

# The Global Climate Crisis: A Child Rights Crisis



*"Acknowledging that climate change is a common concern of humankind, Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity."*

UNFCCC Paris Agreement, 2015

*"This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you. You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words."*

Greta Thunberg, 16-year old climate activist, UN Climate Action Summit, 2019

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



- Climate change arguably poses the single greatest challenge to the realisation of children's rights, and threatens to undercut decades of hard-won progress to improve their lives.
- Despite being least responsible for this unfolding crisis, children bear the brunt of the climate-related impacts, while possessing the fewest resources to respond and cope. At its core, climate change represents a shocking abdication of one generation's responsibility to the next, violating principles of intergenerational equity. Drought, flooding, extreme weather events, rising temperatures, and desertification directly undermine a broad spectrum of children's rights, from access to food and safe water, to housing, education, freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse, and – too frequently – their right to survive and thrive. Moreover, because resilience to climate change is shaped by broader socio-economic factors, such as gender inequality and poverty, the situation is particularly fraught for marginalised girls and other highly-vulnerable groups of children, compounding the multiple hardships that they face.
- Tackling climate change demands urgent attention to equity, across borders and generations. The countries that have contributed least to the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere tend to be the most vulnerable and to have limited capacity for adaptation. Because they also tend to have proportionately large and rapidly-growing child populations, their vulnerability to climate change puts ever-greater numbers of children at risk.
- Despite the catastrophic implications for children's rights posed by climate change, as well as the growing global movement of children and youth calling for ambitious climate action, recognition of children's rights barely feature in key international, regional and national decision-making frameworks related to climate change, including the Paris Agreement and workstreams under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), as well as the SDGs. This oversight is a violation of the guiding principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), notably that the best interest of the child – as well as their right to be heard – should be primary considerations in any decision that affects them.



## Critical data and problem analysis

Since the adoption of the UN CRC in 1989, unprecedented gains have been made in children's health, nutrition, access to education, and formal protections in laws and policies. Yet this progress risks being undermined by the escalating climate crisis, which poses an acute threat to children's survival, development and wellbeing.

Average global temperatures have already surpassed 1°C above pre-industrial levels, exposing millions of children, particularly among the most disadvantaged communities, to significant and severe threats to their rights. Even the "best-case" scenario (limiting global warming to 1.5°C) would effectively put millions of children at risk of life-threatening climate-related impacts.<sup>1</sup>

## Children are one of the largest groups affected by climate change

- ➔ Many of the countries that are most vulnerable to climate change also have a higher proportion of children in their populations,<sup>2</sup> with demographic trends suggesting that many of these countries are also those in which child populations tend to be growing most rapidly. According to UNICEF data, over half a billion children live in areas with extremely high risk of flooding; 115 million are at high or extremely high risk from tropical cyclones, and almost 160 million are exposed to high or extremely high drought severity.<sup>3</sup>

## Children face disproportionate and cascading forms of climate harm

- ➔ Children are disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of climate change largely because the early stage of their physiological and cognitive development makes them less-equipped to deal with climate-related shocks and stresses. This is particularly the case between birth and the age of 5. For example, by 2100, 75% of the world's people are projected to be exposed to heatwaves so extreme they can kill.<sup>4</sup> Young children are more vulnerable than adults to the life-threatening effects of heatwaves, since they are less able to regulate their body temperature, and must rely on others to control the temperature of the surrounding environment.<sup>5</sup> Children are also more likely than adults to be injured, to experience psychological trauma, or be killed by natural hazard-related disasters.<sup>6</sup>
- ➔ Children are also more likely to experience health complications due to the impacts of climate change on water and food security, such as drought, crop failure, and decreased nutritional value of staple crops due to higher carbon dioxide concentrations. Nearly half of all deaths among children under the age of 5 are associated with undernutrition, which also places children at greater risk of dying from infections and diseases.<sup>7</sup> Undernutrition in the first two years of life can lead to irreversible stunting, with negative effects on children's physical and cognitive development, impacting their health, educational performance, and economic productivity later in life.<sup>8</sup> The WHO estimates that climate change will lead to nearly 95,000 additional deaths per year due to undernutrition in children aged 5 and under by 2030, and an additional 24 million undernourished children by 2050.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, climate change is expected to lead to an additional 7.5 million children under the age of 5 who are moderately or severely stunted by 2030.<sup>10</sup>



