

CLIMATE ACTION FOR ALL

ADVOCACY BRIEF

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The climate crisis is already happening and affecting children’s survival, well-being and potential

Climate change has pushed the East Asia and Pacific region across a tipping point of irreversible damage. As the concentrations of human-caused greenhouse gases (GHGs) have grown, the global temperature has increased by 1.2°C. Within the East Asia and Pacific region, the atmosphere and oceans have warmed, many coral reefs have disappeared, and sea levels have risen. Weather patterns have shifted, changing in frequency as well as severity. Pollution of air, soil and water continues to cause harm. All of this is having a devastating impact on nature, bringing about irreversible changes to many ecosystems, with a consequent loss of biodiversity and the functions and services that human well-being depends on.

Children in the East Asia and Pacific region are already suffering as a result of climate change. Globally, approximately 1 billion children – nearly half of the world’s children – live in countries that are at an “extremely high-risk” from the impacts of climate change.¹ All countries in East Asia and the Pacific are at either “High” or “Extremely High” risk, according to the Children’s Climate Risk Index (CCRI).²

New UNICEF analysis from the CCRI reveals that, currently, in the East Asia and Pacific region:



Over 140 million children are highly exposed to water scarcity



Over 120 million children are highly exposed to coastal flooding



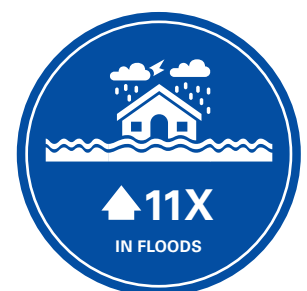
Nearly 210 million children are highly exposed to cyclones



Over 460 million children are highly exposed to air pollution

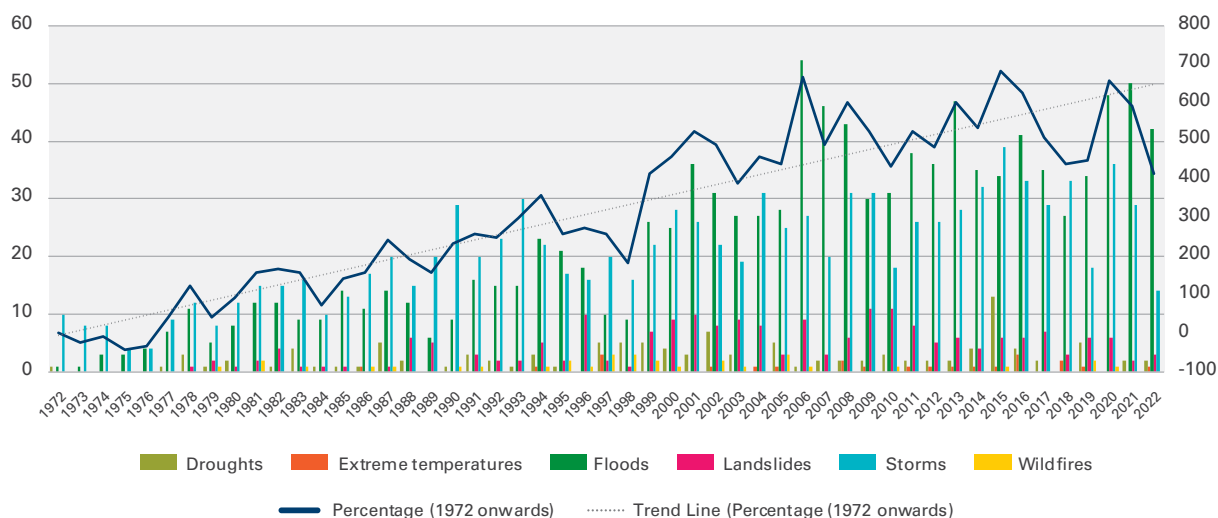
East Asia and the Pacific remains **the most disaster-prone region in the world**. Compared with their grandparents, children in East Asia and the Pacific are facing many more climate and environmentally related shocks, stresses and hazards. There has been a significant increase in climate-related extreme weather events in the East Asia and Pacific region over the past five decades.

