



The security we choose

**The opportunity cost of UK
military spending for education
and human security**





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Foreword

A profound tension underpins the UK's current political debate about public spending. As the degraded state of public services has become increasingly difficult to ignore, politicians insist that the investment needed to rebuild them cannot be afforded. Yet, when it comes to ever increasing military spending, public spending constraints become a secondary issue.

The stark contrast between the additional resources the UK government is willing to allocate for the military – an extra £36 billion per year if the UK is to hit its spending target of 3.5 per cent gross domestic product (GDP) by 2035 – and what it is willing to invest in the services most important to working people demands urgent reflection.

Across Education International's member organisations, spanning 180 countries, we hear a similar story. Governments say there is no money for schools, for teacher salaries, or for the basic infrastructure of public education. Yet when it comes to military spending, resources are found. This is not a matter of scarcity; it is a matter of priorities.

This report is a call to critically examine our choices around security. It asks us to consider what finding billions of pounds more for defence will require and what will be neglected as a result.

It raises questions about the consequences of this neglect and who is being asked to pay the biggest price when funds are redirected. It also argues that a narrow view of security, limited to the remit and capacities of the Ministry of Defence, threatens to create or exacerbate different forms of insecurity.

The message of this report is ultimately one of hope. It shines a light on what is possible when governments invest in people, not war, and shows that a different path towards a more peaceful and prosperous world is within our power. It also demonstrates that education is not a luxury to be traded away in times of uncertainty. Rather, it is one of the surest investments any country can make to secure peace and resilience, for its own people and globally.

True security is built on education, public services, social justice, equality, human rights, and a fair economy, not an ever-larger military arsenal.

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Executive summary

UK military spending is rising to the detriment of other public spending

- The UK's commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) target of spending 3.5 per cent of its GDP on defence by 2035 will require an additional £36 billion per year in current terms.
- To pay for this, the government is redirecting funds from other government departments and threatening "eye-watering" cuts to public services at a time when many are on the brink of collapse.
- The impacts are falling hardest on those least able to shoulder the burden, including through steep cuts to international development assistance and by reduced investment in public services and social security.

Education under strain

- Education in the UK has suffered immensely during austerity, with real-terms funding falling by billions since 2010.
- Increases to defence spending undermine prospects to close funding gaps, including for teacher pay, building refurbishment, and supporting students with special educational needs.
- UK aid and development support to education globally has fallen by 80 per cent since 2016.
- One in five children live within 50km of an armed conflict, and attacks on education are becoming increasingly common, rising by 50 per cent in 2024-25 compared with the previous two years.
- Just 1.5 days of global military spending in 2025 could pay for an entire year of aid to education.

Rethinking security

- Security is about more than borders and external threats. Insecurity is more often experienced through economic, climate, democratic, health and social deficits than an attack by a foreign power. These too have life or death consequences.
- Lasting peace requires tackling the drivers of insecurity, which military action often cannot address but can exacerbate.
- The UK needs a human centred-approach to security, which prioritises people's wellbeing and creates the conditions for more equitable, peaceful societies.

Security through economic justice

- 77 per cent of the British public would prefer the government raise taxes on the very richest than cut public services.
- A two per cent tax on wealth above £10 million is becoming increasingly popular, including among millionaires.
- True security requires an economy that measures success through the extent to which people are able to live secure, healthy and dignified lives, in the UK and around the world.

The Security We Choose: A call to action

The UK must balance the need to respond to genuine threats to the nation's security with the responsibility to invest in the conditions for people to live secure lives, in the UK and globally.



Introduction

Military spending is rising in the UK as living standards fall and public services crumble.

Increases to the UK defence budget are part of a global trend of rapidly rising military spending in response to perceptions of an increasingly dangerous world. Global instability and the need to defend against military threats to the UK are serious matters. Yet military defence is only one aspect of what is needed to keep our country safe.

Increasing the defence budget is often presented as an unavoidable response to insecurity. Far less attention is paid to the consequences of these decisions: who is being asked to bear the costs? And are current spending choices truly capable of delivering the safety and security we need?

Increasing military spending while allowing funding gaps for public services such as education to persist in the UK and around the world reflects a narrow understanding of security. To address the multiple and interconnected threats our world faces at home and globally, we need to think critically about the drivers of insecurity and whether we are adequately investing in the foundations of peaceful, resilient, cohesive and thriving societies.

The National Education Union believes that education, strong public services, human rights, and shared prosperity are essential to building peace and security. A more secure future demands investment in these areas, as well as a strong commitment to international cooperation and diplomacy. The choices made today will shape not only the society we live in now, but the world we leave to future generations.

Military expenditure cannot educate a child, reduce inequality, strengthen democracy, or combat climate change. The UK must not weaken its commitments to education and development to mobilise resources for defence. By investing in people, and by ensuring those with the broadest shoulders contribute a fair share, the UK can help build a future that is safer, fairer, more prosperous, peaceful, and cooperative.



A damaged classroom in Saltivka, Kharkiv, an area badly affected by the war in Ukraine.

