

## Policy pointers

**Development efforts** should work to provide a rights-based 'safety net' that can underpin children's basic wellbeing.

**Interventions should** aim for holistic long-term resilience, not just disaster risk reduction and humanitarian support.

**Child-centred initiatives** need to go further and wider, so they reach the most vulnerable children, not just those in schooling.

**Interventions should** work to give all children voice and agency at local levels, and to augment this with complementary actions at national and international policy level.

## Firm foundations for child-centred climate resilience

Children are particularly vulnerable to climate change. They form a sizable proportion of the marginalised group, concentrated in developing countries, that already struggles to cope with climate impacts. Yet children are not given priority in resilience interventions. Some NGO programmes have identified the need, but responses are not yet comprehensive and widely inclusive. This briefing reviews the challenges children face and discusses how best to build child-centred resilience. It proposes universal foundations, arguing that climate finance should provide children with a shock-responsive 'safety net' that prioritises their access to social assistance programmes. Development must also go beyond crisis interventions to tackle underlying causes of vulnerability. And it must help the most vulnerable, not just the easy to reach. Children's own voices and agency need to be part of the solution, at all levels. These issues are an important challenge for intra- and inter-generational climate justice.

Climate change is fundamentally unjust to future generations, and while some youth voices are now demanding action, most children are suffering in silence. Children are more vulnerable to climate and environmental impacts than adults. For example, their weaker immune systems and physical immaturity make threats such as malaria or malnutrition more deadly. Every year, environmental factors kill 1.7 million children under five.<sup>1</sup> Nearly half the world's children (about a billion) live in countries facing extremely high climate risk,<sup>2</sup> where they grow up in increasingly dangerous conditions. Floods destroy schools, community buildings and health centres. During droughts, children, especially girls, spend less time in school because they must walk miles for water. Rising sea levels and frequent cyclones displace families. Children experience high rates of anxiety and post-traumatic stress under such

circumstances, and these psychological stresses can affect their cognitive development. The impacts are more pronounced for children in Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), many of which have fragile infrastructure and governance systems, or suffer from conflict. These countries' capacity to prepare for and adapt to climate change is weak, and without urgent action, children's wellbeing will be disproportionately affected.

As yet, children are not afforded priority in national and international policy discourses on climate change adaptation and resilience. Some organisations, including Save the Children and Unicef, have programmes focused on child-centred community-based adaptation or child-centred disaster risk reduction (DRR). This is encouraging, but even

## *Climate-driven social and economic deprivation can have a lasting effect on children, making it difficult for them to escape poverty later in life*

these have limited scope and may not reach the most vulnerable.<sup>3</sup>

To raise the profile of child-centred adaptation work and establish some standard good practice, we suggest four universal foundations.

### **1. Focus on children's rights-based access to a basic 'safety net'**

Children exposed to climate and environmental risks need

to be provided with a shock-responsive rights-based safety net guaranteeing their basic material, emotional and social wellbeing. Children's vulnerability can be categorised according to these three fundamental aspects.<sup>4</sup> Material wellbeing encompasses having enough money, food, clothing, shelter, healthcare and education. Emotional wellbeing requires care, love, support and space to grieve and express emotions. Social wellbeing needs a supportive peer group of role models to follow or to offer guidance.

When climate crises hit poor households, children's access to these basic services are usually impaired. Poor families often 'cope' by reducing essential food consumption, healthcare and education investments or by selling or depleting productive assets. Climate and environmental disasters also destroy homes, displace families, force migration and even kill children's parents or caregivers. Such climate-driven social and economic deprivation during childhood and adolescence can have lasting effects, making it difficult for children to escape poverty later in life.

The onus of providing a safety net and support during such crises falls on LDCs and SIDS. Climate finance, such as the Green Climate Fund, or adaptation finance should be providing the support needed to address these situations. A climate-finance-supported children's safety net could guarantee access to decent education, shelter, food security, healthcare and foster care for those who need it.

Such efforts would need to be integrated with existing social assistance initiatives. A national database that records exposure to climate or natural hazards, along with socioeconomic vulnerability, should be used to underpin eligibility criteria for social assistance programmes. Such a system could effectively prioritise children exposed to high climate risks,

giving them access to all resilience initiatives through a single registry. Certainly, social assistance benefits increasingly need to be 'portable' as climate and natural disasters displace more and more families.

Eligibility systems would need to be complemented by a well-functioning, decentralised, transparent and accountable delivery mechanism. A crucial element of such a system would be how children could access help. For example, a national phone helpline number could be widely advertised, as well as raising awareness among children and their families on what they can do if they are in distress. A similar 'migration helpline' initiative in Jharkhand, India, has provided support to stranded adults. Hundreds of thousands of migrants have been supported in various ways, including with help to return home and help with food, healthcare and shelter.

