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Impacts on Children

Natural disasters: Children, particularly young ones, are more susceptible to injury and death during natural disasters. Heatwaves affect children disproportionately, as their bodies adapt at a slower rate and they may suffer from heat rash, heat-related cramps, exhaustion, renal disease, respiratory illness, stroke and death. Natural disasters can also disrupt access to essential services and child protection systems. Similarly, damage to health infrastructure and essential drug supplies can make emergency interventions less effective. Floods, landslides, sea-level rise and storms can destroy housing units and sanitation infrastructure, worsening living conditions, particularly for children in informal settlements.

Water scarcity and food insecurity: Drought induced shortages of water and food will disproportionately impact children. Malnourishment during the first years of life can result in irreversible stunting with lifelong consequences for children's cognitive capacity. It also exacerbates the frequency and severity of other diseases. Income loss can cause an increase in school dropout, domestic violence and child labour for chores such as fetching water.

Air pollution: In 2016, indoor and outdoor air pollution combined were linked to 543 000 deaths among children under 5 years of age. Children, due to their higher breathing rate, are more susceptible to respiratory problems and infections. The heightened risk of wildfires associated with heat waves affects air quality and children's respiratory systems. Warmer temperatures are also linked with the release of airborne allergens that can exacerbate asthma and allergic respiratory diseases.

Vector-borne and infectious diseases: Children are disproportionately affected by vector-borne and infectious diseases including waterborne diseases which spread notoriously fast in the aftermath of floods and storms, when water and sanitation infrastructure is damaged. Poor hygiene and contaminated water can increase the incidence of diarrhoea and cholera, among other illnesses. Climate change is also likely to expand the seasonal and geographic range of vector-borne diseases like malaria and increase the risk of zoonotic transmission of new and emerging infectious diseases like COVID-19. In 2015, 300,000 children under the age of 5 died from malaria.

CLIMATE CHANGE: PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

Globally, nearly 160 million children have been identified as living in areas at high risk of drought, half a billion live in zones at high risk of floods, and 115 million children live in zones at high risk of tropical cyclones. Frequent extreme weather events, food and water shortages, and the increased transmission of diseases caused by climate change heighten existing social and economic inequalities and threaten to reverse progress towards improving children's well-being. Climate change may also have far-reaching implications for the long-term mental health and overall quality of life of children. Young children, because of their less-developed physiology and immune systems, will experience the effects of climate change-related stresses most intensely. A child rights-based approach to climate action is urgently needed to ensure climate justice and protect future generations from the negative impacts of climate change.

Mental Health: Children experiencing life-threatening situations, the loss of a parent or heightened household tensions due to loss of income related to climate change have a higher chance of experiencing mental health issues. Disasters can also affect children's cognitive capacity with corresponding impacts on their emotional well-being. In cases of displacement, separation from traditional lands and local communities can have impacts on children's education, cultural identity and access to social support systems.

Compounding Factors: Climate change will disproportionately affect children in vulnerable situations including poor children, indigenous children, minorities, and migrants. For example, insufficient accessibility considerations in natural disaster evacuation, response and relief efforts can make children with disabilities more susceptible to injuries while discrimination exposes them to risks of abuse, neglect and abandonment in the event of climate shocks. Girls may face heightened risks of child labour, sexual violence and trafficking because of climate change. Additionally, disproportionate impacts will be felt by children living in geographically vulnerable areas, such as riparian and low-lying coastal areas, arid regions, high mountains, polar zones and other delicate ecosystems.

POSITIVE EXAMPLES

The last few years have seen unprecedented climate activism including successful efforts by children around the world to demand decisive actions to halt and reverse climate change. For instance, during the 25th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2019, a group of governments joined youth activists in Madrid, Spain, to sign an Intergovernmental Declaration reflecting climate action priorities identified by children and youth throughout the world. This is a positive step towards a rights-based response that empower the youth.

Some States have established national platforms for young people to voice their concerns and ideas about climate change like the Children's Parliament in Namibia.

Climate litigation is another way to safeguard the interests of future generations. A legal basis for such exists in many countries, often on the basis of international human rights law. Children around the world are joining together to seek accountability from their governments. For example, 16 children, including Greta Thunberg, filed a landmark complaint to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2019.



What can we do?

Take more ambitious mitigation measures to minimize the future negative impacts of climate change on children.

Guarantee children access to remedies: Integrate the right to a healthy environment and the rights of future generations in national constitutions and legislation; Ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which establishes a complaints procedure for violations of children's rights; Ensure responsible conduct and accountability of businesses including through the use of extraterritorial jurisdiction as appropriate.



Ensure policy coherence: States should ensure that children's rights considerations are integrated in their climate, disaster risk reduction and development activities, for instance by integrating children's rights considerations in the implementation of the UNFCCC or by using the universal periodic review mechanism of the Human Rights Council to promote accountability for climate and human rights commitments.

Empower children to participate in climate policymaking. States should facilitate the participation in processes related to the UNFCCC and consider the establishment of standing consultative committees and other mechanisms that include children's perspectives; Educational curricula should transfer knowledge and skills that will equip children to confront climate-related challenges. Up-to-date, meaningful and age-appropriate information about the causes of climate change, its impacts and adaptive responses should be shared.

Improve the understanding of the relationship between climate change and children's rights: This can be done through disaggregated data collection, impact assessments with respect to children's rights, and improved reporting on children's rights and climate change to relevant UNFCCC and human rights mechanisms.

Mobilize maximum available resources for the progressive realization of children's economic, social and cultural rights: Investments in education are a rights-based, cost-effective and sustainable method of empowering children. Training for teachers, parents and children, and climate-resilient schools is key. Health, water and sanitation, housing infrastructure and related services are also critical. After disasters, resources should be devoted to ensure access to health services and to reunite children with their families. Beyond physical support, such as food and clean water, resources should also support psychosocial care and take into account children's distinct needs for play and safety.

Contact: right2environment@ohchr.org

Analytical study: undocs.org/en/A/HRC/35/13

Resolution 32/33: undocs.org/en/A/HRC/RES/32/33