

Protecting Children from El Niño 2026: Readiness & Early Action across Eastern & Southern Africa

A predictable crisis is a preventable one. El Niño is already underway, and the window to protect children and essential services is now.

2 in 3

CHILDREN EXPOSED TO EL NIÑO IMPACTS
IN EASTERN & SOUTHERN AFRICA

24.6m

CHILDREN & THEIR FAMILIES TO BE
REACHED THROUGH UNICEF
PROGRAMMES

US\$173m

EL NIÑO URGENT REQUIREMENTS *

* The \$173 million requirement reflects UNICEF's provisional estimate of the most urgent El Niño-related funding needs across priority countries and is already reflected within UNICEF's 2026 Humanitarian Action for Children (HAC) requirements. This will be refined as Country Offices finalize response plans with governments and partners.

Why this matters now

El Niño is officially underway and is expected to strengthen through late 2026, with impacts extending into 2027. Across Eastern and Southern Africa, El Niño is not only a climate event; it is a direct threat to children's survival, especially in countries already facing conflict, displacement, and weak service delivery. For children, El Niño raises the risk of infrastructure damage, malnutrition, preventable illness, waterborne disease, water scarcity, and displacement in the wake of extreme weather. It will deepen the economic pressure on households already strained by high fuel, fertilizer, and food prices, while disrupting the health, nutrition, education, and protection services that children rely on. Girls face heightened risks of increased caregiving burdens, absenteeism, school dropout and gender-based violence

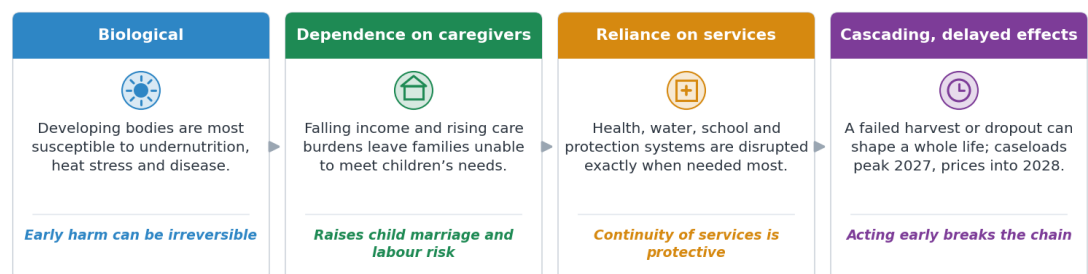
Children are already highly exposed

Based on international seasonal forecasts from WMO, NOAA, regional climate outlook forums and FEWS NET, more than 162 million children live in areas exposed to El Niño impact. The weather patterns vary significantly by region,

and so will the risks to children. In the Horn of Africa, above-normal rains from September to October are expected to increase flooding. Enhanced rains across East Africa from October to December are expected to heighten the risk of flooding, landslides, and disease outbreaks, hitting vulnerable communities in riverine corridors and low-lying settlements hardest. Southern Africa, meanwhile, can expect delayed rainfall, prolonged dry spells, heat stress, crop losses, water scarcity, and deteriorating food-security from October 2026 to March 2027, with child malnutrition caseloads projected to peak in early to mid-2027, after harvest losses and price shocks have worn down household food stocks and purchasing power.

Why children are uniquely at risk

El Niño is a risk multiplier: it amplifies four vulnerabilities specific to children



Two regional risk patterns. One child-centred response.

EAST AFRICA / GREATER HORN	SOUTHERN AFRICA
Flooding and flash floods in some areas, alongside drought risk elsewhere, can drive displacement, waterborne and vector-borne disease, malnutrition and disruption of essential services.	Drought, heat and rainfall deficits can reduce water availability and food production, increase nutrition risks and household costs, and place additional pressure on already stretched services.

EL NIÑO 2026–2027: IMPACT ON CHILDREN ACROSS SECTORS

Rising temperatures, droughts and floods threaten children’s survival, protection and future.

 HEALTH Heat, floods and disease outbreaks strain health systems just as families need care most.	 NUTRITION Crop losses and rising prices are set to push wasting caseloads to a 2027 peak.	 WATER, SANITATION & HYGIENE Drought and flooding both cut access to safe water, driving disease and unpaid care burdens for girls.
 EDUCATION Past El Niño events pushed tens of thousands of children out of school – girls hit hardest.	 CHILD PROTECTION Displacement and household stress raise risks of child marriage, labour and gender-based violence.	 SOCIAL PROTECTION Lost income and rising prices push more families into poverty and harmful coping strategies.

