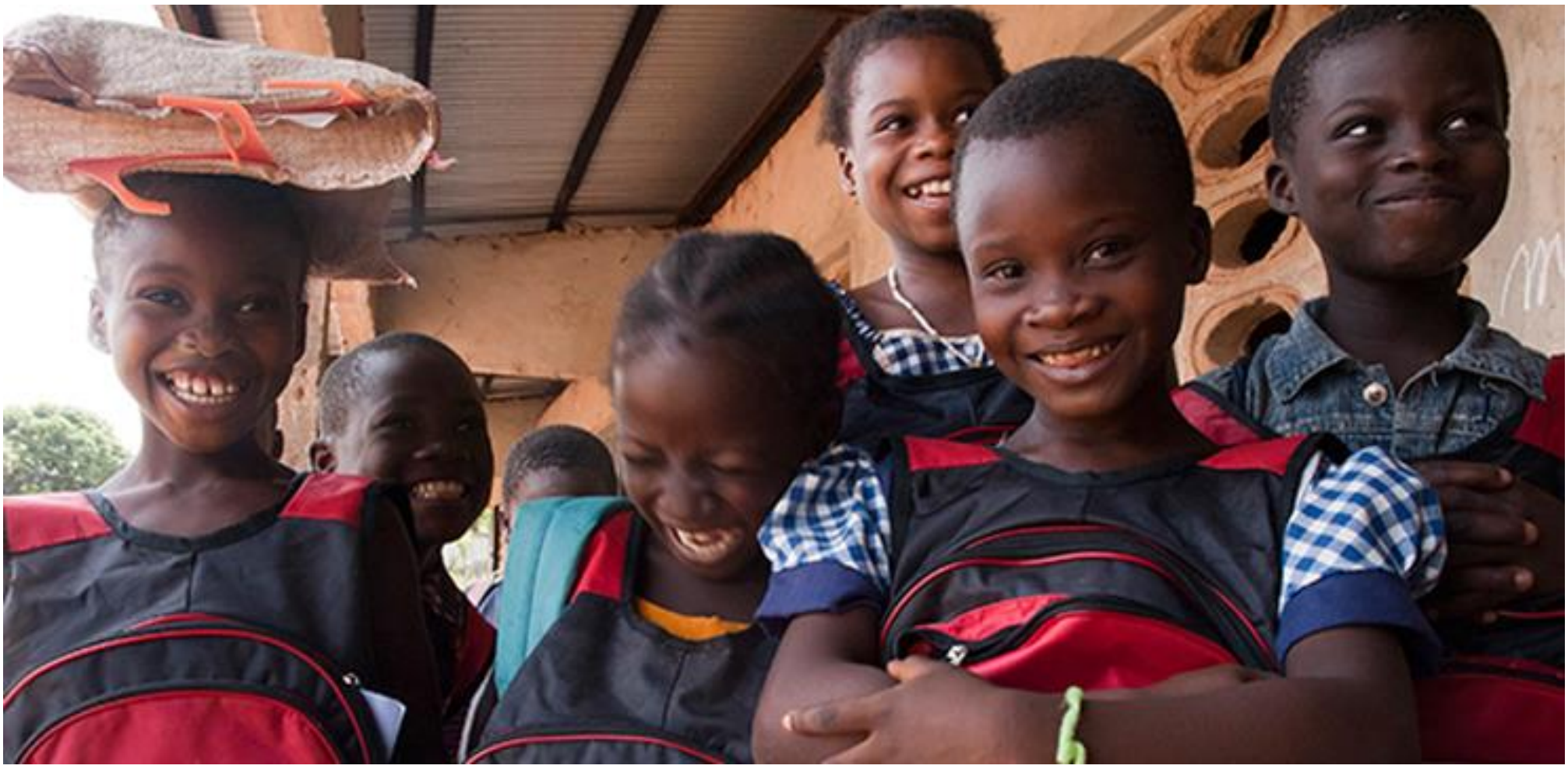
After the 1994 Rwandan genocide, we used Polaroid photos of returning child refugees to help trace their families.

During the 1990s, we continued to work with children affected by war in Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, Angola and the Balkans.

We campaigned for the rights of child soldiers and for the protection of children forced from their homes by war. We also encouraged young people to speak out about their experiences and fight for positive change. Fourteen-year-old Fernando, in Mozambique, told us, "The bandits killed my father. They killed my mother. And my brother. They took me to their base camp. Yes, I was with the bandits. I had a gun."

Following the Rwandan genocide in 1994, large numbers of returning child refugees had become separated from their families. We helped set up a family tracing and reunification programme to help unaccompanied children find their parents, or other relatives who could care for them.

2000s: A new ambition



A new century saw us focus on helping children everywhere reach their potential through education.

The new millennium saw a new ambition to tackle global problems. The Millennium Development Goals decreed that by 2015 child mortality should be cut by two-thirds, extreme poverty and hunger halved, and that all children would be able to go to school.

Save the Children became an important part of the global effort to achieve these aims, and our progress in many areas has been impressive. Between 1990 and 2011, the number of children dying before the age of five fell from nearly 12 million to less than seven 7 million.

Between 2006 and 2009, our Rewrite the Future campaign helped 1.4 million more children into school in countries affected by conflict. And we launched a global campaign to save children from preventable illnesses, laying the foundations for our No Child Born to Die campaign the following decade.

As humanitarian crises continued to have a devastating impact on children, we massively increased our capacity to respond to emergencies.

