

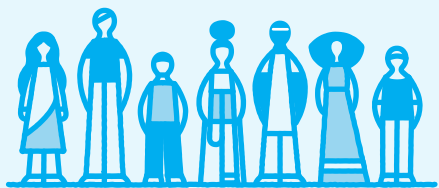
Ruksana and Rahul receive hygiene kits from UNICEF after devastating floods in eastern Bangladesh in 2024. The flooding affected more than 5 million people, including 2 million children. © UNICEF/UNI601291/Sultan Mahmud Mukut

unicef   
for every child

# El Niño 2026–2027

Protect children now, build resilience  
for every cycle to come





**347.5 million**

children likely to be exposed to drier or wetter conditions because of El Niño in 2026 alone (see Annex I)



**90+%**

probability of a very strong event from October to December 2026, with a 75% chance of the strongest El Niño on record<sup>1</sup>



**Up to US\$15**

saved in disaster recovery for every dollar invested in disaster risk reduction<sup>2</sup>



**~US\$2.83 billion**

Funding gap in UNICEF's 2026 humanitarian appeals for the 40 priority countries, within which El Niño-related needs are embedded (see Annex II)<sup>3</sup>

## A predictable crisis on a record-warm planet

El Niño, the warm phase of the El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO), sees above-normal Pacific sea surface temperatures shift weather extremes worldwide. Failed harvests across Southern Africa, floodwaters in the Horn of Africa, intense heat over South Asia and fires and haze across South-East Asia often follow in El Niño's wake. Children bear the brunt of the impacts.

El Niño conditions developed in June 2026 and have strengthened rapidly, with central Pacific temperatures forecast to exceed anything previously observed.<sup>4</sup> The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) gives a more than 90 per cent probability of a very strong event in October–December, with a 75 per cent chance of the strongest El Niño on record.<sup>5</sup>

The World Meteorological Organization's (WMO) update of 3 September 2026 gives a near-100 per cent probability that El Niño will persist through February 2027, peaking around the end of 2026.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, unusually warm waters in the Indian Ocean are expected to make some El Niño impacts even more severe.<sup>7</sup> El Niño is unfolding against the backdrop of a warming climate with 2026 on track to be one of the warmest years on record and global ocean temperatures at record highs.

A warmer climate sharpens every hazard this event brings, while rising global fuel and fertilizer prices will compound the food insecurity and household economic stress that follow. A World Food Programme (WFP) analysis projects that this 2026–2027 El Niño could push at least 49 million more people into acute food insecurity by the end of 2027.<sup>8</sup>

UNICEF's own analysis, presented throughout this brief, quantifies what this means for children: 347.5 million children live in areas likely to be exposed to drier or wetter conditions that could lead to severe droughts or floods (see Annex I). Millions more face the poverty impacts outlined below.

Evidence from the Eastern and Southern Africa region illustrates the longer-term losses that climate shocks inflict on health, education, skills, jobs and economies. Between 2005 and 2024, climate-related disasters caused an estimated US\$1.3 billion in direct damage to schools and education infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> Disruptions in learning due to climate-related hazards in 2025 are projected to cost US\$200 billion in future earnings for affected students.<sup>10</sup>

By the end of 2026, up to 23.4 million additional children could fall into monetary poverty because of the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>11</sup> This estimate does not yet account for the additional impacts of El Niño, which will further erode household incomes and push more children into poverty. In countries already facing conflict, displacement and severe food insecurity, these overlapping shocks drive negative coping strategies, a dangerous deterioration in children's nutrition and a heightened risk of famine.

More than two billion people live in 61 fragile and conflict-affected contexts. While they make up 25 per cent of the world's population, these contexts account for 72 per cent of all people living in conditions of extreme poverty.<sup>12</sup>



The consequences for children are predictable, and the choice is clear: **act before the peak and build lasting resilience at a fraction of the cost** or pay far more to repair preventable damage.



## Why children are disproportionately affected

Stronger and more frequent disasters in the wake of a changing climate constitute one of the most consequential child rights crises of the twenty-first century. Climate risk for children is shaped by exposure to climate-related hazards and by children's vulnerability, determined by their stage of physiological development, socio-economic circumstances and access to essential social services.<sup>13</sup> El Niño acts as a risk multiplier for all these aspects.

The severity of climate- and disaster-related impacts on children depends not only on the **intensity** of the shock itself. It also depends on the **resilience** of the institutions, markets, health and education systems, social protection mechanisms and communities that stand between children and that shock. In fragile and conflict-affected settings, these buffers have been systematically weakened, leaving children the most exposed to climate shocks and stresses, and the least protected from them.

For children, hazards rarely occur in isolation. They recur with repeated damage and setbacks that can affect a child over an entire lifetime. Drought can trigger losses in crops and family income, increasing malnutrition and poverty. This in turn increases children's susceptibility to disease, water insecurity and a range of protection risks, including violence, exploitation, child labour and child marriage. As these risks accumulate, they can overwhelm households' coping capacity and strain local and national systems.

Heavy rains and flooding affected children in Peru's Ucayali region.  
© UNICEF/UNI770686/Romani



Globally, **1.1 billion children**, or nearly half of the world's children, are exposed to at least three overlapping climate-related hazards.<sup>14</sup>



The children affected in 2027 will be those the world chose not to protect in 2026. **A predictable crisis is a preventable one.**

In fragile and conflict-affected settings, governments often have very limited financial resources to respond. Years of conflict, displacement and chronic underfunding have eroded institutional capacity. There, international investment in preparedness, anticipatory action and resilience is not supplementary. It is the primary available mechanism to protect children from predictable shocks.

