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Protecting and empowering children

Children are the most vulnerable in every crisis, and climate change is no exception. But children deserve more than protection – they need tools to be the agents of change



◀ Children collecting drinking water from a public pump in Sana'a, Yemen, a country where the impacts of climate change have combined with conflict

water-borne diseases while air pollution leads to dangerous respiratory and health conditions, which hit children the hardest.

Extreme weather events destroy the clinics and schools that provide the healthcare and education they need to better cope with a changing climate. Changing temperature and rainfall patterns, meanwhile, degrade food production, causing hunger and malnutrition, and force people to migrate – further disrupting the lives and futures of children. As climate change exacerbates the root causes of instability and conflict, children will be even more vulnerable to violence, exploitation and abuse.

Climate change also exacerbates inequity, disproportionately affecting the poorest, most vulnerable and marginalised, deepening existing inequities and perpetuating them over generations. Children and families who are already disadvantaged by poverty, and therefore have the fewest resources for coping with its impacts, are likely to face some of the most immediate dangers of climate change. For example, flood and drought zones often overlap with areas of high poverty and low access to essential services such as water and sanitation.

And climate change is a child-rights issue. It threatens children's most basic rights: to health, access to food, water, clean air, education and protection – even their survival. But children and young people are not central to the global climate dialogue. A child-rights approach is often missing in many policies.

A clean, safe environment for every child

UNICEF recognises that effective responses to environmental degradation (including climate change) are central to its mission to realise the rights of every child – especially the most vulnerable. This recognition is guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the Sustainable Development Goals and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030). To that effect, in its new Strategic Plan (2018–2021), UNICEF has committed itself to the

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Children are the most affected by the rising number of climate-influenced humanitarian disasters such as hurricanes, droughts and floods. They suffer immediately and also face longer-term impacts on their opportunities and livelihoods. Rising temperatures increase incidences of vector-borne and

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goal that ‘every child lives in a clean and safe environment’. UNICEF’s focus has been prioritising children and their rights in climate action. Important areas of our climate change work include:

1. Advocacy and accountability: being a strong advocate for the rights, voices and vulnerabilities of children to be central to climate and environmental planning – locally, nationally and globally.

UNICEF uses its influence, reach and expertise (including generating evidence) in over 190 countries to support governments’ efforts to reach their commitments; to hold them accountable for doing so; to help develop more ambitious programmes that protect children from the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation; and to strengthen engagement of young people in actions related to climate change.

- In 2015, UNICEF, working with the UK National Committee for UNICEF, was instrumental in the inclusion of children’s rights in the Paris Agreement. This is a

- More than half a billion children live in extremely high flood-risk zones and more than 160 million live in high or extremely high drought-risk zones (see the UNICEF report, *Unless We Act Now*).
- Approximately 300 million children live in areas with extremely toxic levels of outdoor air pollution, with increasing evidence that air pollution is affecting children’s cognitive development (see the UNICEF report, *Clear the Air for Children*).
- Some 600 million children, or one in four worldwide, will be living in areas with extremely limited water resources by 2040 (see the UNICEF report, *Thirsting for a Future*).

significant advance: it is the first global environmental treaty to recognise the relevance of human rights, including explicit recognition of children’s rights, in

the context of climate action.

- Article 24 under the UNCRC recognises the right of children to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health and environment. In 2016, UNICEF UK provided a written submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child for the Day of General Discussion on ‘Children’s Rights and the Environment’. The submission focused on the challenges that children face in relation to climate change, air pollution and water security. It also recommended that the UNCRC be considered in climate-related policies, action, investments and dialogue.
- UNICEF promotes the role of children and young people as agents and advocates of change. Children are not only victims of climate change – they also have a critical role to play in building their own and their communities’ resilience to climate shocks and stresses. They are also key to promoting and adopting more sustainable low-carbon lifestyles – both

Solar-powered water in Malawi

■ Solar-powered water systems are helping children in remote off-grid communities access clean water in their villages, health centres, schools and homes. Yesaya’s life has changed for the better after a solar-powered water pump was installed near his school by UNICEF Malawi. Before this piped water, the students used to travel long distances to the nearest available water source. “This was also very unhygienic as livestock used to drink from the same water source,” Yesaya says. “My four siblings and I used to suffer from diarrhoea and could not attend classes regularly. With clean water available near our school, we are now able to attend class every day.”

