

Environment and climate change

Climate change and environmental degradation undermine the rights of every child.

Climate change is a direct threat to a child's ability to survive, grow, and thrive.

As extreme weather events such as cyclones and heatwaves increase in frequency and ferocity, they threaten children's lives and destroy infrastructure critical to their well-being. Floods compromise water and sanitation facilities, leading to diseases such as cholera, to which children are particularly vulnerable.

Children are the least responsible for climate change, yet they will bear the greatest burden of its impact.

Droughts and changing global rainfall patterns are leading to crop failures and rising food prices, which for the poor mean food insecurity and nutritional deprivations that can have lifelong impacts. These also have the potential to destroy livelihoods, drive migration and conflict, and cripple opportunities for children and young people.

Children are the most vulnerable to diseases that will become more widespread as a result of climate change, such as malaria and dengue fever. Close to 90 per cent of the burden of disease attributable to climate change is borne by children under the age of 5.

The drivers of air pollution are the same as those of climate change. Approximately two billion children live in areas where air pollution levels exceed standards set by the World Health Organization (WHO) – causing them to breathe toxic air and putting their health and brain development at risk. Every year, over half a million children under the age of 5 die from air-pollution-related causes. Even more will suffer lasting damage to their developing brains and lungs.

Pneumonia remains the leading infectious cause of death among children under 5, killing approximately 2,400 children a day. Child deaths caused by pneumonia are strongly linked to undernutrition, lack of safe water and sanitation, indoor air pollution and inadequate access to health care – all challenges that are exacerbated by climate change.

This is the first time a global generation of children will grow up in a world made far more dangerous and uncertain as a result of a changing climate and degraded environment.

For children who are already disadvantaged, the stakes are even higher. Poorer families have a harder time coping with shocks. The most vulnerable are already losing their homes, health and education. And as climate change makes crises more common, it becomes harder to recover from them. Already today, some 785 million people lack access to basic water services. And by 2040, almost 600 million children are projected to live in areas where the demand for water will exceed the amount available. Without action now, climate change will exacerbate the inequalities that children already face, and future generations will suffer.

The evidence for the impact of climate change and air pollution on children is firm and growing, but time is running out fast. According to the latest research from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), we have less than 11 years to make the transformation necessary to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. The level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere would have to be cut by 45 per cent by 2030 to prevent global warming above 1.5°C – in other words, the threshold at which the worst impacts of climate change could be averted.

This is the first time a global generation of children will grow up in a world made far more dangerous and uncertain as a result of a changing climate and degraded environment. Addressing climate change and mitigating its impact is imperative to protect the world's children and fulfill their rights.

Solution

Climate action provides an exceptional opportunity to unlock massive economic and social benefits that can help us achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Addressing the challenges of environmental sustainability is imperative for UNICEF to fulfil its mandate and protect the world's most vulnerable children.

UNICEF works with partners at global and local level to ensure that children can live in a safe and clean environment. Our actions are structured around four approaches:

1. Making children the centre of climate change strategies and response plans
2. Recognizing children as agents of change
3. Protecting children from the impact of climate change and environmental degradation
4. Reducing emissions and pollution

[Vocabulary list \(A\)](#)
[Click here](#)

1. Making children the centre of climate change strategies and response plans

UNICEF works with governments and partners globally to ensure children are an essential part of climate change strategies and disaster response plans.

In Bolivia, for example, UNICEF supported the Youth Summit on Water and Climate Change to strengthen youth leadership in climate change adaptation and integrated water resources management. In Papua New Guinea, children are actively engaging in developing climate disaster response plans for their schools.

2. Recognizing children as agents of change

Children's participation in issues that affect them is part of their fundamental rights (Article 12, Convention on the Rights of the Child). UNICEF works with young people to elevate their voices on climate change through creative platforms, advocacy and participation at major United Nations summits.

Children and young people can also play a key role in addressing climate-related risks by promoting environmentally sustainable lifestyles and setting an example for their communities.

The participation of young people is a necessity if the interests of future generations are to be safeguarded.

3. Protecting children from the impact of climate change and environmental degradation

UNICEF supports initiatives to make schools, health centres, water and sanitation facilities – and other services critical to children's well-being – resistant to climate and environmental shocks. This not only improves children's resilience to future shocks, but also makes it less likely that today's inequities will be exacerbated by climate change. Specifically, we aim to support governments in the following areas:

Climate-smart water, sanitation and hygiene services

Among the biggest impacts of climate change is water scarcity and/or contamination as a result of floods, droughts or severe weather. UNICEF is working to scale a package of solutions that include remote sensing to improve the identification of water sources, solar energy to help pump water, and smart management systems to use water efficiently.

Sustainable energy and disaster risk response in schools

Schools that are environmentally sustainable and resilient to natural disasters are some of the best ways we can protect children in the face of a changing climate. Renewable energy (e.g. solar power) enables lighting and connectivity in areas where grid power is lacking. This supports education by allowing school meals to be cooked and solar lanterns to be charged for students to take home to do their homework.

In Kenya, for example, UNICEF has supported sustainable energy solutions, including solar lighting for schools, solar pumps in communities vulnerable to drought and floods, and a pilot social protection cash transfer programme which provides off-grid energy solutions to improve children's learning and health.

Sustainable energy and disaster risk response in health centres

Reliable energy and resilience to disasters is often a barrier to providing health services to children. Over 60 per cent of health facilities in low and middle-income countries and 25 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa are without reliable electricity for basic services such as lighting, heating and the powering of medical equipment.

Building on our experience with solar fridges for vaccine delivery, we focus on solar power. This enables water to be heated, vaccines to be preserved, medical equipment to be powered, and health centres to be lit.

In sub-Saharan Africa, UNICEF continues to support the upgrade of national vaccine cold chains with solar power. We do so to improve reliability and sustainability, reduce carbon dioxide emissions and provide vaccines to children in remote areas.

In Ethiopia, 70 per cent of the 6,000 solar fridges procured by UNICEF in 2018 were installed in new sites to reach previously unreached children.

4. Reducing emissions and pollution

Taking decisive action to cut greenhouse gas emissions to slow, and ultimately stop, the advance of climate change is crucial to tackle the climate crisis before it's too late.

The evidence for the impacts of climate change and air pollution on children is firm and growing.

UNICEF works to improve air pollution monitoring and advocacy, especially in countries and regions where these systems are sparse or non-existent. A big part of our work is also to support governments to respond to the increased incidence of pneumonia and other respiratory diseases that arise as a consequence of air pollution.

UNICEF is also dedicated to environmental sustainability in its own operations. We are working to transform how and where we work to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and environmental impact, and we have established a dedicated internal fund to support this process. This also includes reducing water and energy consumption, paper use, and waste.

We are implementing solutions to reduce our environmental footprint in over 70 offices worldwide and counting – for example energy efficient lighting, heating, ventilation and cooling systems, water efficient fixtures, solar water heating and energy systems, and more. An increasing number of our offices are running on solar power, including in Jordan, Zimbabwe and India – with the Haiti office generating 100 per cent of its power from the sun.

[Vocabulary list \(B\)](#)
[Click here](#)

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