Where is UNICEF focusing now

ACT NOW: INTENSIFY EARLY ACTION Somalia Ethiopia South Sudan	ACT NOW: SCALE UP READINESS East Africa/Greater Horn of Africa: Sudan • Kenya • Djibouti • Eritrea • Uganda Southern Africa: Madagascar • Malawi • Mozambique • Zambia • Zimbabwe
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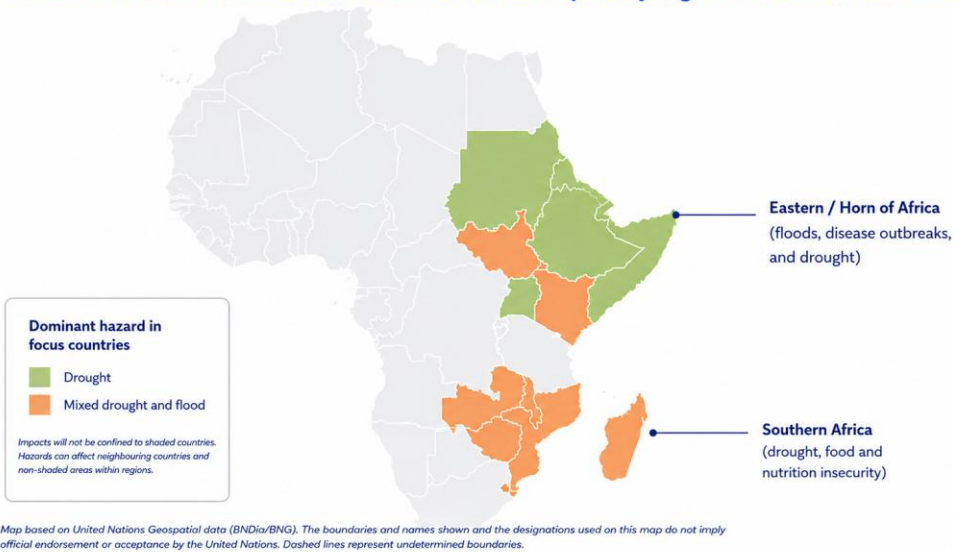
Priorities as of August 2026. ESARO’s prioritisation is intended to remain dynamic as seasonal forecasts and country analysis are updated.

Prioritization considers expected El Niño impacts alongside existing humanitarian needs and vulnerabilities, preparedness gaps, access and operational constraints, and response capacity. **All priority countries require action now, with support tailored to the expected impact of El Niño, existing vulnerabilities and the severity of risks facing the most vulnerable children.**

Across East Africa and the Greater Horn, readiness should be intensified as drought, flood and disease risks evolve, with close monitoring, early action and capacity to rapidly scale where conditions deteriorate. Somalia, Ethiopia and South Sudan require intensified early action and immediate operational support, given the scale and complexity of existing crises and the risk of El Niño further compounding humanitarian needs.

Across Southern Africa and Madagascar, readiness should be scaled up ahead of expected deterioration, including pre-positioning critical supplies, safeguarding essential services and activating anticipatory measures before drought and related nutrition impacts intensify.

Where children are most at risk: El Niño 2026–2027 priority regions in Eastern and Southern



What is UNICEF doing: acting early, building resilience

UNICEF combines immediate preparedness and anticipatory action with longer-term investment in resilient systems, protecting children now while reducing the impact of future shocks. UNICEF’s approach is aligned with government-led preparedness, inter-agency anticipatory action processes and existing humanitarian programmes.

	ACT NOW	BUILD RESILIENCE
1. PROTECT CHILDREN FROM IMMEDIATE RISKS	Pre-position essential health, nutrition and WASH supplies; strengthen screening, outbreak readiness and child protection.	Build climate-resilient health, nutrition, WASH and protection services, with stronger early-warning and referral systems.
2. KEEP ESSENTIAL SERVICES RUNNING	Prepare continuity plans to keep health facilities, water systems, schools and protection services functioning through shocks.	Invest in resilient infrastructure, systems and frontline capacity so essential services can withstand future shocks.
3. ACT BEFORE DISASTER STRIKES	Use forecasts and triggers to activate anticipatory action, prepare communities.	Embed anticipatory action, early warning, and risk-informed planning into national preparedness systems.
4. PROTECT FAMILIES & STRENGTHEN SYSTEMS	Scale shock-responsive social protection and anticipatory cash where appropriate, while addressing emerging protection risks.	Strengthen national social protection systems, registries and pre-arranged financing to respond to future shocks.

What timely funding makes possible

- **Act early.** Pre-position supplies and activate preparedness and anticipatory action before floods, droughts, and access constraints intensify.
- **Protect children.** Keep critical nutrition, health, WASH, education and protection services functioning when families need them most.
- **Adapt as forecasts evolve.** Flexible resources allow for strategic and agile interventions where emerging evidence shows the greatest risk to children.

UNICEF calls on partners to act now to ensure that the most vulnerable children are protected from the impacts of El Niño and receive the life-saving support they need.



In Kenya, Abia Duso, fetching water from the newly rehabilitated water source in Shimbirey, Garissa County, Kenya. July 2026. © UNICEF/UNI1012190/

Who to contact for further information:

Etleva Kadilli

Regional Director, Eastern and Southern Africa
ekadilli@unicef.org

Jeremy Hopkins

Deputy Regional Director, Eastern and Southern Africa
jhopkins@unicef.org

Typhaine Gendron

Regional Emergency Advisor, Eastern and Southern Africa
tgendron@unicef.org

Jelena Jovanovic

Senior Regional Advisor Public and Private Partnerships
jjovanovic@unicef.org