- ➔ Rising temperatures are increasing the incidence of water- and vector-borne diseases, such as malaria and dengue fever. Children under the age of 5 already bear the global burden of these diseases, accounting for almost 80% of all deaths from malaria in 2014.<sup>11</sup> It is anticipated that by 2030, climate change will result in an additional 60,000 deaths from malaria among children under the age of 15. Diarrhoeal disease is another leading cause of death among children, and is also set to increase as a result of drought, flooding and changing precipitation patterns, threatening safe water supplies and hygiene practices. By 2030, climate-related increases in diarrhoeal disease are anticipated to lead to the death of an additional 48,000 children under the age of 15.<sup>12</sup>
- ➔ Beyond children's rights to life, survival, development and health, climate change also threatens their right to education. Extreme weather events destroy schools, while climate-related impacts on nutrition and physical and mental health affect children's ability to learn. Loss of family livelihoods and income due to climate stress is also correlated with loss of education as children are obliged to assist with household tasks, or to seek work, leading to increases in child labour, child marriage, and other violations of their rights.<sup>13</sup>
- ➔ Children are acutely vulnerable in the context of climate-related migration and displacement.<sup>14</sup> For example, climate change can lead to internal migration of families to urban areas where children may be forced into labour. The disruptive effects of migration on family networks can be particularly harmful for young children aged 0-3 who are often left at home alone or in the care of young siblings while their parents seek or go to work.



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## Gender dimensions of climate change

The impacts of climate change, as well as the measures that are adopted to address these, frequently exacerbate gender inequalities. For example, adolescent girls are particularly affected by threats to safe water supplies, since they are often responsible for water collection. They may be required to travel further to find sufficient quantities of water in a changing climate, representing a significant physical and time-consuming burden, with implications for their education, leisure time and wellbeing. In addition, during long journeys to fetch water or other household resources, such as firewood, girls may be exposed to risks such as sexual violence. A lack of water also raises clear sexual and reproductive health concerns, as girls need access to water and hygiene and sanitation purposes during menstruation and pregnancy<sup>15</sup>.

Climate stress also leads to negative coping mechanisms. Human Rights Watch has documented how families facing repeated climate-related shocks in their communities due to river erosion, loss of crops or cyclones, were more likely to marry off their daughters at a young age, before they were displaced. Boys meanwhile may be at increased risk of child labour and exploitation in conflict areas<sup>16</sup>.

➔ More than 1.2 billion people live in extreme poverty – a third of these are children under the age of 13. In low-income countries, more than 50 per cent of all children live in extreme poverty.<sup>17</sup> Climate change has a disproportionate impact on those already facing chronic poverty and hunger and inhibits the ability of parents and caregivers to meet the basic needs of their children. Seventy-five percent of food insecure people are smallholder farmers in developing countries who depend on agriculture as a main source of food and income. Smallholder agriculture is a natural resource-based economic activity that is increasingly challenged by drought, saline intrusion, flooding, land degradation and desertification.<sup>18</sup>

## Marginalised children are first and worst-affected

➔ Predictably, marginalised children that are most at risk of being left behind in global development efforts, are also those that are disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Girls, poor children, indigenous children, minorities, children on the move, and children with disabilities, are first and worst-affected by climate change. For example, girls are more likely to be removed from school to help with household tasks, such as fetching water and firewood, and are more likely to suffer from domestic violence, trafficking, exploitation and abuse in the wake of climate-related disasters.<sup>19</sup>

Poor families are more likely to occupy land that is highly-exposed to the impacts of climate change, and to have less access to adequate housing and climate-resilient services such as water and sanitation, increasing their vulnerability to climate shocks.<sup>20</sup> The World Bank estimates that climate change impacts could push an additional 100 million people into poverty by 2030.<sup>21</sup>

The implications for children are grave, given that they are globally twice as likely as adults to be poor, and account for half of all people who remain in extreme poverty.<sup>22</sup>

Progress towards a rights-based approach to climate action appears to be faltering



## Children are among the least empowered in climate change policy-making and action

Despite the evidence of the severe consequences of climate change for children, international and national frameworks on climate change largely ignore children's right to be heard and for their best interests. Children are conspicuously absent from key policy processes under the UNFCCC, including core workstreams, decisions, and the possibility to participate in the yearly annual negotiations, which is highly restricted for children under the age of 18.