Over the last 50 years the East Asia and Pacific region has witnessed an increase of:



On average, the climate-related weather events have increased by six-fold for the East Asia and Pacific region over the last fifty years.³ There is an increasing trend in the number of floods, tropical storms and landslides, along with a notable emergence of drought, wildfires and extreme temperature events since the 1968-1978 period.⁴

Figure 1. Extreme weather events and their percentage increase in the last 50 years

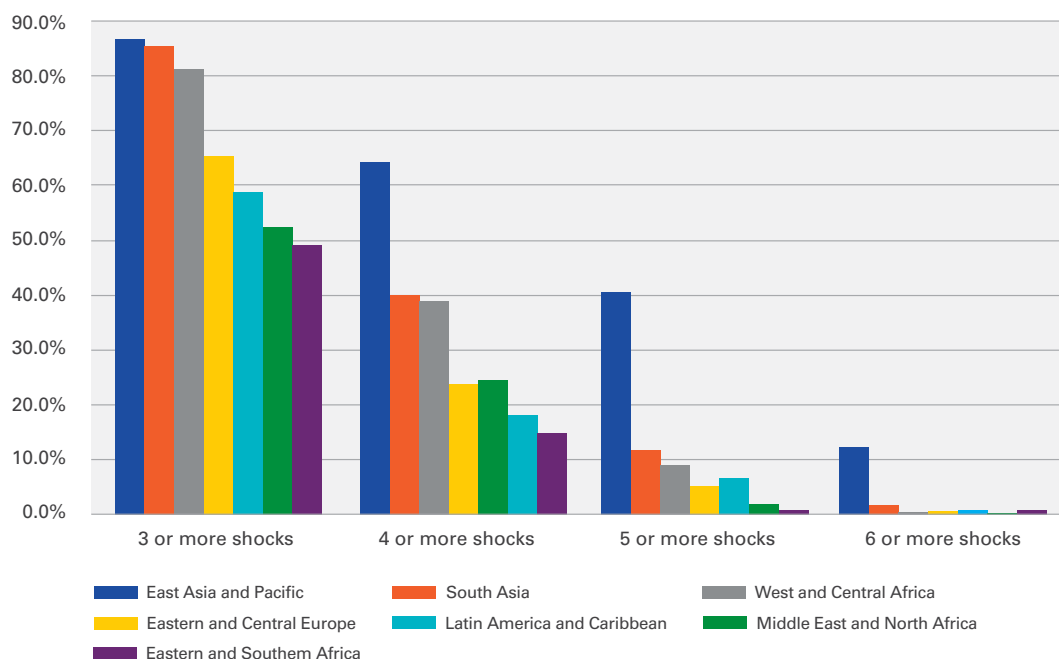


Source: EM-DAT

The staggering increase in extreme weather events underscores the escalating vulnerability of today’s children, who confront unparalleled threats to their safety, health and well-being as a direct result of climate change.

Moreover, the East Asia and Pacific region is one of the most impacted from multiple types of overlapping shocks and stresses. New UNICEF analysis reveals that across the region, 65 per cent of children in the East Asia and Pacific region face four or more climate and environmental shocks, compared to the global average of 37 per cent. These include high exposure to heatwaves, coastal flooding, water scarcity, tropical cyclones, various forms of air, soil and water pollution, riverine flooding, as well as climate-related diseases. All of this puts an incredibly high burden on the children of the East Asia and Pacific region, reducing their ability to survive as well as harming their potential to thrive.