UNICEF/UN0687261/Gilbertson - Highway Child

Section 1: Rising military spending and its trade-offs

Global military spending is breaking records

Global military spending is at an all-time high. In 2025, governments around the world spent almost **US\$2.89 trillion** on their militaries, marking the eleventh consecutive year of growth and a 41 per cent increase in real terms since 2016.¹

This rise is taking place against a backdrop of growing conflict. From Gaza and Ukraine to Sudan, Haiti and Myanmar, there are **130 active armed conflicts** around the world today,² more than double the number just 15 years ago.

If current trends continue, global military expenditure could reach up to US\$6.6 trillion by 2035, almost five times what was spent at the end of the Cold War.³

NATO's push for increased military spending

A major share of global military spending growth can be attributed to NATO member countries, which have spent the past decade increasing defence budgets to reach two per cent of GDP by 2024. In 2025, more than half (55 per cent) of global military expenditure came from NATO members, with the UK ranking as the world's sixth-largest military spender.⁴

Now, the alliance is raising the bar again. Mounting pressure from the United States on European countries to increase their contributions, as well as concerns about the reliability of US support for NATO and escalating



threats from Russia, have contributed to the alliance's decision to raise its spending ambitions further. In 2025, NATO members agreed to increase their spending targets to five per cent of GDP by 2035, with a minimum of 3.5 per cent of GDP allocated to core military spending.⁵

As a NATO member, the UK government has committed to reaching this target and has announced a roadmap to increase core defence spending from 2.3 per cent of GDP in 2025 to 2.5 per cent by 2027-28; three per cent by 2030; and 3.5 per cent by 2035.⁶

The cost of meeting NATO's targets

Meeting NATO's new defence spending commitments will require significant trade-offs for the UK and other member states. NATO countries have already shed international commitments, slashing development funding and climate spending targets, while also struggling to maintain their public services.

The UK is no exception. The government's initial increase in defence spending has been funded directly through deep cuts to international development assistance, devastating programmes that have been supporting some of the world's most vulnerable people.

Aid cuts are only the beginning of a major redistribution of the UK's public budget. The money recouped from development represents a fraction of the resources required to meet new defence spending targets.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) estimates reaching 3.5 per cent of GDP by 2035 will require around **£36 billion of additional spending per year** in current terms, placing significant pressure on other departmental budgets that are already under significant strain.⁷

The world's poorest are first to pay the price

International development assistance to low- and middle-income countries is a moral and strategic investment in a more prosperous, stable and resilient world.

Despite its importance for building the conditions for peace and security, the UK government cut its official development assistance (ODA) **by 40 per cent** to cover the first phase of its increased defence spending in 2025. £4.8 billion was shifted away from the development budget in 2026-27, and £6.5 billion will be moved from development to defence in 2027-28.⁸

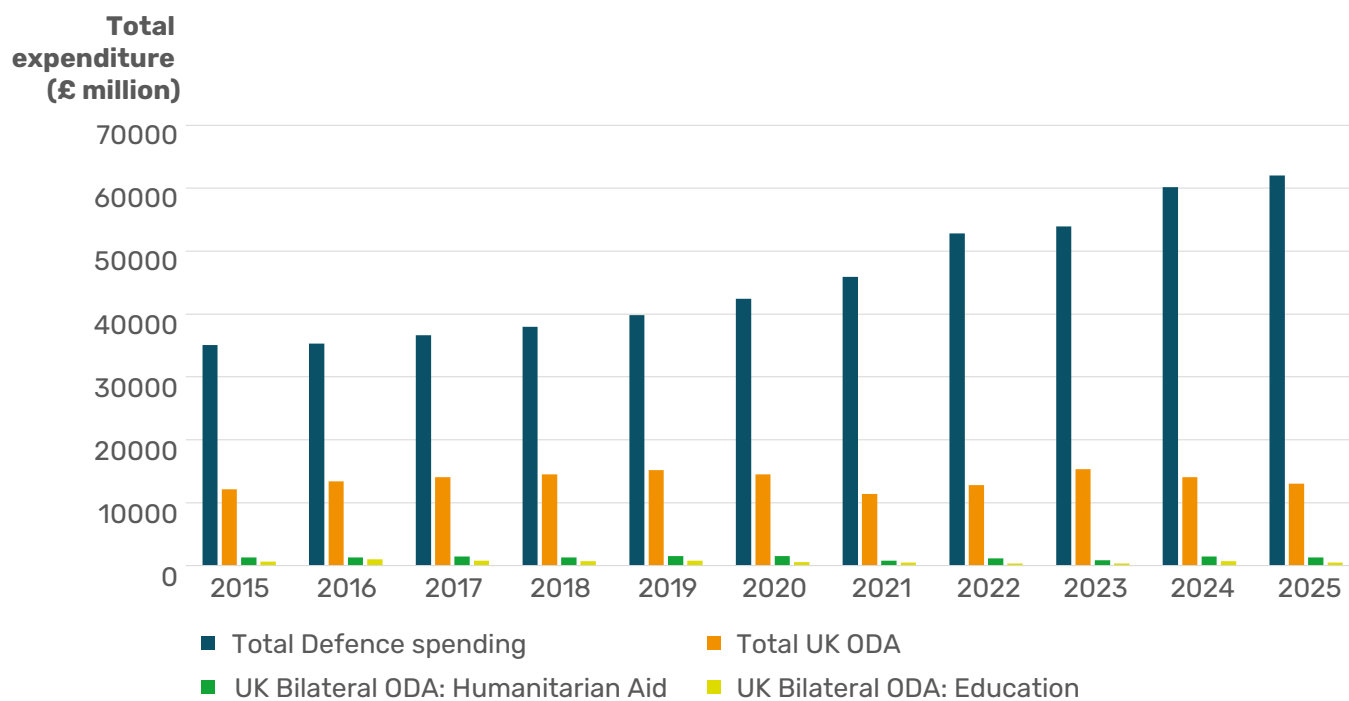
These cuts have compounded pressure on an already diminished UK ODA budget. In 2021, the Conservative government reduced aid spending from the legal target of 0.7 per cent of gross national income (GNI) to 0.5 per cent, citing fiscal pressures created by the Covid-19 pandemic. These latest cuts under Labour have reduced aid spending to just 0.3 per cent of GNI, less than half of the 0.7 per cent that the government is legally obligated to spend under the International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015.⁹