The social services meant to protect children are already stretched not only by climate shocks, but also increasingly by conflict, displacement and shrinking humanitarian funding. The last El Niño cycle showed the scale of what follows. During the 2023–2024 El Niño, nearly 300,000 children were at risk of severe acute malnutrition in six southern African countries alone.<sup>15</sup> Between 2016 and 2023, climate hazards drove more than 20,000 child displacements per day.<sup>13</sup> By the end of 2024, 48.8 million children were displaced by violence and conflict.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, funding shortfalls are dismantling the very systems meant to protect children from impacts like El Niño, such as in Somalia. Here, more than 200 health and nutrition facilities have already closed because of unprecedented cuts to humanitarian aid. The country has also seen a 32 per cent rise in children admitted for severe acute malnutrition with complications.<sup>17</sup> In Sudan, conflict has displaced over 9.1 million people and affected essential services, with 17.3 million children now requiring lifesaving support.<sup>18</sup> UNICEF's 2026 appeal for Sudan still faces a 64 per cent funding gap.<sup>19</sup>

Climate shocks, conflict and funding shortfalls are not separate crises but compounding ones. Each crisis strains the same fragile systems, leaving children caught in the overlap with fewer places left to turn.

## Why children are uniquely at risk: four amplified vulnerabilities

### Biological



Developing bodies are most susceptible to undernutrition, heat stress and disease.

↪ **Early harm can be irreversible**

### Dependence on caregivers



Falling income and rising care burdens leave families unable to meet children's needs.

↪ **Raises child marriage and labour risk**

### Reliance on services



Health, water, school and protection systems are disrupted exactly when needed most.

↪ **Continuity of services is protective**

### Cascading, delayed effects



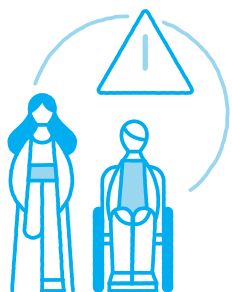
A failed harvest or dropout can shape a whole life; caseloads peak 2027, prices into 2028.

↪ **Acting early breaks the chain**

# El Niño is a gender and disability inclusion crisis

Across affected communities, girls – especially adolescent girls – and female caregivers bear a disproportionate share of El Niño's costs. They experience increased care burdens, worsening health and nutrition outcomes, interrupted schooling and heightened risks of violence, including child marriage. Without gender-responsive action, El Niño will continue to amplify existing inequalities and leave millions of girls further behind.

El Niño preparedness and response should place adolescent girls at the centre of decision-making and action, creating meaningful opportunities for their participation and leadership. Efforts should strengthen prevention and response to gender-based violence and expand social protection systems that address the distinct needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls. They should also protect their rights, well-being and opportunities. In drought-affected regions of Ethiopia, child marriage rose by an average of 119 per cent as the 2022 Horn of Africa drought intensified.<sup>20</sup> Climate-related events disrupted the learning of 242 million students worldwide in 2024 and 171 million students in 2025, with girls most affected.<sup>21</sup>



**Children with disabilities** face barriers to accessing early warning, evacuation and accessible shelter, and higher risks of malnutrition as drought and food insecurity deepen.

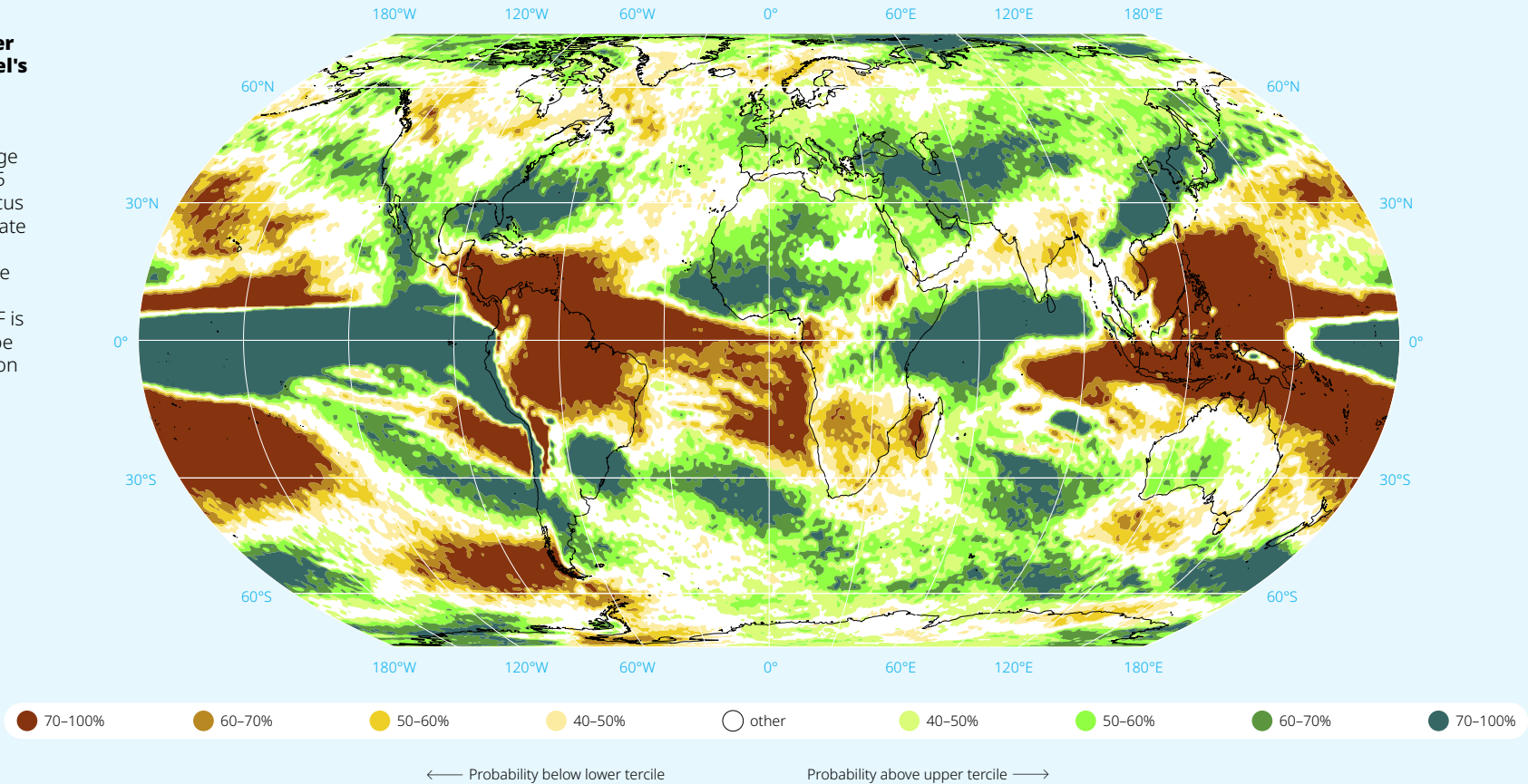
El Niño is also a crisis for children with disabilities, who will be disproportionately affected. Many already face systemic exclusion. This is reflected in the fact that children with disabilities are 34 per cent more likely to be stunted than their peers without disabilities and 49 per cent more likely to have never attended school.<sup>22</sup> In Turkana, Kenya, children with disabilities were found to be up to three times more likely to be malnourished than their peers.<sup>23</sup> They are also among the first to lose access to the health, assistive technology, rehabilitation, education and protection services they rely on when systems come under strain through El Niño-related impacts.