### **2. Aim for long-term resilience and avoid narrowly focusing on DRR and humanitarian support**

Much of the action on climate risk management for children has been via child-centred DRR or child-centred community-based adaptation.<sup>3</sup> These include a wide range of activities, such as structural measures that protect children from disasters, training and evacuation planning for children, distributing mosquito nets and umbrellas, or engaging children in planning and designing activities at school or community level. These measures do help reduce children's vulnerability to some extent, but they take a very narrow approach to adaptation. Such 'standard packages' should not be quickly branded as 'adaptation strategy' lest they become an accepted model of child-centred adaptation intervention. At best, they cover a very small portion of coping strategies. They need to be implemented as part of a holistic package that protects children, prepares them before crises hit, and helps them cope and recover after disasters. Distributing umbrellas does not adequately protect children from floods and handing out mosquito nets will not guarantee better health-related adaptation outcomes.

Rather, a holistic approach to climate resilience is needed — one that targets the adverse changes children encounter and addresses root causes of their vulnerability. We need to combine DRR, humanitarian and adaptation actions into strategies to anticipate, prepare for, cope with and recover from climate impacts. Actions may need to go beyond 'business-as-usual' to be effective. For

example, a climate change curriculum may be needed to build skills for managing climatic risks and possible adaptation strategies. Early warning and early action will be needed, such as planned migration that gives special consideration to children's mobility and their long-term learning opportunities. It is also essential to improve mental health response systems. The most harmful psycho-social-spiritual impacts of climate disruption come when compounding impacts cause persistent and overwhelming stresses. We must proactively build the adaptive capacity of families, schools, local institutions and entire communities in order to underpin children's economic, social, psychological and environmental wellbeing.

### 3. Reach the most vulnerable children

Many initiatives on child-centred climate or disaster risk management are targeting school children. But we need to go further and reach children who are even more vulnerable. Climate crises reduce education expenditure, giving children less time in school or keeping them out of education altogether. So, although reaching the 'low-hanging fruit' of children in school does help, it is not enough.

While all children are vulnerable to some extent, that vulnerability is not equally distributed. Children in poor households, those from marginalised communities with poor social networks, orphans or disabled children are more vulnerable. We don't clearly understand how family-level factors like poverty, asset ownership, access to basic services (healthcare, education, food security), capacity (skill, education), social standing (caste, gender) and access to/quality of infrastructure and natural resources shapes children's vulnerability to climate impacts. However, it is well-established that climate change compounds existing inequalities and marginalisation, so climate impacts are expected to affect children differently depending on their socioeconomic and ethnic background and their gender (see Box 1 for examples).

Children exposed to climate shocks and crises experience heightened and often spiralling vulnerability. They urgently need preventive measures and coping capacity. Reaching the most vulnerable will require anticipatory measures before shocks strike. Additionally, children already affected by climate impacts need interventions to rescue and rehabilitate them and their families.

### Box 1. How climate crises impact children, especially girls

Climate change increases the risk of violence and exploitation among girls, including sexual and physical abuse, and trafficking during and after extreme weather events.<sup>6</sup> These risks are heightened when collecting food, water and firewood or when staying in temporary shelters or refugee camps.<sup>7</sup> The Global Estimate of Modern Slavery report<sup>8</sup> reveals that one in four people in modern slavery in 2016 were under 18 years old (about ten million children). Children represent 21% of the victims of forced sexual exploitation and 18% of forced labour. The International Organization for Migration has reported that trafficking for forced labour as well as for sexual exploitation increases during or after displacement in the aftermath of natural disasters.<sup>9</sup> Another study suggests vulnerability to trafficking increases by 20–30% when a climate-related disaster occurs.<sup>10</sup> Evidence shows that trafficking increased in the aftermath of the Indonesian tsunami, typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines and cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh.<sup>9,11</sup> Similarly, traffickers were seen to specially target women, girls and children in flood relief camps in Assam.<sup>12</sup>

### 4. Give children voice and agency at local levels

While rights-based social safety nets and adaptation actions are important in reducing climate risks, children's vulnerability is ultimately governed by complex interacting local factors. Children need locally-driven resilience building that understands these interacting factors and can help address the root causes of vulnerability. Achieving this requires local decision-making forums in which to hear children's voices and give them opportunities to influence change. That, in turn, requires efforts that build children's capacities to participate. Participating in and contributing towards climate change action provides children with assurance and self-confidence, which itself is a form of resilience building.<sup>5</sup>

Children have lived experience of the risks they face and the local contexts. When this understanding is combined with external information, they can identify relevant climate risks and propose sustainable, locally-suitable adaptation strategies. Including children in climate risk assessments and in designing resilience actions can help avoid maladaptation. Such initiatives would benefit from regular knowledge exchanges between schools and children in different villages, supporting cost-effective replication of best practices and 'peer reviewed' solutions to local challenges.