While recognition of youth in these processes has increased, with a Children and Youth constituency providing a platform, in reality children are overlooked and barely represented.<sup>23</sup> Although children are technically part of this group, and certain issues that children and youth face overlap, children have a specific set of concerns and needs, which continue to go unheard.

The inclusion of children's rights in the preamble of the Paris Agreement represents a critical step forward but, this promise has yet to be operationalised, and progress towards a rights-based approach to climate action more broadly appears to be faltering.<sup>24</sup> Targets under SDG 13 on Climate Action include a welcome focus on youth as a group that should be considered, but this is not sufficient to ensure that children's specific rights, needs and vulnerabilities are addressed, and that no child is left behind.

At both international and national levels, a key challenge is that decision-making on climate change tends to be led by Ministries with limited knowledge of children's rights. A pervasive lack of disaggregated data with respect to age and gender and the impacts of climate change further hinders the attention that this receives in climate policies and action.



The passion and activism of the global movement of children's Fridays for Future climate strikes has helped to challenge this status quo, catapulting children's concerns into the political arena.

However, the capacity of millions of children, especially the most marginalised, to contribute meaningfully to discourse and action on climate change remains limited by the incomplete implementation of states' obligations under the UN CRC to provide environmental education to all children (Article 29). Quality environmental and climate change education and access to information are essential for empowering children to protect themselves from climate-related threats, to exercise their rights to be heard on climate change policies and action, and to seek remedy for harm.<sup>25</sup>

## Promoting children's rights in climate action: what works in practice

Unsurprisingly, children's absence from key climate governance frameworks limits effect on the development of child-centred public climate policies and action. Nonetheless, exceptions exist that provide important models of best practice to governments and other actors.



- ➔ The Philippines' 2016 Children's Emergency Relief and Protection Act mandates the provision of emergency relief and protection for children before, during, and after disaster and other emergency situations threatening their survival and development. The Act was developed in collaboration with children and is guided by the UN CRC, as well as the Children's Charter for Disaster Risk Reduction,<sup>26</sup> and clarifies the responsibilities of various government sectors to ensure that children's basic needs are met in emergency settings. The Act is particularly pertinent in a country that consistently ranks among the world's most vulnerable to climate-related disasters, such as Typhoon Haiyan, one of the most powerful cyclones ever recorded.<sup>27</sup>
- ➔ In Germany, the Government has a commitment to protecting the best interests of the child in its development cooperation policy and across all projects, ensuring that this principle informs assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation, including funding for climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and resilience-building projects that involve children and youth.<sup>28</sup>
- ➔ In the United States, children are using the legal system to enforce their rights and guarantee a safe climate. The Juliana et al. v. United States of America et al. case is led by a group of 21 plaintiffs aged 9-20 filing suit against the US Federal Government for its failure to adequately address climate change, representing a violation of their constitutional rights to, inter alia, life, liberty and property.<sup>29</sup> Similar child-led cases are underway around the world, including a recent complaint to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child under the Optional Protocol for a Communications Procedure.<sup>30</sup>



In Zambia, the Ministry of Education and the Wildlife and Environmental Conservation Society of Zambia have partnered with UNICEF to empower children with knowledge and advocacy skills through the child-led Unite4Climate programme.<sup>31</sup>

More than 1,000 Climate Ambassadors have been trained, who in turn reach thousands more through media, programmes, debates, advocacy for community-based projects, and through conservation efforts. Since its inception in 2009, young people from 210 schools have planted more than 30,000 trees nationwide.

The programme has raised the voices of children to the national level through engagement with Government, Members of Parliament, and traditional leaders, to influence national and international climate policies.