The UK is not the only country making deep cuts to ODA. The United States, Canada, France, Germany and many other donors are scaling back their commitments. But the UK has gone further than most, outstripping cuts by all other G7 countries, including the United States, which has effectively eliminated its development agency, USAID.¹⁰

Development funding plays a vital role in tackling poverty, improving health and education outcomes and creating the foundations for more stable and equitable societies. Yet global goals for sustainable development are severely underfunded. Just a fraction of what is spent on military spending could promote transformative progress in addressing some of the world's greatest challenges if it were spent on development.



Development and humanitarian aid is a fraction of what is spent on defence



Source: UK Government



The opportunity cost of defence spending for the world

Of the money the world spent on its militaries in 2024:

- 10 per cent could eliminate the extreme poverty gap worldwide.
- 14 per cent could fund basic healthcare for everyone in low- and middle-income countries for a year.
- 4 per cent could end global hunger by 2030.
- 5 per cent could make safe drinking water and sanitation available to people in 140 low- and middle-income countries.
- 3.5 per cent could close the annual education funding gap for lower-income countries.

Source: The Security We Need, UN Secretary General report, 2025¹¹

UK working people and future generations are next to pay

The UK's Defence Investment Plan (DIP), published in 2026, outlined that most increases in defence funding will be paid for by cuts to other government departmental budgets. With changes to the government's fiscal rules ruled out, the author of the Government's Strategic Defence Review, George Robertson, has warned that the UK could face 'eye-watering' public sector cuts.¹²

Beyond cuts to existing budgets, sectors which suffered long-term decline under austerity will be even less likely to see the amount of money they need to sustain services, let alone make much-needed improvements and maintenance.

Education is a prime example of this.

Unless there is a significant change in approach, such as a wealth tax or reconsideration of the government's fiscal rules, the burden of funding planned increases in defence spending will fall disproportionately on working people who rely on public services and are already struggling amid a cost-of-living crisis. This presents threats to the forms of security that people experience in their day-to-day lives.



NEU members at an anti-austerity demonstration in June 2025.

Photo credit: Lee Thomas

Section 2: The consequences for education

Education under pressure in the UK

As the government commits to spending billions of additional funds on expanding military capabilities, schools have been grappling with the consequences of more than a decade of underinvestment.

In real terms, since 2010:

- Mainstream school spending power in England has fallen by **£4.5 billion**.¹³
- Education spending has fallen from 5.6 per cent of GDP to **4.1 per cent**, below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development (OECD) average of five per cent and the lowest share of national income to education since the late 1990s.¹⁴

- Per-pupil spending has fallen to its **lowest** level in the last 15 years.¹⁵

The result is overstretched school staff, crumbling school buildings and worsening learning conditions for children, especially for those with greatest need.

A majority of schools are now reliant on fundraising to cover basic running costs as well as spending on building repairs, new equipment and school trips.¹⁶

Class sizes in the UK are some of the highest in the OECD.¹⁷ More than one million pupils are taught in classes of over 30, with primary class sizes the largest in Europe and secondary class sizes the highest since records began in the late 1970s.¹⁸



More than half of schools across England have areas that are out of use or unfit for purpose, due to leaks, mould, broken toilets and crumbling buildings.¹⁹ The reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) crisis and school closures during recent heatwaves have shown the strain of years of underinvestment in the school estate. At the current pace of refurbishments, it would take approximately **220 years**²⁰ for the government to fulfil its pledge to make all schools fit for purpose. Meanwhile, millions of children continue to be educated in conditions not conducive to learning and possibly detrimental to their health.

Pupils with additional needs pay the highest price

Underfunding has a disproportionate impact on pupils with disabilities, special educational needs and from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Over 90 per cent of funding intended to support disadvantaged students is not ring-fenced, and school leaders are increasingly reporting using pupil premium funding to plug other budget gaps.²¹ In a 2024 survey by social mobility charity the Sutton Trust, **47 per cent** of senior school leaders said they were using the pupil premium to fill budget shortfalls, up from 23 per cent in 2019.²²

The number of pupils with education, health and care plans (EHCPs) has tripled since 2015,²³ but funding has not kept pace, leaving children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) unable to access appropriate staff support and specialist programmes. Plans outlined in the government's 2026 white paper on SEND provision, while welcome, will struggle to deliver meaningful improvements for children and young people without adequate resources, including through investment in additional specialist staff and support services.