Our five-year response to the 2004 Asian tsunami was one of the largest in Save the Children's history, benefiting around one million people. During the conflict in Dafur, Sudan, we reached children in intensely hostile environments. And in the aftermath of the 2005 Pakistan earthquake we found our way through to children whose communities had been completely cut off.

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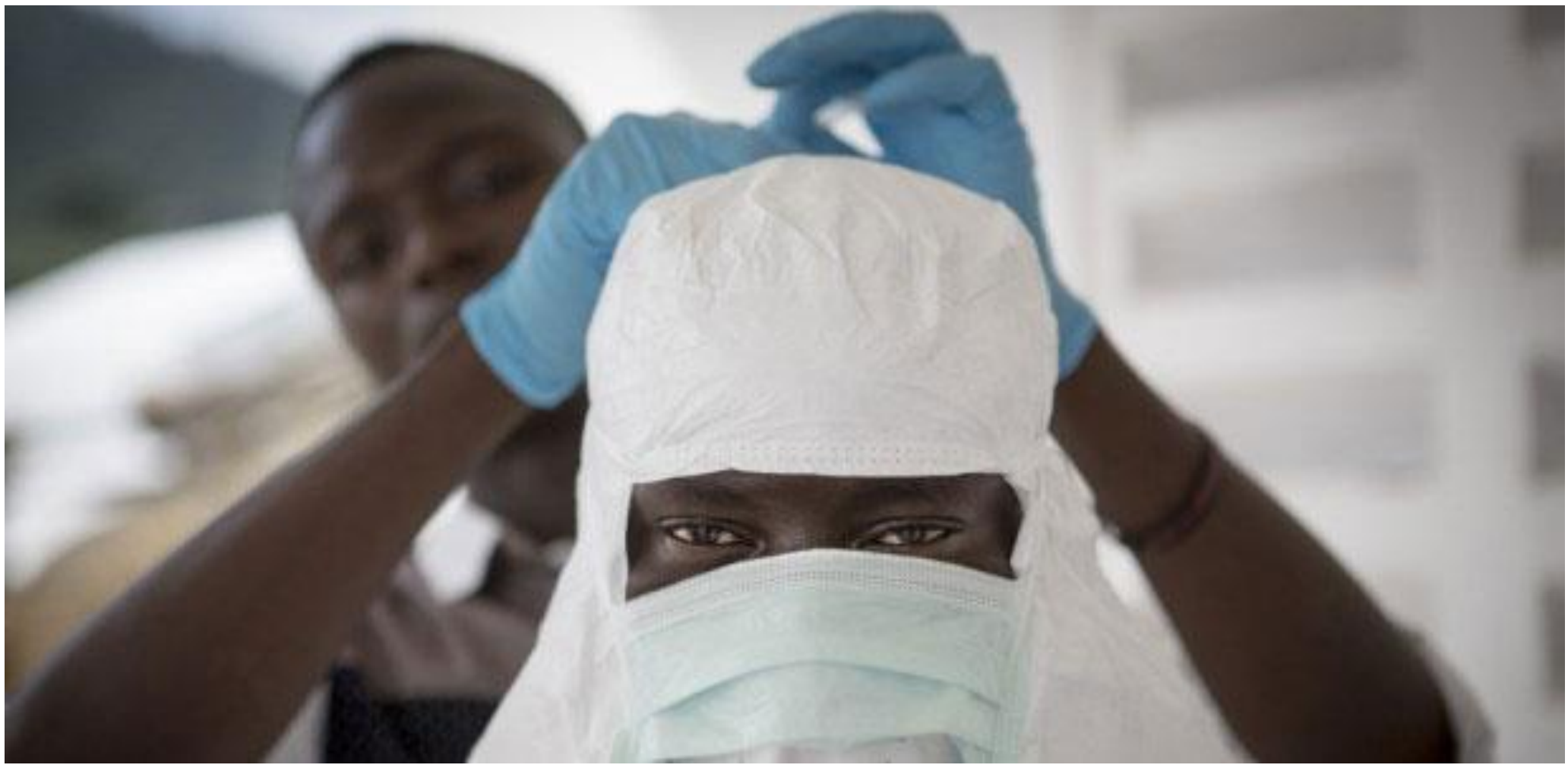
2010s: No Child Born to Die



In response to the Ebola crisis, we ran one of Sierra Leone's most important specialist treatment centres.

During the current decade we've continued to expand our reach and impact. In 2016 we reached 22.1 million children through our work on the ground – more than double the number of children in 2010.

We've responded to a series of devastating disasters – from brutal conflict in Syria, to devastating food crises in East and West Africa, and the worst ever outbreak of the deadly Ebola virus.

Faced with the growing number of emergencies around the world, we've expanded our humanitarian staff and resources, including joining forces with frontline health charity Merlin in 2013. We've also set up the Humanitarian Leadership Academy to help train the next generation of humanitarians, primarily in countries affected by crisis.

Alongside the growth in our emergency response, we've developed a portfolio of ambitious, long-term 'signature programmes' – from Rwanda to Bangladesh to Indonesia – to support millions of children. These programmes involve partnerships with local communities, governments and global companies.

In 2011 we launched our five-year No Child Born to Die campaign, to engage broad public support for our cause. Through raising awareness and calling for world leaders to take action to stop children dying, this ground-breaking campaign has helped bring about breakthroughs – in vaccination, nutrition and newborn health – to save millions of children's lives.

This year, we launched Every Last Child – a campaign that aims to help children who are forgotten because of who they are or where they live.

We're also focusing on our work with disadvantaged children in the UK. We've launched successful new programmes to tackle child poverty and are focusing on making sure that all children get the best start in life.

savethechildren.org.uk
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