

**A child-focused lens for the 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference  
on Small Island Developing States (SIDS4)  
A Summary of UNICEF's First SIDS position paper**



Addressing the critical needs of SIDS requires safeguarding current and future generations of children by creating solutions to ensure sustainable, equitable, and resilient lives for children, their families and their communities.

## Unique challenges

- The Small Island Developing States (SIDS) - 57 countries, areas and territories scattered across the Caribbean, the Pacific, and the Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea regions - are some of the most structurally vulnerable countries on the planet. Following compounding global crises, they are even further off track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

SIDS vulnerabilities are exacerbated by:

- Remoteness, undiversified economies, high dependence on external markets and exposure to extreme weather, natural hazards, disasters and climate change resulting in sea-level rise, coastal erosion and biodiversity loss.







## Supporting children across Small Island Developing States

- Children are the most vulnerable to poverty and social inequity, educational disruption, displacement and migration challenges, as well as risks to their safety, protection, mental health and psychosocial needs.
- Their general health may also be impacted (rising global temperatures lead to heightened exposure to diseases like malaria and dengue), the level of non-communicable diseases is rising and they are often most at risk of being underweight or overweight.

*The upcoming SIDS4 conference (27-30 May 2024) and the Children and Youth Action Summit preceding it (24-26 May 2024) are important opportunities to highlight the urgent need to address these challenges. We will be guided by the Commitment to Action emerging from this key youth summit.*

UNICEF advocates for the protection and well-being of every child. For SIDS, this takes on a new urgency. Our collective action - or inaction - will determine the trajectory of countless young lives, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized. The children of SIDS must not become overlooked casualties in ongoing global crises but be elevated as central figures in the narrative of resilience, adaptation, empowerment and sustainable development.

### Key data

	<b>Displacement and migration:</b> Between 2016 and 2021, extreme weather events led to 43.1 million children being displaced globally - the equivalent of 20,000 children a day.
	<b>Poverty:</b> Even pre-pandemic, some 40 per cent of SIDS had a poverty rate of more than 10 per cent <sup>1</sup> . On average in the Caribbean, one third of children live in poverty <sup>2</sup> . This can severely affect their life chances.
	<b>Environmental and climate vulnerability:</b> From 1970 to 2020, SIDS suffered losses of around US\$153 billion due to weather, climate and water-related hazards.
	<b>Economic vulnerability:</b> Many SIDS have crushingly high levels of public debt and income inequality.
	<b>Child protection:</b> In the Pacific, there are high rates of both gender-based violence against adolescent girls and child marriage. Adolescent pregnancy is also a serious issue across SIDS. Mental health conditions affect an estimated 11 per cent of the population in the Pacific and 15 per cent in the Caribbean <sup>34</sup> . Guyana has one of the highest suicide rates in the world.
	<b>Educational disruption:</b> A 2021 assessment of 6,000 school buildings in Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu found that between 50 to 90 per cent would be at risk in a strong cyclone or earthquake <sup>5</sup> .

1 UNCTAD Development and Globalization: Facts and Figures 2021 <https://dgff2021.unctad.org/social-development-issues/income-poverty-and-employment/>

2 UNICEF ECA

3 Small islands agree bold plan of action on noncommunicable diseases and mental health [website]. (<https://www.who.int/news/item/15-06-2023-small-islands-agree-bold-plan-of-action-on-health-and-climate-crises#:~:text=The%2010%20countries%20with%20the.the%20population%20in%20the%20Pacific>)

4 This is still likely undercounted.

5 [unicef.org/pacificislands/media/4041/file/CEED\\_Investment\\_Case.pdf](https://unicef.org/pacificislands/media/4041/file/CEED_Investment_Case.pdf)

*UNICEF is committed to supporting children and young people in SIDS by addressing the complex challenges caused by the unique vulnerabilities they are facing and we are actively focusing on several key areas:*

- **Child and Youth Empowerment, Engagement and Participation:** Involving children and young people in policymaking and developing initiatives to strengthen child and youth leadership and engagement mechanisms, support youth-led policies and programmes, and appoint formal youth ambassadors. Efforts include hosting youth consultations and supporting the Children and Youth Action Summit 2024 to empower young people from SIDS regions.
- **Child-sensitive Policies and Financing:** Developing and implementing policies, plans, and financing strategies that prioritize children's rights including advocating for enhanced debt relief and concessional financing. The recently launched Today and Tomorrow Initiative<sup>2</sup> addresses climate and disaster risk finance gaps.
- **Climate Resilience and Advocacy:** Collaborating with governments to advocate for children's rights in global climate fora and develop climate-resilient policies. The Children's Climate Risk Index-Disaster Risk Model assessments provide a solid evidence base for such policies.
- **Resilient Systems and Services for Children:** Ensuring that services across education, health, social protection, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) remain operational during and after disasters by building in shock-resilience, preparedness and crisis-response management.
- **Education:** Transforming education with a focus on new technologies, digital tools, foundational literacy and numeracy, green skills, aligning education with population and labour market needs and the development of lifelong learning policies.
- **Health System Strengthening:** Investing in health systems based on a primary health care approach to achieve universal health coverage.
- **Protecting Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-being:** This includes strengthening preventative services in the community and developing/improving mental health service delivery systems, ensuring equitable access to care and providing support services for children and their communities including before, through and beyond emergencies.
- **Nutrition:** Promoting climate-resilient food systems, healthy diets, and regulation of ultra-processed foods. Programmes like nutrition-responsive cash transfer initiatives are implemented to combat malnutrition and poverty.
- **Social Protection:** Strengthening social protection systems to safeguard children by investing in disaster preparedness, implementing shock-responsive social protection mechanisms and supporting child-sensitive policy development.
- **WASH:** Building resilient WASH systems by developing infrastructure, sustainable practices, disaster-resilient water policies and water supply systems following disasters.
- **Local Capacity Enhancement:** Scaling up and improving the resilience of child-critical services, empowering local communities, integrating indigenous knowledge and investing in early warning systems.
- **Mobility Management:** Supporting child-sensitive, pre-emptive evacuation and community relocation for children and families in climate-vulnerable locations, ensuring inclusive migration pathways.
- **Data, Research and Evidence for Informed Decision Making:** Strengthening data systems to collect and analyse population data disaggregated by sex and age to help develop evidence-informed policies and programmes including climate and emergency interventions.

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