

**Special Representative on Violence Against Children’s inputs to the CRC General Comment on Children’s Rights and the environment with a special Focus on Climate Change**

**THE CLIMATE CRISIS: A THREAT MULTIPLIER FOR VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN**

The Special Representative welcomes the initiative of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to draft a ***General Comment on Children’s rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change***. The Special representative strongly commands the CRC for undertaking this global consultation involving all key stakeholders including children and youth that are the most affected and remain the least consulted and heard to change the curve of the climate crisis.

## **BACKGROUND – THE CHALLENGES**

It is time to face that the world is facing one of the major global challenges of our time. All of us now face a ‘new normal’ of rising sea levels, devastating floods, cyclones, air pollution, global warming, extreme weather events, desertification, deforestation, catastrophic droughts, fires, storms and loss of biodiversity**. *But it is* *children who are the most vulnerable* *to climate and environmental shocks,* *particularly those who are the poorest,* *the most disadvantaged and those* *living in high-risk and fragile contexts.***

*According to UNICEF’s first child-focused climate risk index, 1 billion children are at extremely high risk of being affected by the climate crisis, of whom 820 million (over one-third of children globally) are currently highly exposed to heatwaves, 400 million (nearly 1 in 6) to cyclones, 330 million (1 in 7) to riverine flooding, 240 million (1 in 10) to coastal flooding, and 920 million (over one third) to water scarcity.*

The cumulative shocks of the climate crisis are exacerbating pre-existing crises, including the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing financial and humanitarian crises and armed conflicts. Its shocks are aggravating the risk factors for experiencing violence, abuse and exploitation, such as poverty, economic and social inequalities, food insecurity and forced displacement.

Taking these crises and risk factors together, the climate crisis appears as a threat multiplier for violence against children. The Special Representative considers critical to draw attention to the urgent need to protect children and their rights in response to the climate crisis – protection that is also crucial for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The climate crisis exacerbates every challenge that enables violence to thrive. While no child is immune to the combined impact of the climate crisis and violence, that impact falls most heavily on the children who are already the most disadvantaged and on those living in high-risk and fragile contexts.

## **The nexus: the climate crisis and rising levels of violence against children**

More children than ever are facing extreme poverty, discrimination and social inequalities and are forcibly displaced, fleeing conflicts, widespread violence and food insecurity. The climate crisis has aggravated these risks. Taken together, those multiple crises are exacerbating children’s vulnerabilities to violence.

Poorer children and families are less able to obtain access to key resources when crises occur. *This* *creates a vicious cycle that pushes the* *most vulnerable children deeper into* *poverty while increasing their risk of* *experiencing the worst and most life-threatening* *effects of climate change.* Under these conditions, children are exposed to a greater risk of violence and exploitation, including as a result of engaging in risky and negative ways to survive and cope.

Poorer households are less resilient to financial hardships when climate shocks hit, which can increase the risk that their children’s education will be interrupted. Families with no access to affordable credit spend less on their children’s education during crises (for example, on school fees, learning materials or transportation) and are more likely to pull their children out of school temporarily. This, coupled with less time for learning at home, can mean major disruptions in education. Food shortages and lack of clean water in times of drought and flooding also undermine the daily activities of children and young people. Their household chores increase if they have to, for example, walk further to collect drinking water and firewood or take on extra childcare responsibilities when children are unable to go to school. These extra burdens often fall on the shoulders of girls and young women, cutting into their own time to study and increasing their risk of dropping out of school altogether.

People are being uprooted from their homes and communities on an unprecedented scale. Millions of children around the world are now internally or externally displaced, driven from their homes by the impacts of slow-onset disasters, environmental degradation and sudden-onset disasters exacerbated by climate change.

*The World Bank estimates that the number of internal climate migrants could surpass 216 million by 2050, with approximately 86 million people displaced within sub-Saharan Africa alone.* South *Asia could see as many as 40 million internal climate migrants; North Africa, 19 million; and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 5 million.*

Displaced children are far more likely to be victims of various forms of violence at all stages of their journey. In addition, they lack access to humanitarian assistance and services; risk being deprived of liberty because of their or their parents’ migrant status, under policies that

criminalize irregular migration, and face discrimination and the possibility of statelessness. The social fabric and social norms are often shattered by post-disaster behavior. Families face

severe economic stress, as well as insecure shelter and living conditions. *All of these, taken together, constitute* *significant pathways to violence* *against children.*

The climate crisis is both strongly intersectional and deeply unequal in its impact. The disruptive effects on the capacities of social services and communities to prevent and respond to violence are felt most keenly in countries that have the fewest resources to adapt and remain resilient. *These countries are already bombarded with other challenges: almost all of the countries at extremely high risk with regard to the climate crisis are also considered to be fragile, and 25 per cent of them have very high levels of displacement, with more than 5 per cent of their populations displaced from their homes.*

The impact is also felt more by some groups of children than others. Children who are already

disadvantaged are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including children deprived of family care; children with disabilities; children living in poverty or in rural areas; children in humanitarian and conflict settings; and those who rely on and have a close relationship with the natural environment and its resources, such as Indigenous children. Given their strong connection to nature, some 400 million indigenous peoples face threats to practicing both their cultural rights and their collective rights.