Cuts to other public spending hurts schools

It is not just education that is suffering under tight funding constraints. From the NHS to social care, children and families are not receiving the quality care and investment that they need. The ramifications of pressures on other public services often spill over into schools, with teachers and support staff expected to fill the gaps.

As families struggle to keep up with the rising cost of living, children are arriving to school hungry, tired, anxious and less ready to learn. School staff have reported washing pupils' clothes and teachers feeding pupils from their own pockets.²⁴ With **over a quarter** of the UK's children living in poverty,²⁵ falling living standards are limiting the life chances of millions of children, affecting their educational experiences and outcomes in school.

A workforce under pressure

Funding pressures have placed unsustainable expectations on school staff. Teachers are handling intense workloads, problematic levels of work-related stress and rising pupil need, without reprieve in sight.

As demands rise, experienced teacher pay has declined by **23 per cent** in real terms since 2010, leaving earnings below those of many comparable professions.²⁶ Support staff have experienced similar declines. As a result, schools face ongoing recruitment and retention challenges, with shortages particularly acute in key subjects and specialist roles.



Schools face continued real-terms cuts

While the government's commitment to fully fund the 2026-27 teacher pay award is welcome, there is much more to be done to close ongoing funding gaps. After 16 years of underfunding, schools have been running on empty, exhausting all available efficiencies to keep up with inflation and rising costs without further harm to children's education. Real-terms cuts will remain a reality until there is significant additional funding for education and a long-term solution to school funding and pay.

As the defence budget continues to grow, the prospect of education receiving the levels of investment it desperately needs is at risk. This will result in continued pressure on schools to shed subjects, reduce support staff, and cut back on essential maintenance to balance the books.

What could be done with £36 billion in education?

Reaching the UK's 3.5 per cent military spending target is estimated to cost an additional £36 billion per year. If this was spent on education, it could:

- Reverse real-terms losses to school spending power in England (£4.5 billion)²⁷
- Eliminate the 2026-27 SEND funding gap for local authorities (£3.7 billion)²⁸
- Clear the maintenance backlog for all schools in England (£13.8 billion)²⁹
- Fund universal free school meals through year 11 (£3 billion)³⁰
- Restore overseas aid to education to peak levels (£1 billion)³¹
- Fill the funding shortfall for music education (£0.2 billion)³²

This would leave another ~£10 billion to restore pay for teachers and other school staff, which have declined significantly since 2010 against inflation and average earnings across the rest of the economy, and pay for other school needs.



Students in a classroom in Kismayo, Somalia supported by the Global Partnership for Education's Girls' Education Accelerator, a programme which helps girls overcome conflict, displacement, drought and poverty to access education. The UK has cut its contributions to GPE by 77%.

Photo credit: GPE/AP

Aid to education decimated

While chronic underinvestment in education is a global phenomenon, gaps in funding which prevent children from accessing their right to education is particularly acute in low- and middle-income countries.

As of 2023, lower-income countries faced a US\$100 billion annual shortfall to meet their education targets.³³ Between 2023 and 2027, it is estimated that **global aid to education will fall by 30 per cent**, putting an already strained financing landscape under even more stress.³⁴

Once a leading donor to education, the UK government has played a key role in driving reductions in international aid to education. Between 2013 and 2023, the UK reduced the share of its ODA budget allocated to education from 13.5 per cent to just 3.5 per cent. The latest

round of aid cuts will leave **UK aid to education almost 80 per cent below its peak in 2016**.³⁵

Failure by donors to meet their funding commitments to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has had a clear impact on the rate of progress toward achieving SDG4 – education for all. The latest data, published in 2024, showed that 273 million children were out of school, an increase of three per cent since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015.³⁶ At current rates of progress, the world will likely never achieve universal completion of secondary school.³⁷ The greatest impact is felt by the most marginalised children, with girls, disabled children and minority populations most likely to lose their right to education.



Choosing to honour defence spending commitments but not those to global education puts our world's priorities into stark perspective. Far from being unattainable, **funding education for every child in the world would be just a small fraction of annual global military spending:**

- Just **1.5 days** of global military spending in 2025 would be enough to fund an entire year of the amount governments gave in aid to education globally.³⁸
- Delivering 12 years of education to every child in low- and lower-middle-income countries would cost **less than a quarter** of the sum spent by the world's militaries over the last decade.³⁹
- Just **a** portion of the increase in global military spending between 2023 and 2024 could finance the entire annual education funding gap for low- and lower-middle-income countries **twice over**.⁴⁰
- Addressing the global teacher shortage would require just **five per cent** of what was spent globally on militaries in 2025.⁴¹

Consequences of aid cuts for Rohingya children

In Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, the world's largest refugee camp, half a million Rohingya children have relied on international assistance for basic education and essential services. Denied access to employment and formal education outside of the camps, international aid has been the only way to access necessities for many Rohingya. Yet in 2025, aid cuts by the US and UK led to nearly all education provision in the camps abruptly ending.