Disability-inclusive preparedness and response means accessible early warning and evacuation, and inclusive social services and social protection that account for extra disability-related costs and support needs.<sup>24</sup> It also ensures children with disabilities can access assistive technology, maintain essential services and actively participate in preparedness and response planning alongside their caregivers and representative organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs).

Fig. 1 **World map of the precipitation forecast for October to December 2026**  
Probability of the most likely category of precipitation

**Forecast issued on 1 September 2026, compared with the model's simulations for 1993–2016.**

Source:  
European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF) SEAS5 seasonal forecast, via the Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) Climate Data Store. Contains modified Copernicus Climate Change Service information 2026. Neither the European Commission nor ECMWF is responsible for any use that may be made of the Copernicus information or data it contains.<sup>25</sup>



**Children living in areas historically affected by El Niño where the precipitation forecast is unusually dry or wet (October-December 2026)**

Source: The International Research Institute for Climate and Society, Columbia University; ECMWF; WorldPop (UNICEF analysis; see Annex I)

| Asia and Pacific                                                                                | Eastern and Southern Africa                                                                      | Europe and Central Asia                                                                            | Latin America and the Caribbean                                                                    | Middle East and North Africa                                                                       | West and Central Africa                                                                            |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 190 million  | 40.8 million  | 21.6 million  | 40.6 million  | 20.4 million  | 20.2 million  |

Fig. 1 shows where precipitation from October to December 2026 is likely to be below or above the usual range, based on the ECMWF seasonal forecast.<sup>26</sup>

No two El Niño events are alike, and priorities may shift as the seasons develop. Within and beyond the shaded regions, the severity of impacts will be determined as much by fragility, conflict and system readiness as by the strength of the hazard impacts.

Significant shifts in climate patterns are expected:

- ↪ **East Africa's short rains** (October–December 2026) are forecast with unusually high confidence to be heavily enhanced. Regional forecasters project a 90 per cent probability of above-normal rains over southern Ethiopia, central and southern Somalia and north-eastern Kenya. This raises flood risk along major river basins even as drought persists across the northern Horn.<sup>27</sup>
- ↪ **Southern Africa's main agricultural season** (October 2026–March 2027) carries the highest drought risk, with the danger of harvest failure concentrated in early 2027.<sup>28</sup>
- ↪ **South Asia's monsoon deficit** has already been observed and will translate into heat stress and water scarcity into 2027. Drought coincides with South-East Asia's main rice season.<sup>29</sup>
- ↪ **Pacific-coast flooding** is expected in Peru and Ecuador between December 2026 and May 2027. Peru's national Multisectoral Commission for the National Study of the El Niño Phenomenon (ENFEN) rates a strong-to-extraordinary coastal El Niño as the most likely scenario through early 2027.<sup>30</sup>

Children's needs will follow the same calendar. The number of malnutrition cases will build towards a 2027 peak, with disease outbreaks after floods and children's education interrupted at each step. Each of these windows is also the moment to start disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate change adaptation (CCA) investments that will lower the toll of the seasons that follow.



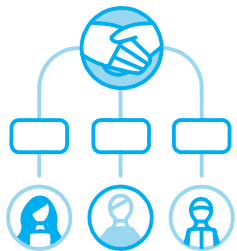
**Protect children now, and in every El Niño cycle yet to come.**

Every system of services that children rely on – a clinic, a water point, a classroom – needs to be resilient to current and future hazards.

## Act ahead of this El Niño with anticipatory action

El Niño can be forecast months in advance. Anticipatory action (AA) across child-critical social sectors turns those forecasts into protection before disaster strikes.

- ↪ When climate forecasts indicate that a crisis is likely (through a pre-agreed hazard trigger), funding can be released automatically so disaster preparedness action at community level can begin immediately.
- ↪ Anticipatory measures across sectors help families protect children, especially those most vulnerable, before extreme weather arrives. Such measures include accessible early warnings, pre-positioned relief supplies, assistive technology and services, anticipatory cash and the temporary expansion of social protection systems.