At the programmatic level, best practice examples exist. For example, a ChildFund Korea project focusing on eco-system based, youth-led disaster risk reduction in Sri Lanka involves children and youth in climate change adaptation. The project is enhancing the resilience of the community through a youth-led approach to disaster management, building their capacity to cope with and avert disasters, including through eco-system restoration, and linking child and youth groups to district, divisional and community level service providers to undertake advocacy and resource mobilisation efforts over the long-term.<sup>32</sup>

## Children's voices

Here are some responses to a global poll asking children the question: what action do you want world leaders to take with respect to children's rights and the environment?<sup>33</sup> They emphasised the importance and need for environmental education to empower children, and for more avenues to be made available for children to participate in decision-making processes.<sup>34</sup>

***"Accept that we are facing a new challenge and if we don't work together our planet won't survive. The children won't have a home. We have to work together. Raise our voices and help each other to do better for us and our planet."***

***"I would like world leaders to stop fooling around. Children are the number one priority because their future needs to be protected. Let children be leaders...Enable children to attend COP with world leaders"***

***"Allow young people to play a more integral part in policy making as it relates to environmental preservation and global sustainable development in general"***

***"Globally move to a carbon neutral society and 100% renewable energy. A transition and phase-out of coal, oil and gas (fossil fuels). A circular economy. Prioritise the future of my generations, and younger generations over everything else."***

***"Ask [children's] opinion about what measures to take. Even if they are not implemented, children will have already established that their voice matters and will be more aware of their future decisions while teaching people close to them about what is happening"***

***"Create programmes with the sole purpose of educating people regarding the climate crisis, create a mandatory one-year course in schools for young children in which children will be taught the dangers of climate crisis in detail and how they can help reverse it"***



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## Calls to Action: realising children's rights in a transforming climate

- ➔ **Governments' obligations to children necessitate limiting warming to a maximum of 1.5°C, along with a significant increase in investments in adaptation measures which protect the rights of all children.** Governments and the vast majority of other actors working on climate change or children's rights agendas have been far too slow to recognise that the climate crisis represents a human rights crisis, and one in which children's rights will be most at risk. This artificial separation must end. Without urgent and aggressive action on climate change – taken in the rapidly-closing window that scientists say we have to act – there will simply be no liveable world for children. And without a significant scaling-up of investment in adaptation – currently the recipient of just twenty per cent of global public climate finance – millions of children will suffer from the irreversible impacts that have already been set in motion. Industrialised countries that have a unique responsibility for the problem should ensure that poorer countries are supported to transition to net-zero carbon economies, to adapt, and to prepare for loss and damage.
- ➔ **Adequate safeguards for children's rights must be integrated in climate action, ensuring that climate projects respect, protect, promote and fulfil, rather than undermine, children's rights.** In parallel, information on the impacts of climate change on children must be collected so as to enable interventions to be tailored to their specific needs.
- ➔ **Children's right to be heard must be upheld, by engaging them fully in strategies and action to meet the climate crisis.** This will entail a much greater focus on creating mechanisms for consultation with children and young people, and empowering them to protect themselves from climate risks and to participate meaningfully in decision-making.
- ➔ **In particular, children's right to information on climate change and related policies, as well as their right to climate and environmental education, must be recognised.** Governments should take measures to integrate climate change in formal and informal education, including green skills, to ensure that children can meaningfully participate in decision-making, and that they are not left behind in the transition to a sustainable economy.



**Specific entry points** for governments to live up to their promises to children's rights under the CRC, 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement include:

-  Adopting and advocating for the strongest possible ambition in countries' revised national climate plans (Nationally Determined Contributions), in order to align with the Paris Agreement targets.
-  Fulfilling climate finance pledges to poorer countries and commit to invest in child-centred climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction measures.
-  Integrating a stronger focus on children's rights as a cross-cutting priority in UNFCCC decision-making processes and at the national level, including commitment to protecting the best interests of the child and their right to be heard.
-  Ensuring that children's right to environmental education is reflected and embedded in decisions under the Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE) UNFCCC dialogue and associated decisions.

## NOTES

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