The NEU has been working with Rohingya Centre UK on an educational plan for the Cox's Bazar refugee camps and the wider Rohingya diaspora. The partnership focuses on developing and advocating for a sustainable strategy to restore and improve education for Rohingya children and young people, delivered by Rohingya teachers. The aim is to build capacity among the Rohingya people so they can act on their own behalf. NEU members have supported the initiative through online teaching, mentoring and subject specialist guidance for Rohingya teachers, while the NEU nationally has funded key aspects of the programme.



Students at a community-led learning centre in Nayapara Refugee Camp, Cox's Bazar during a visit from a RCUK delegation.

Photo credit: Rohingya Centre UK



The walls of a girls' school riddled with bullet holes in Omdurman City, Sudan. Schools remain under attack in hot spots and active battle areas.

Photo credit: UNICEF/UNI625427/Mohamedelamin

Education in conflict

Education is often one of the first rights lost during crises and one of the last to be restored.

One in five of the world's children live within 50km of an armed conflict,⁴² putting the education of millions of children at risk of being interrupted or denied.

It is estimated that 258 million school-aged children currently have their education affected by conflict and crises, with 93 million completely out of school.⁴³ Girls in fragile and conflict-affected settings are more than twice as likely to be out of school than girls in non-affected contexts.⁴⁴

Even when formal systems collapse, communities in crisis go to great lengths to keep education alive. Teachers continue working, even when unpaid, and families continue to prioritise education and keep children

enrolled until their resources are exhausted, a powerful testament to the hope that education represents for people in conflict situations.⁴⁵

Education under attack

Amid the increasing number of armed conflicts globally, there has also been a rise in the number of attacks on schools and other educational settings, in violation of international law.

The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack recorded at least 9,259 attacks on education in 2024-2025, **more than a 50 per cent increase** compared to 2022-2023.⁴⁶ These attacks have killed thousands of students and staff, destroyed schools, and restricted the use and delivery of educational materials.

Ukraine experienced around 900 attacks on schools during this period. In Iran, 120 children were killed in an attack on a primary school



in Minab. In Colombia, attacks on schools, teachers, and students – as well as the military use of schools – also increased, and the country remains the most dangerous in the world for teacher trade unionists.

The occupied Palestinian territory Education Cluster, the UN-coordinated humanitarian mechanism for education in Gaza and the West Bank, estimates that **over 97 per cent** of educational buildings have been damaged or destroyed in Gaza,⁴⁷ and the Palestinian education ministry reports that over 19,100 school students and 800 school staff have been killed since 2023.⁴⁸

UN experts have determined that the degree to which educational facilities have been erased in Gaza is an intentional effort to comprehensively destroy the Palestinian education system, known as **scholasticide**.⁴⁹ A pillar of genocide, scholasticide contributes to the elimination of spaces where collective memory, identity, knowledge, culture and resistance are produced.⁵⁰

Attacking education can be a tactic of war. Armed groups might target education for a number of reasons: the perception that educators support a particular party to the conflict; that educators are a symbol of the state; that they prevent children being recruited into armed gangs; that school buildings are being used by military forces or their opponents; that they spread ideas deemed to be objectionable, such as the importance of girls' education.

The impact of UK arms sales

The UK government's Strategic Defence Review and Defence Investment Plan seek to expand the UK's role as an arms exporter, despite widespread evidence of atrocities conducted in conflicts in which British-made weapons and components have been deployed.

In Gaza, the UK government has continued to allow arms sales and other military support to Israeli forces, including parts for the F-35 fighter jets that have dropped bombs on civilians in Gaza and Lebanon.⁵¹ This is despite a UN commission finding that Israel has committed genocide in the Gaza Strip and mounting evidence of grave violations of international law conducted by the Israeli military.⁵²

The UK has also continued to approve over £420 million worth of arms export licences and military equipment sales to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), despite evidence that British-made military equipment has been diverted to, and used by, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan.⁵³ Evidence submitted to the UN Security Council identified British-manufactured components used by the RSF, a paramilitary group that has been accused of carrying out mass atrocities and genocide in a conflict that has killed at least 150,000 people, forced more than 12 million to flee their homes and created the world's biggest humanitarian crisis.⁵⁴

The UK government has a responsibility to do everything in its power to uphold International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and protect children. This includes immediately suspending all arms sales to the governments of Israel and the UAE, including parts for F-35 fighter jets, as well as to any other countries committing violations of IHL.



Children taking part in recreational activities organised by UNRWA teams in front of destroyed buildings in Khan Younis, Gaza.

Photo credit: 2024 UNRWA

The costs of reconstruction and recovery

Recovery from war is immensely painful, difficult and expensive, leaving lasting marks on people and places.

It is estimated that the cost of rebuilding Gaza amounts to US\$71.4. billion.⁵⁵ But alongside this, recovering from the dehumanisation experienced, the shredding of social fabric, destruction of social networks and collective trust, and all the other human impacts of the war will take decades to rebuild. For so many, life-changing injuries, the pain of losing loved ones and shattered livelihoods will stay with them for their whole lives.

The damage inflicted by conflict extends far beyond destroyed classrooms and schools. Displacement, violence and trauma can keep children out of education for months or years, affecting children's life outcomes, slowing community recovery and undermining prospects for long-term peace and prosperity.



