

ECOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Pressing priorities

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THE CRITICAL NEED TO PRIORITIZE INVESTMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

During the first eight years of life, essential pillars of well-being, good health, socioemotional skills and abilities for lifelong learning and productivity are established. Yet, adversity has the potential to undermine these pillars, leading to far-reaching consequences at both individual and societal levels, including impacts on public health, violence and social conflicts.

For children to realize their fullest potential, they require a nurturing environment that encompasses adequate nutrition, good health, stimulating opportunities for early learning and safe, healthy environments that offer protection.¹

Young children learn through play and regular, affectionate communication that responds to their interests. This fosters the confidence necessary for them to explore their surroundings and understand how the world functions. Consequently, governments have an ethical responsibility to ensure they are provided with an optimal ecological environment.

A body of scientific research has led experts to assert that **early childhood development represents a unique window of opportunity** for human development and the development of social capital, which in turn propels societal advancement and the future sustainability of nations.



Nonetheless, poverty and various vulnerability factors often hinder parents and caregivers from providing their children with the best start in life. Studies indicate that detachment from nature and residing in urban areas lacking access to green outdoor spaces detrimentally affect various aspects of child development, including birth weight, motor skills, physical activity, cognitive development, behavioural patterns and decision-making abilities.

Similar to how ecology examines the interrelationships among living beings and their environment, early childhood development can be approached from a holistic and ecological viewpoint. This involves understanding:

- The interconnectedness among the five crucial components essential for optimal early development: health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, early learning opportunities and protection.
- The dynamics of children's interactions with other beings within the contexts of individual, family and community or societal settings where they grow and develop.

It is imperative for various sectoral actors and institutions to actively cultivate favourable conditions for early development through an intersectoral approach. This approach should encompass policies, budget allocations, programmes and services aimed at supporting parents, caregivers and families, particularly those in the most vulnerable situations.



ECOLOGICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL URGENCY

As scientists issue warnings about the impending extinction of our natural environment, the world continues to witness:



Consequently, the frequency and severity of natural disasters are escalating due to climate change and environmental degradation,

triggering simultaneous crises that jeopardize the survival of various species. Despite having contributed the least to this crisis, children bear the brunt of its consequences:

- Younger children are particularly vulnerable to environmental degradation because, per unit of body weight, they experience higher exposure to air, water and food pollutants compared to adults.²
- It is projected that 90 per cent of all climate change-related illnesses and fatalities will afflict children under 5 years old.³ For instance, between 2010 and 2050, approximately 500,000 additional deaths are anticipated due to reduced food quantities and nutritional quality.⁴
- Available evidence suggests that air pollution ranks as the second leading cause of death among children under 5 years old.⁵
- Environmental toxins inflict severe and enduring setbacks in brain development.

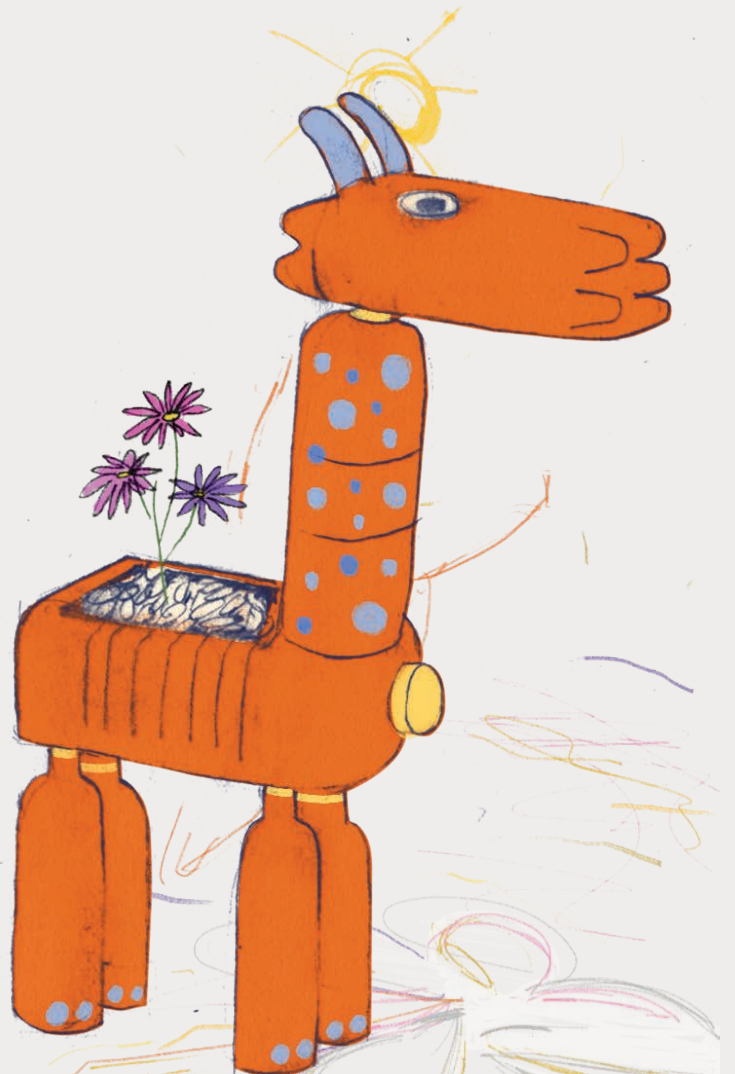
Natural disasters and environmental degradation also profoundly affect the socioemotional well-being and mental health of children and their caregivers. These impacts include weakened attachment bonds, post-traumatic stress disorders, depression, anxiety and phobias. In severe instances, these disturbances can hinder cognitive, behavioural and socioemotional development.