Figure 2. Proportion of children facing multiple overlapping climate and environmental shocks, by region



Multiple overlapping shocks, stresses and hazards create cascading impacts

The recurrent climate hazards, shocks and stresses do not have isolated impacts – they have cascading effects on a host of other risks. Droughts, floods and severe weather, coupled with other environmental stresses, compound one another. For instance, cyclones can result in heavy rainfall and strong winds, causing floods that damage infrastructure and properties. These floods can then trigger landslides due to soil erosion, which can cause further destruction and loss of life. Additionally, droughts can lead to wildfires, which can increase emissions and worsen air pollution, further intensifying the effects of climate change.

Regarding temperature change, warmer air holds more moisture, which then increases the likelihood of more rainfall. Likewise, a storm surge combined with sea level rises, for example, can create considerably worse impacts in terms of damage to coastal regions; similarly, soil pollution combined with flooding can cause contamination of key water sources such as rivers and lakes.

As the frequency of these hazards increases, the likelihood of hazards striking simultaneously and in closer succession will grow, as will opportunities for cascading impacts.⁵ Secondary multiplier effects are created when hazards meet different vulnerabilities in social, economic, human and ecological systems that are interconnected.⁶ Floods, for example, can increase water-related infectious diseases such as diarrhoea, caused by water contamination and damage to water systems. Floods and cyclones also increase the number of breeding sites for mosquito vectors and facilitate the transmission of diseases such as malaria and dengue. Additionally, warmer weather expands the geographic range of disease-carrying mosquitoes.

And feedback loops further drive the magnitude of shocks

The cascading and residual shocks can often create feedback loops, which further drive the magnitude of climate and environmental shocks. As the frequency of climate hazards increase, so will the likelihood of interrelated shocks that create compounding impacts that trigger a series of feedback loops. For example, a drought can create a loss of arable land necessary food security and children's nutrition. However, it can also reduce water security, causing families a reduction in access to drinking water and sanitation, fueling the spread of vector borne diseases such as cholera. Moreover, the reduction in the land's ability to absorb water can also create soil erosion which can prompt landslides and other hazards, which can increase homelessness and potentially even force migration, which creates a range of new risk factors for children. So what was one hazard, can become many.

Climate change is exacerbating inequality, pushing the poorest children further into poverty

Climate change is exacerbating existing inequalities and disproportionately affecting children. Children and families who are already disadvantaged by poverty and have the fewest resources for coping with climate change impacts, are likely to face some of the most immediate dangers – as they have the least means to protect themselves from these risks. Additionally, climate change is impacting the health, nutrition, education, and well-being of children in numerous ways, particularly in low-income communities. But these impacts are not felt equally.

Children, despite their limited contribution to climate change, are shouldering the burden due to their reduced abilities to act or protect themselves. They are hit hardest because of the early stage of their physiological and cognitive development. Heatwaves affect children more than adults as they are less able to regulate their body temperature, and young children are at the greatest risk of heat-related mortality and morbidities, including chronic respiratory conditions, asthma, and cardiovascular diseases. Climate-related disasters can also interrupt their education by damaging schools and relevant infrastructures. These calamities are likely to create conditions for economic stress in families, leading to children (especially young girls) to stay home to take care of their families.

Climate-smart social services are critical

As compounding and cascading climate risks affect children and children living in poverty disproportionately, it has become urgent to invest in, and focus on, robust social infrastructure and services that assure children's access to health, nutrition, education, protection and water and sanitation, services, as they are instrumental in protecting and advancing children's well-being.

Climate-smart social services are ones that:

1) Are low-carbon, green and sustainable

By investing in green, low carbon social services, we will be able to contribute to a healthier, greener planet for the next generation and advance national and global efforts towards meeting the objectives of the Paris Agreement.

2) Are resilient to the impacts of climate change

By incorporating climate change considerations into social services planning and design, children's services will become more resilient to climate-related disruptions. This will ensure that even in the face of extreme weather events or environmental changes, children will still have access to education, healthcare, water and sanitation, nutrition, child protection and social protection services.