NEU solidarity with teachers in emergencies

Teacher pay in conflict settings is often unreliable and fragmented,⁵⁶ which has a significant impact on teachers' livelihoods and on the quality of education they can provide for their students.⁵⁷

The NEU is working with Education International (EI), the global federation of teacher trade unions, to address gaps in financing and support sustainable teacher salaries in crisis and emergency settings.

The NEU is a leading donor to EI's solidarity fund for teachers in Palestine, which provides direct support to educators affected by the conflict. The NEU also supports the General Union of Palestinian Teachers (GUPT) to train its members to support students experiencing trauma from the war.

In Ukraine, the NEU has supported the Trade Union of Education and Science Workers of Ukraine (TUESWU), throughout the past four years of Russia's illegal invasion, providing financial assistance to affected educators and supporting the construction of a children's summer camp outside Kyiv, including an emergency shelter to ensure learning can continue safely.



Members of the NEU Ukraine Solidarity Network at the 2026 NEU Annual Conference

Investing in education for peace

The mechanisms for building peace amid and following conflict, including through education, face a dearth of resourcing as funding is diverted away from humanitarian and development budgets.

Mounting evidence has shown that investing in education is essential for peacebuilding, both in the short and long term.⁵⁸ Yet, education is often treated as an afterthought in humanitarian responses.

Countries with high education levels experience higher social and political stability, while countries with low education levels experience a higher occurrence and intensity of internal conflict.⁵⁹ Any vision for and investment in peace is incomplete without free, quality, inclusive and equitable education.



A teacher in front of a classroom in Kiritimati Island, Kiribati, where students continue to attend school despite challenges posed by climate change.

Photo credit: GPE/Arlene Bax

Section 3: Rethinking security

There are valid concerns to be had about the state of the world's security. However, security is about more than just defence. Diverting public funding to military spending comes with its own risks, which themselves must be weighed against those posed by military threats. The conversation about what security entails must therefore broaden to ask: does more military spending necessarily make us safer? And what is required to ensure genuine security?

A worthwhile investment?

Will higher spending targets make us safer?

Russia has escalated its threats against NATO countries, with the UK a particular target. This is a serious challenge that our country should prepare for. However, more important than headline spending targets is how money is spent and the degree to which it is scrutinised to ensure it is effective and proportionate.

Europe's collective security challenges cannot be explained as simply a lack of military funding. NATO countries currently account for around 55 per cent of global military expenditure, compared with approximately 6.6 per cent for Russia. The UK alone accounted for 3.1 per cent of the world's spending on militaries in 2025.⁶⁰ With spending already at this scale, the question of our security is therefore not simply about how



much money is spent, but whether our current approaches are the right ones and whether resources are being directed in the most effective way to address the challenges we face.

There is evidence that greater attention is needed to ensure that additional UK defence funding is the best use of resources. Analysis by the Transition Security Project has shown more than **£7 billion per year** is lost to waste, fraud and overspending in the Ministry of Defence (MoD),⁶¹ while former defence minister Al Carns described the scale of waste and inefficiency within the MoD as “unbelievable”.⁶²

The global rise in military spending has prompted the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) to advocate for parliamentarians to apply stronger democratic oversight of defence budgets. The IPU warns that weak transparency and accountability in military spending carries significant risks, including heightened risk of conflict through arms races, unnecessarily diverted public resources, greater vulnerability to poverty, disease and inequality, and democratic erosion.⁶³

Examining the defence dividend for working people

A common justification for increased military spending is a “defence dividend” of job creation and economic growth. While increased defence spending can boost some parts of the economy, the benefits are not always felt by British workers and should be examined against the opportunity costs of lost investment in other sectors, as well as alternative approaches to foreign policy.

There is strong evidence to suggest that increasing defence spending creates fewer jobs than equivalent investment in other areas of public spending. The Transition Security Project estimates public cuts used to fund the increase in military spending in the Defence Investment Plan (DIP) will result in a net loss of around

10,000 jobs across the UK, rising to 20,000 if the remaining third of the DIP is funded through cuts to other public spending.⁶⁴ United Nations analysis found that every US\$1 billion spent on the military creates approximately 11,200 jobs, compared with around 26,700 jobs generated by the same investment in education.⁶⁵

A significant share of the economic benefits associated with defence spending accrues outside the UK. Some 85 per cent of the weapons the UK imports come from the US⁶⁶ and recent growth in European military spending has been shown to support nearly 200,000 American jobs.⁶⁷

There are also reasons to be cautious of claims about the potential benefits to economic growth. The UN estimates that, in NATO countries, a one percentage point increase in spending on military personnel actually reduces GDP growth.⁶⁸ The Institute for Fiscal Studies has similarly cautioned that the growth benefits of higher defence spending are far from certain and must be considered in relation to the returns that could be generated through investment in public services like health and education, which produce strong benefits to economies.⁶⁹



The number of jobs US\$1 billion could create:



11,200 in the military



26,700 in education



17,200 in health care



16,800 in clean energy

Military spending creates jobs, but civil sectors consistently generate more employment per dollar invested.