THE URGENCY OF PROMOTING EARLY CHILDHOOD SURVIVAL AND DEVELOPMENT IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Although the repercussions of climate change and environmental degradation impact children and families worldwide, those residing in the poorest communities and low- to middle-income countries, including several in this region, bear a disproportionate burden.

Latin America and the Caribbean, recognized as the most unequal region globally, faces

heightened vulnerability stemming from factors such as rapid urbanization and climate change-related emergencies. Additionally, the region grapples with the world's largest migration crisis, exacerbated by conflicts arising from resource exploitation. These conflicts breed violence, pollution, toxic stress and significant displacement, with millions of people forced to flee due to food insecurity.



A new paradigm:
ecological coexistence,
well-being and harmony

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Addressing the repercussions of the climate and environmental crises demands a paradigm shift in how we perceive the world, transitioning from an anthropocentric to a biocentric viewpoint.

A careful observation of nature reveals that **societies and the environment are inherently intertwined and interdependent**, as they are integral components of a complex and dynamic system.

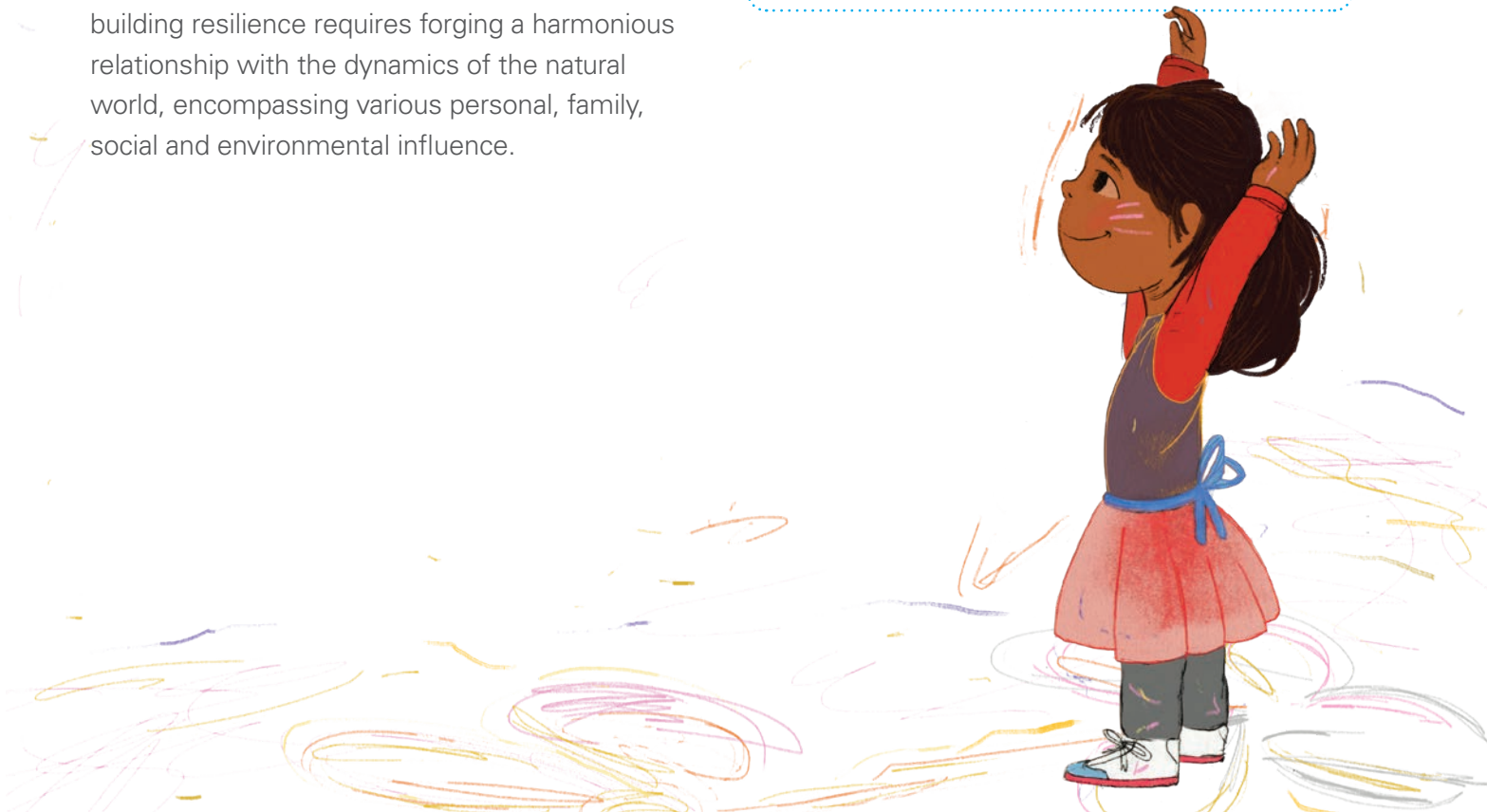
Biocentrism embodies an approach that regards all life forms on the planet, encompassing flora and fauna, as equally significant entities coexisting with humans within the biosphere. Under the biocentric perspective, well-being transcends individual outcomes, emerging as a collective achievement founded on principles of reciprocity, empathy and consensus building.