UNICEF is delivering anticipatory action at scale. As of August 2026, it supports **55 anticipatory action frameworks** – including interagency frameworks – across 30 countries, reaching **11.2 million people, including 3.7 million children.**<sup>34</sup>

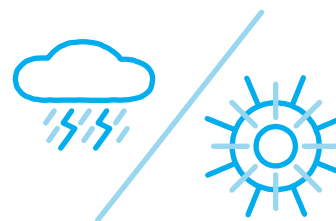
- ↪ A joint FAO-OCHA-WFP review of evidence shows that acting when forecasts warn – not when images of crisis appear – means that children are protected before they are harmed by predictable shocks.<sup>31</sup> In Somalia, effective early warning and anticipatory action ahead of the 2023 El Niño-related floods helped keep the death toll to around 118 people, against more than 2,000 in the comparable 1997 event.<sup>32</sup>
- ↪ Anticipatory action is not a standalone humanitarian tool. It is a way to embed early warning triggers, pre-arranged financing and pre-planned interventions directly into government-owned disaster risk management systems rather than parallel emergency structures.<sup>33</sup> This bridges work between acting now and investing in resilience for the future.

## Invest in resilience to reduce the risks of every future El Niño and La Niña

What is built and strengthened now will protect children through this El Niño cycle, reduce avoidable losses and strengthen systems for every shock that follows.

- ➞ Climate-resilient health, nutrition, water and education services, as well as child protection and social protection systems which tackle crises-related vulnerabilities at scale, can reduce losses and damages in 2026–2027, and every subsequent El Niño cycle. Reliable and accessible multi-hazard early warning systems and planning based on known risks and forecasts are also critical. Strengthening continuity of essential social services before shocks hit can help ensure that children continue to access the support they need when crises are forecast.
- ➞ Investments made now will provide benefits with no regrets. The same child-critical systems that protect children during El Niño can also reduce the impacts of future heat and cyclone seasons and La Niña, the cool, opposing phase of the ENSO cycle that typically follows El Niño. In Mozambique, where climate-resilient school construction standards became mandatory in 2021, none of 1,025 classrooms in 192 schools built to resilient standards with UNICEF support were damaged when Cyclone Freddy struck in 2023.<sup>35</sup>

- ➞ While significant progress has been made, 40 per cent of countries still do not have adequate multi-hazard early warning systems.<sup>36</sup> This El Niño cycle will be a critical test and a demonstration opportunity for the Early Warnings for All (EW4All)<sup>37</sup> initiative pledge for 2027. UNICEF is contributing to EW4All by supporting child-centred risk communication. It also improves how lifesaving alerts reach people in at risk areas and helps communities integrate early warning information into disaster preparedness systems. UNICEF pursues this in close partnership with WMO and national meteorological and hydrological services.



El Niño will return, **but its devastation need not return with it.**



## UNICEF's distinct value

UNICEF brings distinct value to the UN-wide El Niño response and longer-term DRR and CCA efforts of governments. It combines a deep field presence in over 190 countries with technical or cluster leadership across the sectors most affected by climate shocks, including nutrition, health, education, child protection, social protection and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).

UNICEF brings governments and partners together, and can rapidly scale up supply chains, cash transfers and social protection systems in El Niño-affected countries. UNICEF's programming strategy keeps risk reduction, adaptation and humanitarian action on one continuum. Forecasts are translated into preparedness, anticipatory action and rapid response, while longer-term climate risk management is embedded in government-led systems and development plans wherever possible.

Omar lives near degraded agricultural land in Rajanpur, Punjab, Pakistan. El Niño years often bring earlier, longer and more intense heatwaves in Pakistan. They increase the risk of dehydration, heatstroke, crop failure and energy shortages. Drought also affects children's development and well-being by limiting access to safe water and nutritious food. UNICEF and the government are implementing DRR and CCA strategies as heat intensifies during the El Niño cycle. © UNICEF/David Palazón

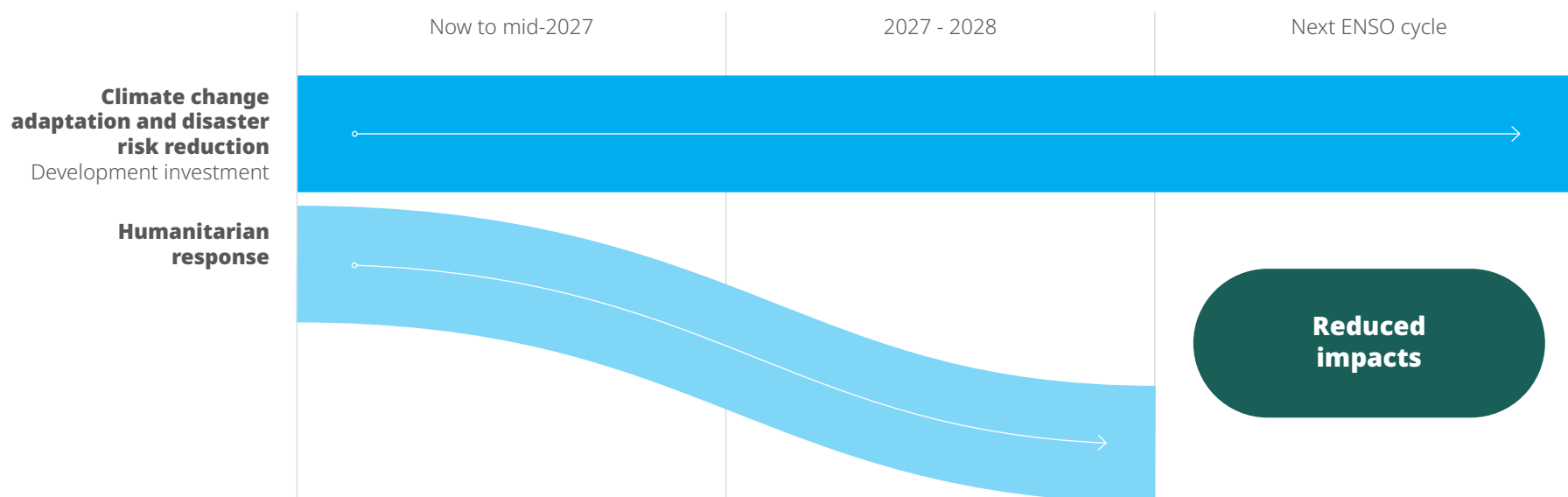
Invest now, pay less later:

## Disaster response and resilience must run in parallel

The unaddressed impacts of El Niño across child-critical social services, from malnutrition and lost learning to disrupted health care, lack of protection and unsafe water supplies, can create lifelong losses in health, human capital and future earnings. Every new El Niño cycle will find countries either better prepared or increasingly exposed to new losses and damages. Fig. 2 shows how pairing anticipatory action and disaster response with DRR and CCA can increase the resilience of government systems, and subsequently decrease future humanitarian impacts. Resilient government systems mean smaller humanitarian impacts in the future.

The impacts on children and their families unfold in the coming seasons from floods in East Africa, drought in Southern Africa and heat and disease in South Asia. The window for early action closes quickly as each season begins. Famine risk is already elevated in several priority countries. Preventing it depends on acting now (e.g., scaling up malnutrition treatment, food and cash assistance and humanitarian access before child malnutrition numbers peak) – not after famine is declared. These actions need to be paired with a long-term resilience lens (e.g., investing in child-focused risk data; establishing protocols for climate- and disaster-related displacement cases; strengthening Nationally Determined Contributions [NDCs] to be more effective for children). See pages 15–17 for more indicative activities.

Fig. 2 Pairing humanitarian response with DRR and CCA reduces impacts across this and future ENSO cycles



## The cost of acting too late

Across most countries affected by El Niño, disaster preparedness plans and delivery capacities exist. Yet many of these plans cannot be implemented at the speed and scale this unprecedented El Niño cycle requires. Despite the growing need for anticipatory action to reduce disaster impacts, financing is insufficient or arrives too late, or plans are not effective enough in addressing the needs of children and the social services they rely on. Preventive programmes still receive less than 1 per cent of humanitarian funding.<sup>38</sup> Most anticipatory action programming to date has focused on food security and agriculture, leaving child-critical social services severely underfunded.

Every recent El Niño response was funded late. Plans in 2015–2016 closed with a US\$3.4 billion gap and the UN-led flash appeals for Southern Africa in 2024 received less than 18 per cent of the required funding.<sup>39</sup> In 2024, with only around half of the US\$208 million required for its Eastern and Southern Africa El Niño response mobilized, UNICEF still reached 14.6 million people, including 10.1 million children. However, it could treat only 4 in 10 children targeted for severe wasting.<sup>40</sup>

In vulnerable countries, El Niño alone could reduce gross domestic product by up to 1.7 percentage points, shrinking fiscal space for children's services precisely as needs rise.<sup>41</sup>

Financing preparedness and strengthening systems before shocks occur can **reduce immediate humanitarian needs and the longer-term human and economic costs** of repeated climate shocks.

- ↪ Every US\$1 invested in risk reduction and prevention saves up to US\$15 in post-disaster recovery.<sup>2</sup>
- ↪ Every US\$1 invested in nutrition returns an estimated US\$23 in economic benefits.<sup>42</sup>
- ↪ Every US\$1 invested in sanitation returns about US\$5.50 in health and productivity gains.<sup>43</sup>
- ↪ Every US\$1 invested ahead of a forecast shock generated more than US\$7 for families in the contexts where returns were highest.<sup>44</sup>

## Timely, flexible funding drives resilience

There is substantial overlap between countries at risk from El Niño and countries already facing major humanitarian crises, including conflict, displacement and elevated risk of famine. Most are already covered by UNICEF's [Humanitarian Action for Children \(HAC\)](#) appeals and interagency Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans (HNRPs) but remain significantly underfunded.

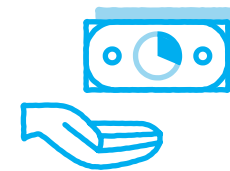
According to UNICEF's existing 2026 Humanitarian Action for Children appeals, an estimated 190.2 million people, including 94 million children, already need humanitarian assistance for the ongoing crises in the 40 countries prioritized for urgent action in relation to El Niño impacts (see Annex II). Meeting these already-published 2026 appeals requires US\$4.11 billion; only US\$1.28 billion has been received or carried over from previous years, leaving an estimated funding gap of 69 per cent.<sup>3</sup>

These figures reflect the countries' full humanitarian appeals, within which El Niño-related needs are embedded. A separate El Niño-specific requirement cannot be isolated, which is precisely why timely, flexible funding to the existing appeals matters. El Niño threatens to exacerbate these already severe needs and further strain the essential services children depend on.

The immediate humanitarian financing ask is therefore not to create a separate El Niño funding mechanism. It is to **ensure timely, flexible funding to existing appeals and humanitarian programmes** in high-risk countries and to provide **pre-arranged financing** for multisectoral anticipatory action and preparedness initiatives before seasonal windows close. UNICEF's HAC appeals fund immediate humanitarian needs, and flexible contributions through UNICEF's Global Humanitarian Thematic Fund (GHTF) allow resources to be allocated rapidly to the countries and sectors where El Niño-related needs are greatest.