Source: The Security We Need, UN Secretary General report, 2025⁷⁰

The costs of conflict

The use of military force can itself deepen insecurity. UN secretary general António Guterres has warned that **excessive military spending undermines rather than strengthens security** by driving arms races, deepening mistrust and reducing investment in the social and economic conditions that support peace.⁷¹

Conflict causes displacement, destroys infrastructure and livelihoods, damages cohesion within communities and erodes faith in government institutions. Arms races create perverse incentives for further military expansion with no clear end point, while an increasingly militarised approach to international relations can weaken diplomacy and multilateral mechanisms for resolving disputes before they become conflicts.⁷²

Military activity can also wreak havoc on the global economy and working people. The US and Israel's illegal war on Iran has exacerbated the cost-of-living crisis in the UK, causing annual energy bills to rise by £221, while monthly food bills are forecast to rise by £32.80.⁷³

War also comes with a significant environmental cost. In addition to the destruction of habitats and the carbon footprint of military activity – an estimated 5.5 per cent of global emissions⁷⁴

– **resources spent on war are resources not being invested in an urgently needed green transition.** This carries long-term economic as well as environmental consequences. Climate change is frequently characterised as a 'threat multiplier' as it worsens existing inequalities and pressures that drive displacement and sow conflict.⁷⁵

The security we need

Evidence that the benefits of increased military spending have been overstated also come into tension with concerns that the UK is chasing spending targets disconnected from the drivers of insecurity and the experiences of people at the individual level. Together, these raise serious questions about the case for substantially higher defence expenditure and the trade-offs it will require, versus what can be achieved when we make spending choices applying a broader understanding of security.

Understanding insecurity

For most people in the UK, security is experienced not only through protection from external threats, but through the conditions of everyday life. Security includes whether people can afford to cover their basic needs, to access quality healthcare and education, to live free from violence and discrimination, and to have confidence in the institutions and communities around them.



Globally, in an unprecedented era of multiple, interlocking crises, characterised by some scholars as a ‘**polycrisis**’,⁷⁶ the imperative to take a multifaceted approach to global challenges has never been so important.

Many of today’s global security challenges cannot be effectively addressed with conventional military approaches. Conflict, poverty, inequality, climate change, displacement, political instability and the erosion of democratic institutions all contribute to instability, with cross-border consequences that impact the UK.

The UK government’s decision to redirect funding from development assistance, which aims to tackle these challenges at their root, to defence has been criticised by politicians, security experts and military officials as a ‘false economy’ that prioritises conflict response over prevention. In 2026, more than 50 former UK senior military officials signed an open letter to the prime minister warning that redirecting funding from international development to defence would harm security, arguing that the move would remove ‘the first line of defence’ against global instability and extremism.⁷⁷

Forms and drivers of insecurity

Economic insecurity

- Poverty
- Work and income insecurity
- Wealth and income inequality
- Cost-of-living pressures
- Lack of access to social protection

Democratic insecurity

- Misinformation and disinformation
- Political polarisation
- Disillusionment with political processes
- Declining trust in institutions
- Restrictions on rights and freedoms
- Weakened institutions

Community insecurity

- Social exclusion
- Breakdown of social cohesion
- Community violence
- Ethnic or religious tensions
- Loss of cultural identity
- Loneliness and social isolation

Climate insecurity

- Extreme weather
- Flooding and coastal erosion
- Biodiversity and ecosystem loss
- Exposure to environmental hazards
- Damage to infrastructure and livelihoods

Personal insecurity

- Violence against women and girls
- Hate crimes and discrimination
- Physical violence
- Crime and victimisation
- Exploitation and trafficking

Health insecurity

- Infectious diseases
- Poor mental health
- Limited access to healthcare
- Unsafe water and sanitation
- Unsafe living conditions
- Health inequalities



A human security approach

To create a more secure world, the UK government must do more than seek to deter or respond to military threats. It must also create strong public institutions, social cohesion, international cooperation, effective diplomacy and investment in the conditions that enable people to live safe, healthy and dignified lives.

Developed within the United Nations after the end of the Cold War, a human security approach places people rather than states at the centre of security policy. It recognises that security is interconnected and that people cannot be secure if they are protected from one threat while remaining exposed to poverty, hunger, violence, discrimination or environmental destruction.⁷⁸

A human-security approach emphasises meeting basic needs, protecting human rights and the rule of law, tackling inequality, advancing gender and racial equality, addressing climate change, strengthening democratic institutions, and supporting peacebuilding, diplomacy and international cooperation.

Three core pillars of human security:⁷⁹

- **Freedom from want:** ensuring people have access to the resources and opportunities to meet their basic needs, including education, healthcare, food, water, housing and decent livelihoods.
- **Freedom from fear:** protection from violence, armed conflict, human rights abuses and other threats to personal safety.
- **Freedom to live in dignity:** protection of human rights, equality and inclusion, ensuring all people live with respect, opportunity and agency.

This conception of security does not ignore military threats. Rather, it recognises that military capability is only one component of a wider strategy, and that military capability must not come at the expense of the social, economic and environmental foundations on which lasting security depends.

This broader understanding of security allows us to build the world that we want to see – one which truly creates the conditions of safety, dignity and peace.



Primary school pupils water pots with sunflower seeds.

Section 4: Financing a better future

For too long, security in the UK has been undermined by increasing inequality and underinvestment in the conditions that ensure a safer, more sustainable and more prosperous world for everyone.

As the fifth largest global economy,⁸⁰ it is possible to balance national security with investments in education, international development and domestic public services. But how we pay for those investments matters.