3) Are transformative and can create change at scale

With transformational institutional change, UNICEF can successfully demonstrate the shift that is required – at a scale commensurate with the challenge. This includes evidence generation, real time monitoring of risks and early warning systems, institutional capacity building, youth engagement, public finance for children, and legislative, legal, and policy change that can have multiplying effects.



Examples include:

Climate-smart health

- Develop climate resilience and adaptive strategies for health system infrastructures.
- Ensure that environmental determinants of children's health are reflected in prevention and treatment.
- Reduce the environmental footprint of health centres.

Climate-smart water, sanitation and hygiene

- Develop climate-resilient WASH services by ensuring that WASH infrastructure and services systems are sustainable, safe, and resilient to climate and disaster risks.
- Strengthening the linkages between water resources management.
- Recovering resources through sanitation circular economy approaches that use treated wastewater and faecal by-products for irrigation, bio-fertilizer, energy, or other opportunities.

Climate-smart education

- Integrate climate change in teaching, learning and curricula.
- Invest in climate resilient education systems.
- Invest in climate resilient infrastructure and disaster risk reduction.

Climate-smart food and nutrition

- Curate inclusive food environments that ensure accessibility and affordability of sustainable healthy diets.
- Shift consumer demand towards sustainable healthy diets.
- Enhance ongoing nutrition surveillance mechanisms within high-risk areas and expand access to nutrition to reduce vulnerability to shocks and build climate resiliency.

Climate-smart social protection

- Enable shock-responsive social protection. Social protection policies can help manage the impacts of climate extremes in advance by reducing income poverty.
- Programmes need to be not only shock-responsive, but also shock-prepared, anticipatory and preventive. This can be forecast-based social protection linked to action protocols.

Climate-smart child protection

- Adapt child protection workforce and systems for effective case management as a result of climate impacts.
- Ensure children who are forced to migrate as a result of climate change, internally or across borders, are safe and protected.
- Address increased risks of gender-based violence and harmful practices because of climate-related disasters.

Youth Engagement and Early Warning Systems on Climate and Environment

- Empower young people to become agents of change in their communities and countries.
- Establish a legal framework for children and young people to claim their environmentally-related rights.
- Build early warning systems and climate information services to better protect vulnerable groups.

Key asks

There are many ways to achieve the change required – however it is clear that all stakeholders have a role to play. The following are a set of key changes that governments, donors, partners, and the private sector can make to create the right enabling environment to ensure children have access to climate smart social services – so that they are more resilient to the impacts of climate change, and their futures are brighter, and more sustainable.

Governments:

- **Nationally Determined Contributions and National Adaptation Plans need to be child sensitive.** They need to include specific provisions for the services that children rely on most, including access to health, education, water, sanitation, nutrition, child protection and social protection services. This has also been reflected in the recent landmark agreement on the framework for the Global Goal on Adaptation at COP28.
- **Climate policy needs to be made child-sensitive; and social policy needs to be made climate-sensitive.** Engaging children and young people, as well as relevant line ministries, in the development and updating of NDCs and NAPs is critical to achieving these goals.
- Governments can also support line ministries directly in **shifting the social services to become climate-smart.** This includes working with relevant stakeholders **to improve resilience, as well as decarbonize and reduce environmental impact,** of social services. This can also include south-south cooperation, knowledge sharing on best practices, to ensure a successful shift.
- Governments also play a role in integrating critical cross-cutting functions like **disaster risk reduction and early warning systems into national systems.** Early warning systems are required to identify areas at risk of drought, food or water insecurity, storms or sea-level rise, allowing governments and aid organizations to provide assistance before shocks occur.
- Finally, **national financial management systems should be aligned and conducive** towards ensuring that resource envelopes are large enough, equitable enough, and efficiently implemented so that social services can be made climate smart. This includes finding synergies between climate finance and social budgets for children.