In short, UNICEF asks donors for three things: 1) fund the existing 2026 HAC appeals for the priority countries now; 2) pre-arrange financing for anticipatory action before the October 2026 seasonal windows, including through the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) anticipatory action window; and 3) invest in longer-term resilience through UNICEF's Global Climate, Environment, Energy and Disaster Risk Reduction (CEED) Thematic Fund.

UNICEF requires longer-term, **sustainable funding for resilience-building (DRR and CCA) to strengthen the systems and services** that reduce children's vulnerability to El Niño, La Niña and future climate shocks. This ensures that investments made now continue to reduce risk beyond the current crisis. DRR and CCA can be funded through UNICEF's Global CEED Thematic Fund or through bilateral and multi-country programmes and initiatives.



**94 million children**  
already need humanitarian  
assistance in the priority countries.  
Current funding meets only **31%**  
of the required need.

## Cross-cutting: Disaster risk reduction, climate policy, risk data and early warning

### Act now

- ↪ Disseminate multi-hazard early warnings that reach children, families and frontline services, through accessible systems.
- ↪ Update and activate risk-informed preparedness and contingency plans across all social sectors, based on the latest El Niño forecast data.
- ↪ Strengthen the coordination of sector preparedness actions with government-led disaster risk management systems.



### Every sector action below depends on the same backbone:

risk data, early warnings that reach families and services, and risk governance that plans and budgets for predictable shocks. This disaster risk reduction backbone cuts across all child-critical social sectors and requires dedicated funding.



### Invest in resilience

- ↪ Strengthen national multi-hazard early warning systems, contributing to the Early Warnings for All pledge for 2027.
- ↪ Embed child-centred DRR and CCA in national planning, budgets and local capacities.
- ↪ Invest in child-focused risk data and analysis to guide risk-informed programming across child-critical sectors and services.
- ↪ Reflect the resilience of child-critical services and disaster risk reduction priorities in Nationally Determined Contributions and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) under the Paris Agreement.
- ↪ Unlock climate finance – including adaptation and resilience funds – to invest in child-critical systems at scale, complementing humanitarian and development funding.



## Education

**Past climate shocks pushed children out of school, with girls most affected. After major floods in Kenya, girls' enrolment fell by 10.5 per cent, compared with 7.1 per cent for boys.<sup>11</sup>**

### Act now

- Activate and strengthen continuity-of-learning plans based on early warning systems and forecast-based triggers. This includes teacher capacity for adapted teaching and emergency protocols.
- Protect education continuity and essential school services, including school feeding, WASH and safe access to schools.
- Prioritize children, schools and communities with high risk. Provide targeted support for girls and other children most at risk.
- Ensure that education coordination mechanisms are established and active at national and local levels.

### Invest in resilience

- Strengthen education systems to withstand climate shocks, through planning that takes climate and disaster risks into account.
- Connect data and early warning and resilient financing.
- Include DRR, climate strategies and action in curricula and teacher professional development.
- Strengthen school infrastructure standards to be climate-resilient and accessible to ensure safe learning environments.
- Create meaningful opportunities for children and young people to participate and lead in climate action and DRR. Centre girls and children and young people with disabilities in planning and action.



## Child protection

**Displacement and household stress raise risks of child marriage, child labour and gender-based violence.**

### Act now

- Map safe spaces and evacuation sites for all children. Prepare pre-emptive evacuation plans and safeguarding measures to reduce child protection risks.
- Establish community-based, mental health and psychosocial support readiness.
- Strengthen national and local child protection systems. This includes mobile and digital systems that help identify, refer and support children at risk as well as trained social workers and child protection personnel.
- Monitor child protection risks linked to climate-related displacement and mobility. This includes adolescent pregnancy, child marriage and other harmful practices.

### Invest in resilience

- Integrate child protection into national DRR and CCA frameworks.
- Train social workers and child protection staff to keep services running during droughts, floods and other climate shocks.
- Establish pre-agreed protocols for climate- and disaster-related displacement cases.
- Strengthen gender-based violence risk reduction measures and referral pathways.



## Social protection

**Lost income, rising prices and increased unpaid care responsibilities push more families into poverty and harmful coping strategies, particularly women-headed households.**

### Act now

- Use existing social protection systems and registries to identify and reach vulnerable families quickly, including through temporary expansion of benefits.
- Activate anticipatory action by providing cash support to families before a hazard occurs for protection and to reduce losses.
- Ensure affected communities can provide feedback and raise concerns through accessible grievance and feedback mechanisms.

### Invest in resilience

- Strengthen climate-resilient social protection, integrating climate and disaster risk into design and delivery mechanisms.
- Invest in risk-informed child, family, disability and maternity benefits that reduce vulnerability, build resilience and are gender-responsive.
- Maintain grievance and feedback mechanisms that strengthen accountability. Ensure systems respond to community needs.



## Health

**Heat, floods and disease outbreaks strain health systems as families need care most.**

### Act now

- Strengthen early warning systems to detect, track and respond to disease outbreaks quickly.
- Pre-position essential medicines and supplies before shocks occur.
- Protect primary health care services from extreme weather events.
- Strengthen communication and community engagement on health risks.
- Prepare health facilities for extreme heat, floods and other climate-related shocks, as well as their impacts, including displacement.