Who pays?

The weight of the UK's military spending is currently falling on those least able to shoulder the burden. From cuts to the overseas aid budget, and plans to substantially reduce welfare, to future opportunity costs and investment in public services, it is the world's poorest and ordinary working people in the UK who are footing the bill.

Those with the most to spare have not been asked to make any sacrifices to pay for these increases, as resistance to taxing exponential increases in wealth has led to soaring inequality. Since 1990, billionaire wealth in the UK has **grown by over 1,000 per cent.**⁸¹ Today, 40 UK families currently have more wealth than 50 per cent of the country's population.⁸² Meanwhile, working people have been asked to withstand prolonged periods of austerity, and low-income households have been disproportionately affected by rising cost of living.⁸³



Strong public support for fairer taxation

Support is growing for new taxes on wealth. YouGov polling commissioned by Oxfam found that **78 per cent** of the British public support a two per cent tax on wealth over £10 million and **77 per cent** of the public would prefer the government to raise taxes on the very richest to improve public finances than to cut public services.⁸⁴ Polling from the group Patriotic Millionaires UK found even higher support among millionaires themselves, with **80 per cent** of those surveyed supporting the two per cent wealth tax.⁸⁵

Further reforms which crack down on tax avoidance and evasion, close loopholes, and phase out unfair tax breaks and tax relief schemes could also raise significant funding for public services without placing an additional burden on working people.

A new approach to the economy is needed

The choices we make about spending priorities are ultimately shaped by deeper assumptions about what the economy and our government exist to achieve. Rebalancing military spending with social spending is a part of a broader task to rethink economic ideologies that have too often placed traditional military and disembodied economic growth targets ahead of human rights, public wellbeing and long-term sustainability.

Decades of neoliberalism have resulted in chronic under-investment in education and undermined the principles central to inclusive, high-quality public education. An economy that consistently fails to adequately fund teachers, schools and learning opportunities for all, while finding ever greater resources for military expansion, is making more than just budget choices, it is an expression of a vision about what matters most.

A different approach would evaluate economic success not only through measures such as GDP growth, but through the **extent to which people are able to live secure, healthy, and dignified lives at home and around the world.** It would recognise education, welfare and other public services not simply as consuming resources, but as foundational investments that underpin economic prosperity, democratic participation, social cohesion and long-term security.

Building real security requires challenging our assumptions of the way the economy works. Different choices are possible, and necessary, to advance a more secure, equitable and sustainable future for all.



Global economic justice for education justice

The vast majority of funding for education in lower-income countries comes from domestic budgets, but the fiscal space and economic freedom to invest sustainably in their own education systems is subject to global constraints. A fairer global economic system is needed to raise sustainable funding for schools, teachers and public services.

Debt is crowding out spending on education

Currently, 113 countries spend more on debt payments than on education.⁸⁶ Low-income countries often borrow at higher interest rates than wealthy countries, despite having fewer resources or viable alternatives to fund essential services.

Unfair tax rules reduce public revenue

US\$88 billion is lost every year in African Union countries to illicit financial flows.⁸⁷ Many low-income countries also have very low tax-to-GDP ratios, making public revenue difficult to raise. International tax cooperation has historically been led through the OECD, where lower-income countries have limited influence over rule-making that affects their ability to raise revenue.

Imposed austerity limits investment in teachers and schools

Lower-income countries facing debt distress are frequently instructed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to restrict public spending, even when repaying creditors comes at the expense of people's lives and human rights. Public sector wage constraints recommended by the IMF have a disproportionate effect on teachers as one of the largest groups of public employees.⁸⁸

The UK is in a powerful position to effect change

- Support debt relief and reforms to free up fiscal space for spending on education and public services.
- Tackle international tax abuse and support fairer, more inclusive global tax governance, including by supporting tax governance moving to the UN.
- Use its influence in the IMF to oppose austerity measures that undermine investment in teachers, schools and education.



The Security we choose: a call to action

Amid international pressure to meet military spending targets and respond to increasing conflict, the UK needs a broad and grounded vision of security. We must ask bold questions about what truly creates the conditions for peace, and whether more military investment can accomplish this.

We must balance the need to respond to genuine threats with the responsibility to invest in the conditions for people to live secure lives, in the UK and globally.

The choices made today will shape the security, wellbeing and opportunities of the next generation.

Our vision for a more secure future

- Education is adequately funded and protected as a fundamental human right in the UK and around the world.
- UK international development assistance is restored to the legally enshrined target of 0.7 per cent GNI
- Diplomacy, peacebuilding, human rights, international law and international cooperation are strengthened as a core aspect of security.
- The UK ends arms sales to governments and actors that risk contributing to human rights abuses or violations of international humanitarian law.
- Funding and support to humanitarian organisations is commensurate with the scale of needs generated by conflict and insecurity.
- Public services and communities have the resources needed to support resilience, wellbeing and opportunity for all.
- Climate action and the green transition receive the investment and long-term commitment needed to mitigate climate breakdown and build resilience.
- Those with the greatest wealth contribute their fair share to invest in a more secure and equal future.
- The global financial system supports all countries to sustainably fund human rights obligations, through fairer approaches to debt, taxation and economic governance.



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