Donors and partners

- Donors and partners have a critical role to play in ensuring that **resources and technical capacity is provided to ensure social services are climate smart.** This includes ensuring ODA is harmonized, and that Support the SHIFT financially and technically.
- **Climate finance for children needs to increase.** Current estimates are that only 2.4 per cent of global climate finance is directly towards children. Yet children will receive 100 per cent of the long run impact. Climate finance needs to grow according to the scale of the challenge ahead, and be directed towards outcomes that impact children.
- **Climate finance also needs to be additional to existing levels of overseas development assistance and finance – not replace it.** Current analysis shows that in many cases climate finance is replacing traditional forms of development financing, forcing countries to forgo critical needs for climate-related ones. However, progress on climate goals is unlikely to be successful if it happens without simultaneous progress on social and development goals, and so financing needs to be additional. Climate finance should explicitly prioritize social sectors and accommodate the added costs required to enable countries to be prepared for and resilient to climate risks.
- Climate finance should be built on a **global financing architecture that is both contemporary and fit-for-purpose.** We call on partners to deliver on the vision of the Bridgetown Agenda, using this moment to establish an international finance system that is fitting for the 21st century: one that equips all countries with the resources they require to meet today's challenges, and embodies an approach to global economic governance that reflects the modern world into which today's children are born.

Private sector:

- The private sector has a major role to play in several areas – in both **reducing the scale of the problem as a result of their operations, as well as pioneering innovations and technology** to facilitate climate smart social services.
- **The private sector should adopt a child rights-based approach** that is conducive to creating a healthy and sustainable environment for children and future generations. This includes taking all available efforts to reduce emissions and pollution. This requires changes to supply chains, due diligence, and ensuring supply chains are sustainable from end-to-end.
- The private sector is also part of the solution and has a critical role to play in **pioneering innovations and technology** that can be transformative in increasing resilience of social services whilst also reducing environmental impact. It will be critical that the private sector engages in constructive public-private partnerships to advance common objectives.

And ultimately, **each of the above stakeholders need to include the views of children and young people.** This is their planet to inherit. They have done the least to create the problem – and they will bear 100 per cent of the future impacts. They have the right to be heard, and we have a duty to listen and respond to their calls, including supporting meaningful involvement in climate action. The urgency is requiring them to not wait for adults, but to act themselves, to champion solutions in mitigation, as well as adaptation with creativity and ingenuity. We need to support that process, and provide them with what they need, including the skills and resources to scale the work up. At the very least, we owe them every chance for success.

While we have scientific models to suggest what the future looks like from a climate perspective, the compounding and cascading effects are difficult to predict. Thus, it is crucial for policymakers to address climate change holistically and implement measures that reduce the effects of multiple climate shocks simultaneously. There are a range of tools and actions that can be taken to improve children's resilience – principally among them are to improve access to climate-smart social services; ensure policies (both climate and non-climate) addresses the needs of children, and that they have adequate social protection and child protection systems in place. While the existential threat is real, the opportunities to not just avert the climate disaster but to emerge resilient through adapting, rebuilding, improving and regenerating, is a positive reality we can build for all children and their families in the East Asia and Pacific region.



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Endnotes

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- ⁴ Author's calculations based on EMDAT data for 14 Countries. Increases calculated using the 10-year average of the number of events between 1968-1978 and 2012-2022. For full dataset see: EM-DAT: The Emergency Events Database, Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium, accessed April 2023, <https://www.emdat.be/>.
- ⁵ World Economic Forum, 'Global Risks Report 2023', Geneva, Switzerland, 2023, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risks_Report_2023.pdf.
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- ¹² Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 'Synthesis Report of the Sixth Assessment Report (AR6)', 2023.
- ¹³ Author's calculations based on EMDAT data for 14 Countries. Increases calculated using the 10-year average of the number of events between 1968-1978 and 2012-2022. For full dataset see: EM-DAT: The Emergency Events Database, Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium, accessed April 2023, <https://www.emdat.be/>.



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