### Invest in resilience

- Strengthen health facilities to be solar-powered, climate-resilient and accessible.
- Train frontline workers for climate-related risks, including heightened risks to maternal health and adolescent girls during puberty.
- Strengthen prevention and preparedness for El Niño-related climate extremes at community and household levels.
- Integrate El Niño risks into national health adaptation plans.



## Nutrition

**Crop losses and rising prices, poor health and WASH services are set to push the number of children affected by wasting to a 2027 peak.**

### Act now

- Forecast how many children will experience wasting before instances peak. Secure and pre-position ready-to-use therapeutic food ahead of hazardous events.
- Include nutrition indicators in systems that trigger early action before climate shocks occur.
- Expand early detection of wasting and the ability of health care and community systems to respond when needs rapidly increase.
- Expand the package of services for Infant and Young Child Feeding in Emergencies (IYCF-E) to improve the coverage, quality, and accessibility of critical nutrition support for infants, young children and caregivers.
- Deliver enhanced and adapted nutrition education, counselling and support.
- Pre-position micronutrient and lipid nutrient supplement supplies before climate shocks.
- Ensure that nutrition coordination mechanisms are established and active at all levels.

### Invest in resilience

- Integrate nutrition data into permanent early warning systems that trigger integrated action across multiple sectors.
- Address the specific nutrition needs of women, girls and children and youth with disabilities.
- Support shock-and nutrition-responsive social protection that expand support when nutrition risks increase.



## Water, Sanitation & Hygiene

**Drought and flooding cut access to safe water, driving disease and unpaid care burdens for girls.**

### Act now

- Map and protect at-risk water sources and communities.
- Pre-position water-treatment supplies in high-risk areas.
- Strengthen groundwater and surface-water monitoring and early warning systems.
- Develop and implement drought contingency plans.
- Engage communities in water monitoring and conservation.
- Establish agreements in advance to provide emergency water supply in drought hotspots. This includes for water delivery and the quick repair of damaged or non-functioning boreholes and wells.
- Ensure that WASH coordination mechanisms are established and active at all levels.

### Invest in resilience

- Build climate-resilient, gender- and disability-inclusive water services.
- Secure national budgets and climate finance for resilient WASH services.
- Assess water availability and opportunities to use water more efficiently. Develop water-safety plans that ensure safe drinking water during climate-related shocks and stresses.
- Integrate WASH climate risks into national policies and strategies.

## Call to Action

UNICEF calls for coordinated action by El Niño-affected governments, donors, international financial institutions, regional organizations, climate finance partners, and humanitarian and development partners. Together, we can turn forecastable climate risk during the 2026–2027 El Niño cycle into timely support for children, while investing in DRR and CCA actions which make child-critical social systems stronger and more robust for future El Niño cycles.

### Governments in affected countries

- ↪ Activate and regularly update El Niño preparedness and contingency plans. Ensure that plans have clear triggers, responsibilities and decision points for multisectoral anticipatory action ahead of the highest-risk seasonal windows in late 2026 and early 2027.
- ↪ Ensure that national and local planning, budgeting and decision-making processes take children's needs, climate risks and future impacts into account.
- ↪ Protect the continuity of child-critical social services, including nutrition, health, education, child protection, social protection and WASH. Prioritize actions that protect the most vulnerable children and communities, particularly women, adolescent girls and female caregivers, persons with disabilities, refugees and displaced populations.
- ↪ Build social services and systems that can anticipate, absorb, adapt to and recover from El Niño-related shocks and other climate impacts.
- ↪ Enable early humanitarian action by sharing risk information, ensuring that aid can reach affected communities, pre-positioning relief supplies in high-risk areas, and aligning the disaster relief plans of local, national and international partners. Strengthen national and local capacities across sectors and levels of government for data-driven decision-making on beneficiary targeting and disaster risk governance.
- ↪ Strengthen national financing and systems for early warnings on multiple hazards, shock-responsive and gender-responsive social protection and climate-resilient social services. Ensure these preparedness investments reduce underlying vulnerabilities, are child-responsive and contribute to long-term DRR, CCA and resilience-building beyond 2027.



## Donors

- ↪ Commit funding before the highest-risk seasonal windows – in October 2026 for East Africa's short rains and Southern Africa's main agricultural season. This means that disaster preparedness and anticipatory action can be implemented before needs escalate.
- ↪ Prioritize multi-year funding that can be deployed flexibly as forecasts and country priorities evolve during this El Niño cycle. Ensure that child-critical needs in nutrition, health, education, child protection, social protection and WASH – alongside food security and livelihood interventions – are adequately funded throughout the cycle. This includes innovative and trigger-based financing mechanisms that release resources as risk escalates.
- ↪ Direct resources through existing, underfunded UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children appeals and humanitarian programmes in El Niño priority countries (see Annex II), rather than waiting for individual crisis appeals.
- ↪ Contribute to the [Central Emergency Response Fund Anticipatory Action window](#) and other global pooled funds, which pre-arrange financing before shocks, alongside UNICEF appeals. Channel longer-term DRR and CCA funding through the Global CEED Thematic Fund and bilateral or multi-country programmes.

UNICEF works with government partners to preposition WASH supplies in a new warehouse in Boeny, Madagascar, a region with high cyclone and flood risk. The facility strengthens regional logistics for planning and responding to climate-related disasters and disease outbreaks. Careful inventory management supports traceability, rapid deployment and effective assistance for vulnerable community members, especially children. © UNICEF/UNI957654/Andriantsoarana

- ↪ Prioritize early humanitarian action and disaster prevention in political and financing agendas, mobilize collective action and strengthen humanitarian diplomacy around El Niño. This includes the involvement of fragile and conflict-affected states and UN Member States with strong relationships to these countries. These efforts can secure safe, sustained and principled humanitarian access to children at greatest risk of severe impacts from El Niño.