Countries like Malawi have heavy dependence on natural resources and rains. This means they are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, forcing children to travel long distances to reach the only available water source. Access to clean water becomes crucial for survival in the dry season, and the non-availability of grid electricity for pumping water in most remote areas adds to the burden. A solar-powered water system can transform water access for children and families in these areas. By using solar energy, the systems use cleaner fuel and can pump treated water from a borehole to different communities, schools and health centres. This provides more than just clean water: it also improves health and education outcomes for children.



▲ Yesaya drinks water from a tap at his school, connected to a solar-powered water pump

Empowering children through disaster planning

■ Climate-related disasters are on the rise and are responsible for untimely disruption and deaths. Tragically, children make up more than half of those affected, and when a disaster strikes, children are the hardest hit. It is vital that children have the knowledge and life-saving skills that can support their survival and development in the event of a disaster. Recognising this, country offices like UNICEF Philippines are working to promote disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation programmes for the most vulnerable.

The participatory 3D map is a joint project between UNICEF Philippines, the Center for Disaster Preparedness and the University of the Philippines Department of Geography. It can tell people in a village about the risks, vulnerabilities and capacities of their village to help them with disaster planning. If children are empowered, they need not be victims, but can be agents of change too.



▲ Using participatory 3D mapping, Lyn Lyn, 10, explains the hazards and vulnerabilities in her village

now and as future decision-makers, teachers and parents. It is vital that they are empowered with the education, skills and means to advocate for, and effect, change. In Zambia, for example, child-led advocacy programme Unite4Climate empowers 11- to 17-year-olds to become climate ambassadors. More than 1,000 ambassadors have reached over one million community members through peer-to-peer outreach and education, and by implementing low-cost community projects on climate change adaptation and mitigation (see UNICEF UK's report *Children and the Changing Climate*).

2. Providing children and communities with the tools to cope with the reality of climate change, both by reducing the impacts on children and by increasing their opportunities to participate in the green economy.

This includes strengthening early-warning systems for extreme climate events,

providing emergency humanitarian support when disasters do occur, and bridging the divide between emergency operations and resilient development.

Examples include climate-resilient WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) infrastructure such as: remote sensing to identify water sources; aquifer-recharge systems that capture water during the monsoon season, purify it and store it underground for use when water is scarce; improved water management systems; cyclone and flood-proof schools; climate and environment education and awareness-raising; and youth-led energy innovation hubs (providing skills or training for green jobs) through youth initiatives such as the recently launched Generation Unlimited.

This also includes strengthening air quality monitoring systems to draw attention to air pollution and to design solutions that reduce children's exposure. For children, again, the stakes are higher, as scientists increasingly recognise that the effects of air pollution are not just short term.

UNICEF also promotes the use of sustainable energy, both as a means to reduce emissions and also to provide more climate-resilient service delivery. Examples include electrification of health facilities and schools with renewable energy solutions like solar systems for cold chain equipment; lighting, cooling and heating in schools; and support for use of fuel-efficient cook stoves in households to reduce air pollution and emissions.

3. Incorporating sustainability into UNICEF operations and programmes.

UNICEF believes in walking the talk by working continuously to incorporate sustainability into its own operations. These include using energy more efficiently, using renewables and disaster-resilient construction, and monitoring and continuously improving its own emissions. UNICEF is taking all these steps to support tomorrow's generation – today's children – to continue the fight against one of the greatest threats to their wellbeing and basic rights. ●