Girls and young women are also affected disproportionately by climate change. This is especially true for those in rural areas, who represent up to 70 per cent of the agricultural workforce in some countries, as a result of their social roles and the discrimination

they suffer.

The climate crisis overlaps with other crises and therefore magnifies the threat of all forms of violence against children. These include gender-based violence, child marriage, female genital mutilation, child labour, abduction, trafficking, sexual violence, and recruitment into criminal, armed and/or violent extremist groups.

The Special Representative would like to strongly highlight the fact that the climate crisis is also harming children’s mental health. ‘Eco-anxiety’ refers to the distress caused by climate change, with people becoming very anxious about their future. It is now causing negative emotions in children and young people worldwide. As they are extremely vulnerable to climate change, children face environmental stressors and are rapidly becoming able to understand climate change and its anticipated impacts.

## **Child-sensitive responses to the climate crisis are needed now more than ever**

The climate crisis has been and continues to be addressed at the global, regional and national levels, through a wide range of high-level political commitments, treaties, resolutions, frameworks, policies and agreements including the latest global commitment during COP 27. The COP27 have demonstrated once again the importance of this engagement and I very much hope that efforts will continue increasingly promoting children’s participation.

To that extent, the Special Representative welcomes the adoption in July 2022 of the Resolution [76/300](https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/76/300), in which the General Assembly recognized the ***right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment***, as a means to help to reduce environmental injustices, close protection gaps and empower people, especially those that are in vulnerable situations, including environmental human rights defenders, children, youth, elders, women, persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples.

Those initiatives and commitments are still not enough. Children are still left behind in policies, in mitigation and adaptation measures to address the climate crisis. A paradigm shift is strongly needed as a matter of urgency. This must be based on the inclusion of children as part of the solution, far greater investment in their well-being, and child-sensitive climate laws and policies that are backed by adequate resources and monitoring.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has highlighted how climate action must be consistent with existing international human rights obligations, including having the highest possible ambition to prevent a worsening of the harms related to climate change. *These ambitions* *should also include the building of* *equitable resilience, the reduction*

*of the risks faced by those facing the greatest threats of climate change and ensuring accountability and access to effective remedies for those affected.*

Normative standards, multilateral agreements and policy frameworks have also been developed at the regional level to address different dimensions of the climate crisis. The same at the national level, initiatives span major legal reforms and policy frameworks to enhance and highlight the impact of climate change on children. In some countries, environmental rights are guaranteed at the constitutional level.

Although States are the primary duty bearers of rights, businesses also have a responsibility to respect human rights and do no harm. *In* *addition, business activity has been the* *source of significant environmental damage that affects children’s living conditions, health, development, and* *well-being.*

In 2021, the business community released a statement on the vital role that businesses play in addressing the devastating impacts of climate change on children’s well-being. *In the statement, issued during the International Chamber of Commerce Make Climate Action Everyone’s Business Forum, business signatories acknowledge that child rights and* *the environment are interconnected and that businesses should be part of the solution to address and mitigate the negative consequences of climate change in children’s lives worldwide.*

Despite all of these policy frameworks and initiatives, far more needs to be done to ensure

child-sensitive responses to the climate crisis. According to UNICEF, only 42 per cent of all nationally determined contributions contain direct references to children or young people, only 20 per cent contain a specific mention of children, and less than 2 per cent mention their rights.

There is also a pressing need for far more investment in adaptation and resilience, in addition to a stronger focus on children and their rights in legal frameworks and action plans. Investment in cross-sectoral child-sensitive climate policies that address the specific risks to and vulnerabilities of children, as well as the drivers of violence linked to climate change, is essential for sustainable solutions to the current global and negative trends. Investment in children’s services can reduce the overall climate risk for children worldwide – and reduce it considerably.

Developing countries are hit hardest by the impacts of climate change because they are more

vulnerable to the damaging effects of hazardous phenomena, have less capacity to cope and need more time to rebuild and recover. *According to* *the Global Climate Risk Index 2021, 8* *of the 10 countries most affected by the* *quantified impacts of extreme weather* *events in 2019 are low- to lower middle-* *income.* Half of them are least developed countries. *Yet countries at* *extremely high risk of the experiencing the negative impacts of climate change received only $9.8 billion in global financial flows that year, mostly in the form of official development assistance.* Cooperation, multilateralism and international solidarity must, therefore, be strengthened to fortify the resilience of the countries that are most vulnerable to climate crisis.