### **International financial institutions & climate finance partners**

- ↪ Expand pre-arranged and contingency financing that can be released against forecast-based triggers, including support to government-led anticipatory action and shock-responsive social protection.
- ↪ Protect and strengthen public expenditure for essential social services for children when climate and economic shocks lead to tight or constrained budgets.
- ↪ Direct climate adaptation, resilience and disaster-risk financing to strengthen nutrition, health, education, child protection, social protection and WASH systems in countries with a high risk of current and future El Niño impacts.
- ↪ Support financing approaches that link humanitarian preparedness with longer-term resilience building, including scalable risk financing and insurance-backed mechanisms where feasible.

### **Development & humanitarian partners**

- ↪ Align disaster preparedness, anticipatory action and response plans around common forecasts, triggers and priority geographies. Draw on WMO and national meteorological and hydrological services' forecasts and data, including through interagency frameworks.
- ↪ Engage regional organizations and platforms, such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Pacific regional bodies and regional climate outlook forums. This coordination helps align cross-border preparedness, forecasts and advocacy, including through regional El Niño summits and ministerial platforms.
- ↪ Coordinate and participate in integrated sectoral action to protect child-critical social services, as well as food security, livelihoods and agriculture.
- ↪ Share analysis, operational capacity information and supply-pipeline data through existing government, cluster, sector and other coordination mechanisms, rather than creating parallel structures.
- ↪ Link immediate early action and response with longer-term DRR, CCA and systems strengthening so each investment lowers humanitarian needs and impact in the next El Niño cycle.

## Protect children now, build resilience for every cycle to come

The 2026–2027 El Niño has not yet peaked, and the window for effective early action has not yet closed. Every week of delay in acting on forecasts, or in making financing available in advance for predictable hazards, translates into harm for the most vulnerable children who may already be experiencing poverty, conflict, malnutrition, displacement or lack of access to safe water. Governments, donors and partners must act now on forecasts, not on images of crisis. The window is narrowing; the cost of waiting is measured in children's lives.

For donors, this means providing early, flexible support to underfunded humanitarian appeals and essential social services for children. For governments, financing institutions and humanitarian and development partners, this means unlocking disaster preparedness, coordinated anticipatory action across social sectors, and more climate-resilient national systems. Sustained investment in disaster preparedness and climate adaptation is also essential to protect national economies from future El Niño cycles.

**Act early. Fund flexibly.  
Protect essential services.  
Reduce the crisis before it happens.**

**More than 347.5 million children are likely to be exposed to drier or wetter conditions because of El Niño in 2026 alone. UNICEF calls for partners and donors to act now on three fronts:**

### Commit before the peak

Funding secured in October 2026 reaches the earliest, highest-confidence seasons: East Africa's short rains and Southern Africa's main agricultural season. Aid arriving in 2027 cannot undo the damage that a lost harvest, destroyed incomes and disrupted learning inflict on a child.

### Fund resilience with flexibility

Flexible, multi-year funding can move at the speed of forecasts and support anticipatory action now and disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation for every El Niño cycle to come.

### Fund the child-specific gap

Close the gap that food-security pipelines do not cover: nutrition, health, education, child protection, social protection and WASH – and the national systems that deliver them.

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## Annex I

### Methodology

The figures in this brief estimate the number of children living in areas where precipitation between October and December 2026 is forecast to be unusually dry or unusually wet. They are based on the ECMWF seasonal forecasting system, issued in September 2026, combined with WorldPop's estimates of child population. A mask based on past El Niño events from IRI, Columbia University, was used to identify areas which could potentially face the impacts of the current El Niño.

Children were counted only in places where the forecast and El Niño's known history point the same way. Areas where below- or above-average precipitation is expected for other reasons were left out. The forecasting system was also tested against 24 years of satellite precipitation records to see where it has a track record of being right.

These are estimates of children living in areas where wetter- and drier-than-normal weather is forecast for October, November and December (OND) 2026, not predictions of impact. They indicate where unusual precipitation is likely, which might lead to drought or flooding, especially where the forecast shows higher intensity. The forecast describes conditions over areas roughly 110 kilometres across, providing broad estimates rather than precise counts, and its uncertainty varies considerably from one region to another. Seasonal forecasts are also revised as the season approaches. These figures reflect what was known in September 2026.

## Annex II

### 40 priority countries

These 40 priority countries represent the locations where UNICEF's global, regional and emergency teams assessed that forecast severity, children's vulnerability and preparedness and response needs are highest. Over **127 million children** are likely to be exposed to drier or wetter conditions that could lead to severe droughts or floods in 2026 alone across these countries.

#### Asia Pacific

- Afghanistan
- Bangladesh
- Kiribati
- Marshall Islands
- Pakistan
- Papua New Guinea
- Philippines
- Solomon Islands
- Timor-Leste
- Tonga
- Viet Nam

#### Latin America and the Caribbean

- Bolivia
- Colombia
- Cuba
- Ecuador
- El Salvador
- Guatemala
- Haiti
- Honduras
- Mexico
- Nicaragua
- Peru
- Venezuela

#### East and Southern Africa

- Djibouti
- Ethiopia
- Kenya
- Madagascar
- Malawi
- Mozambique
- Somalia
- South Sudan
- Sudan
- Uganda
- Zambia
- Zimbabwe

#### West and Central Africa

- Burkina Faso
- Chad
- Mali
- Niger
- Nigeria

Funding can be provided through [UNICEF's Humanitarian Action for Children country appeals](#), thematic humanitarian funding and the Global Climate, Environment, Energy and Disaster Risk Reduction (CEED) Thematic Fund.

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