

Climate change and child rights

The Convention on the Rights of the Child envisions a world in which children have the right to survive and grow in a healthy physical environment. Yet child rights, and children themselves, are rarely included in international and national discussions on climate change and how to respond to it.

Children are particularly vulnerable to the impact of climate change for several reasons. First, their stage of physiological and cognitive development and innate curiosity leave them at a heightened risk of exposure to environmental hazards and the potential to be harmed by them. Children are, for instance, more susceptible than adults to the effects of intense ultraviolet radiation, inadequate shelter and indoor air pollution from biomass fuel.

Second, many of the main killers of young children – undernutrition (which contributes to more than one third of all under-five deaths), acute respiratory infections, diarrhoea, malaria and other vector-borne diseases – are known to be highly sensitive to climatic conditions.

Third, there is increasing evidence that the world's least developed countries are likely to bear the brunt of climate change. These countries have large child populations. In 2008, under-18s accounted for 47 per cent of the population in the world's 49 least developed countries, compared with 21 per cent in the industrialized countries. Many developing countries suffer from poor physical infrastructure and lack systems to cope with such climatic events as drought and flooding.

Fourth, the growing correlation between civil strife and climate change is an area of particular concern for child rights. A 2007 study estimated that 46 countries, with a total population of 2.7 billion people, may face a higher risk of violent conflict as climate change intersects with social, eco-

nomical and political stresses. For children, this has consequences of psychosocial trauma, recruitment into armed forces, displacement and forced migration, which may in turn lead to family separation and exposure to trafficking and exploitation.

Last, the evidence strongly suggests that climate change will make achieving the Millennium Development Goals even more difficult. The Stern Review, a comprehensive study on the economic impact of climate change commissioned by the Government of the United Kingdom in 2006, has estimated that climate change could increase under-five deaths in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa by 40,000–160,000 annually, by reducing economic output in these regions.

The potential loss of livelihood for millions of families could mean that more children will be needed to support household income, making it more difficult for them, especially girls, to attend school. The increasing scarcity of water and other natural resources will place an even greater burden on girls and women, who undertake most of the household fuel and water collection. And the cost of mitigating climate change may leave less money for social spending on health, education and other social protection programmes.

Children as protagonists in the response to climate change

Integrated, collaborative approaches, with children as key partners, are required to face the complex challenges that climate change poses to child rights. Intersectoral collaboration in the areas of health, education, nutrition and public works and with those agencies and organizations entrusted with the care and protection of children, women, young people and families, will be essential. Gender awareness is also required to create opportunity, reduce vulnerability and empower all citizens. Community partnerships will also be cen-

tral to mitigation and adaptation strategies. Empowering villages, towns and neighbourhoods to cope with threats will entail greater investment in traditional areas of child development, such as nutrition, health care, education, and water, sanitation and hygiene. It will also encompass innovative interventions to promote renewable energy sources, such as solar and wind, for cooking, heating and water collection; to enhance the availability and quality of environmental education in schools and communities; to support groups whose livelihoods may be threatened; and to improve disaster-preparedness for storms, floods and droughts.

Across the developing world, initiatives have already emerged to address these challenges. In Sierra Leone, for example, 15,000 young people are participating in a volunteer programme that trains them to better run their farms and plots, organize micro-enterprises and share good practices. In Morocco, a World Bank-assisted project aimed at reducing the burden of water collection on girls has succeeded in raising their net primary school attendance by 20 per cent. In Tajikistan, children are helping to test water quality, using simple, inexpensive testing equipment. These examples show how undertaking efforts with children at the centre can create a better natural environment and at the same time help children and young people realize their rights.

Adapting to climate change can provide an opportunity for countries and communities to revitalize their commitments to children. Steps must now be taken to mitigate the effects of climate change and strengthen mechanisms of preparedness and adaptation. The cost of inaction will be high; left unattended, climate change threatens reversals in child survival and development in the 21st century.

See References, pages 90–92.