## **Children must be part of the solution**

For the office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children, children’s participation is a key component of her mandate and a cross-cutting priority. Throughout different actions the SRSG-VAC promotes a culture of meaningful and representative child participation, where children, as key stakeholders in all matters concerning their safety and wellbeing, are also actors and agents of change in the development of integral protection systems. A key aspect of a culture of meaningful participation is bridging the gap between children who are taking actions and decision makers, by facilitating access to information that can be used by children to input their own actions and initiatives, and that has been adapted to fit children's needs.

Investing in children means involving, empowering and listening to them as part of the solution to tackling the climate crisis. Children are increasingly making their voices heard and acting at the forefront of climate action worldwide, through legal actions, social media activity, community and civic engagement, participation in climate negotiations, child-led strikes, peaceful protests and social mobilization movements, despite the barriers they face.

As environmental and human rights defenders, children are also increasingly using the justice system as a strong and powerful tool to demand climate justice. Young activists across various regions have been involved in legal proceedings to demand more ambitious emissions cuts to safeguard their future; to require an assessment of the impact of fossil fuel extraction on children; and to stop deforestation, among other examples. Despite these and many other examples of child participation, the barriers to that participation remain considerable. Acting as environmental and human rights defenders carries risks for children, such as being criminalized, silenced, threatened and stigmatized. Negative cultural and social norms remain widespread around their right to have a voice in the decisions that affect them, as well as attitudes that limit their ability. These challenges underscore the need to redouble efforts to ensure that children have safe pathways to find information, express themselves and become involved in climate action and decision-making processes.

The Special Representative have held consultations and collected children’s views on the climate crisis and would like to echo their key messages and it is now about time to act and to include them as part of the solution. *“We, the children, demand for urgent action and solutions to climate change. We are the most affected yet least responsible for climate change. We also need to be included or consulted when coming up with the solutions. When we are included, we learn more and in our own small way are able to take action and engage in activities that address climate change like proper disposal of garbage and planting trees.” Michelle, 13, Kenya.*

## **The way forward – Recommendations**

Too many children worldwide are still left behind. More children than ever are facing extreme

poverty, discrimination and social inequalities. More children than ever are forcibly displaced, fleeing conflicts, widespread violence and food insecurity. The climate crisis has aggravated all of these risks. Taken together, these multiple crises are exacerbating children’s vulnerabilities to violence. No country – and no child – is immune. Exposure to the climate crisis, to violence and to stress causes immediate and long-term physiological and psychological damage. And the

consequences can last a lifetime.

The Special Representative has given the priority to the climate crisis and has dedicated her latest report to the 77th General Assembly on how the current climate crisis is a threat multiplier magnifying children’s exposure and vulnerability to violence[[1]](#footnote-1). Children’s consultations have been held from across the globe, a child-friendly version of the GA report and materials have been produced to ensure children’s views and sensitivity are taken into account and an advocacy brief has been launched to provide guidance to ensure child-sensitive responses to the climate crisis to all key stakeholders.

Interest and attention received from the Special Representative annual report from Member States, key stakeholders and from children themselves provide an opportunity to deepen the nexus of the climate crisis and violence against children and to give a new angle in the climate crisis responses and mitigation measures.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Spending on integrated and cross-sectoral child- and gender-sensitive services must be seen as an investment and an essential step to ensuring the adaptation and resilience of social services in the face of the climate crisis. These include social welfare, protection, and care services; safe and inclusive education, including digital learning; physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health services; justice; and support and sustainable social protection for vulnerable families

and communities.

With less than seven years remaining to keep the promise of the 2030 Agenda, the clock is ticking. A paradigm shift is needed. Cooperation and multilateralism need to be strengthened, based on mutual partnerships and accountability, as most of the countries at greatest risk are those who are least responsible. Justice for all children including social justice is needed more than ever, for all children, leaving no one behind. This requires joining forces and responsibilities with all key stakeholders including Member States and the private sector. In addition, spending on integrated and cross-sectoral child- and gender-sensitive services must be seen as an investment and an essential step to ensuring the adaptation and resilience of social services in the face of the climate crisis

Given the overwhelming evidence of the dangers and causes of the climate crisis, failing to take action now is an injustice to all children. This is therefore an opportunity that cannot be missed to provide adequate responses to children and future generations.

1. <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/climate-crisis> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. OSRSG VAC online package: <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/how-the-climate-crisis-affects-violence-against-children.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)