Ensuring marginalised families and their children are heard in decision-making bodies is an important issue of inter- and intra-generational justice. Gender and other factors that intersect with social status

groupings must be considered so that all children get equitable influence. For example, some initiatives engaging children in climate and DRR planning in schools have had more participation from girls than from boys.<sup>3</sup> Future projects should engage boys equally so as to counter any emerging gender stereotyping that makes climate change and environmental challenges appear to be 'women's issues'.

Obviously, building child-centred resilience does not mean making children responsible for solving the climate crisis. Efforts need to involve children alongside households and wider communities. Local institutions will need to integrate child-focused thinking into their local adaptation, so as to ensure long-lasting impacts. Indeed, participatory processes and whole-community efforts will bolster impacts by fostering a sense of ownership from all stakeholders.

Similarly, a focus on children's local participation must run alongside child-centred approaches at national and sub-national level. Here too, policy and planning must build in better protections for children.

## Conclusion

Child-centred resilience-building efforts need to go further and wider. Reactive 'fixes' among

school children are a start, but will not give all children adequate support in the face of climate crises. Child-centred initiatives need to target the underlying barriers and constraints that make children particularly vulnerable. This vulnerability to climate risk is especially evident among marginalised groups.

Children's wellbeing is a multidimensional concept, with vulnerable groups exhibiting diverse needs, all of which need addressing in community-level resilience strategies. Child-friendly actions are needed locally and must be augmented with complementary actions from mainstream/government initiatives.

This requires a joined-up, inclusive approach with vulnerable children, families, local and national governments, NGOs and international organisations working together to extend existing efforts. This should involve continuous and well-structured dialogue, coordination and engagement among relevant organisations and networks. Such exchanges would share learning and evidence on local forms of child-focused resilience and adaptation, feeding this into national and international policies and practices.

## Ritu Bharadwaj

Ritu Bharadwaj is a senior researcher in IIED's Climate Change Group.



## Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

### Contact

Ritu Bharadwaj  
ritu.bharadwaj@iied.org

Third Floor, 235 High Holborn  
London, WC1V 7DN  
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399  
www.iied.org

IIED welcomes feedback  
via: @IIED and  
www.facebook.com/theiied

ISBN 978-1-78431-951-9

This briefing has been produced with the generous support of Irish Aid and Sida (Sweden).

 **Irish Aid**  
Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland

 **Sida**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization (2017) Inheriting a sustainable world? Atlas on children's health and the environment. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/254677> / <sup>2</sup> UNICEF, The impacts of climate change put almost every child at risk. [www.unicef.org/stories/impacts-climate-change-put-almost-every-child-risk](http://www.unicef.org/stories/impacts-climate-change-put-almost-every-child-risk) / <sup>3</sup> Bharadwaj, R, Chakravarti, D and Karthikeyan, N (2022) Child-centred community-based adaptation in Bangladesh. What works and why? IIED, London. [pubs.iied.org/20776iied](https://pubs.iied.org/20776iied) / <sup>4</sup> Skinner, D, Tsheko, N, Mtero-Munyati, S, Segwabe, M, Chibatamato, P, Mfecane, S, Chandiwana, B, Nkomo, N, Tlou, S and Chitiyo, G (2006) Towards a definition of orphaned and vulnerable Children. *AIDS and Behavior* 10, 619–626. / <sup>5</sup> Sanson AV, Van Hoor, J and Burke, SEL (2019) Responding to the impacts of the climate crisis on children and youth. *Child Development Perspectives* 13(4), 201–207. / <sup>6</sup> Plan International, Effects of climate change on girls' rights. <https://plan-international.org/emergencies/effects-of-climate-change-girls-rights> / <sup>7</sup> Johnstone, K and Perera, N (2020) Can cooking solutions for refugees better serve gender dynamics? IIED, London. [pubs.iied.org/17762iied](https://pubs.iied.org/17762iied) / <sup>8</sup> ILO (2017) Global estimates of modern slavery: forced labour and forced marriage. [www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS\\_575479/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_575479/lang-en/index.htm) / <sup>9</sup> Coelho, S (2017) The climate change-human trafficking nexus. IOM, Switzerland. [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mecc\\_infosheet\\_climate\\_change\\_nexus.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mecc_infosheet_climate_change_nexus.pdf) / <sup>10</sup> Gerrard, MB (2018) Climate change and human trafficking after the Paris Agreement. *University of Miami Law Review* 72(2), Article 4. <https://repository.law.miami.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4527&context=umlr> / <sup>11</sup> Bowersox, Z (2018) Natural disasters and human trafficking: do disasters affect state anti-trafficking performance? *International Migration* 56(1), 196–212. / <sup>12</sup> Bharadwaj, R (6 July 2021) Policymakers take note: climate displacement is driving millions into slavery. [iied.org/policymakers-take-note-climate-displacement-driving-millions-slavery](https://www.iied.org/policymakers-take-note-climate-displacement-driving-millions-slavery)