This paradigm shift also requires cultivating resilience from the earliest stages of life to prevent, resist, adapt and recover from adversities that impact the rights of all children. In turn, building resilience requires forging a harmonious relationship with the dynamics of the natural world, encompassing various personal, family, social and environmental influence.

In this discussion paper, this aspiration is defined as ecological well-being, signifying a shift in mindset towards transforming people's habits and behaviours in relation to nature.

The notions of ecological well-being and harmony align closely with sustainability, which entails meeting the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, ensuring a balance between economic growth, environmental preservation and social well-being.

In essence, humanity's duty, both in the present and future, is to ensure the rights and well-being of young children alongside the habitability of our planet. This entails a steadfast commitment to preserving and safeguarding nature, which benefits all species.



How can we achieve transformation?

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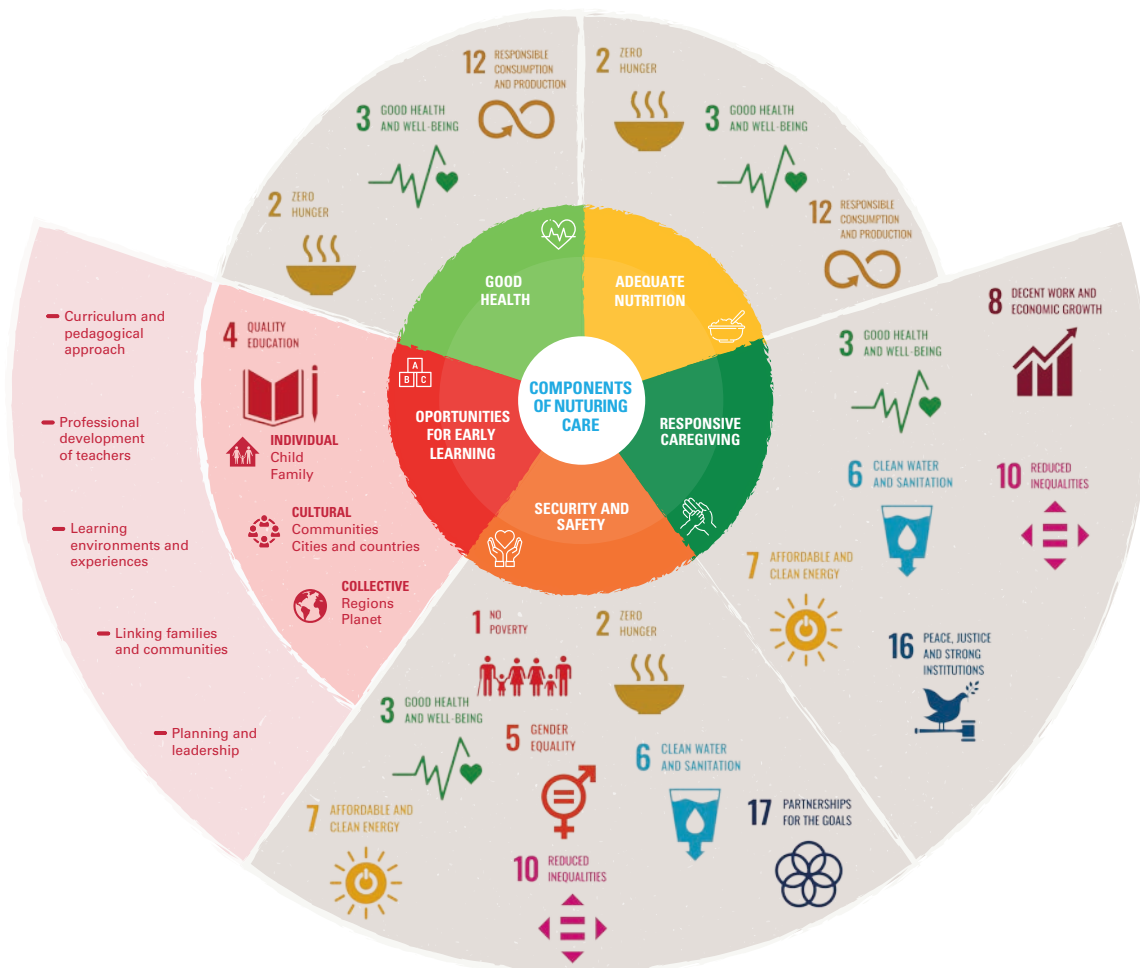
One way forward is to promote a shift in mindset focusing on the cornerstone of societal development, that is, through early childhood investment.

If adults, along with the youngest members of society, engage with ecosystems in a constructive, horizontal and cooperative manner rather than a dominating and destructive one, they can nurture a generation more inclined to cherish and safeguard nature as they grow up.

When early childhood is involved in efforts to revert the environmental crisis, diverse actors associated with child development and sustainable development are being mobilized.

Connecting these two domains enhances comprehension of the interlinkages between the challenges of delivering services to early childhood and the endeavors to mitigate the climate and environmental crises, address children and families on the move and respond to emergencies and humanitarian crises.

Transitioning from political will to tangible action requires a concerted strategy that incorporates the concepts of resilience and ecological well-being into the knowledge and practices of these respective fields. With a roadmap, like the one outlined in the Nurturing Care Framework, coordinated multisectoral action can be propelled forward, facilitating the design and implementation of cost-effective interventions that yield impactful outcomes.



Ecological well-being in early learning and education



As a vital stage, early childhood presents an unparalleled opportunity to cultivate healthy habits, instill responsible behaviours and shape lifelong aspirations, such as advocating for and participating in the protection and restoration of balance within natural processes.

Engaging in experiential play, exploration and early learning while in constant interaction with the natural environment offers countless advantages for children's development. This includes bolstering physiological health, enhancing cognitive abilities and fostering greater psychological well-being.

They also contribute to developing ecological resilience by promoting the acquisition of essential life skills, including inquiry, problem-solving, empathy and respect for diversity.

Fostering collective learning about ecological well-being from early childhood serves as a potent means to instigate genuine shifts in societal mindsets.

Yet, implementing such an approach poses challenges for educational systems, as it entails influencing deeply ingrained cultural mindsets that shape beliefs and behaviours within society.

Nevertheless, early childhood educators play a critical role as they facilitate learning during a crucial period in human development when the groundwork is laid for the value systems that will shape individuals' daily decisions.

The early years present an optimal opportunity to foster a sense of interconnectedness with ecosystems through the examples children observe in adults. Additionally, it is the prime time to systematically integrate early childhood education into programmes and strategies focused on sustainable development and climate change education. Such efforts not only enhance prospects for individual and collective survival and development but also cultivate the resilience necessary to navigate challenges and recover.

There is an urgent need for childcare, early learning, preschool, pre-primary and early primary education programmes to actively transition towards a biocentric approach to teaching that advocates for harmonious coexistence with nature.

This requires conducting training for school staff and teachers, developing educational content and pedagogical approaches for teaching and learning, investing in the infrastructure and location of childcare and early learning settings and implementing communication campaigns for social and behavioural change targeted towards children, caregivers, families and communities.



ECOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AS RELATIONAL, CONNECTED, INTERDEPENDENT, INTEGRATED, AND TRANSDISCIPLINARY LEARNING

Research indicates that activities intentionally designed to cultivate perspective are crucial for children to develop empathy and a sense of connection with all beings and ecosystems, thereby enhancing their capacity to care for the world around them.

Outdoor education and nature-based educational programmes, such as forest schools, initially popularized in Scandinavia, where children engage in play, rest, meals and exploration outdoors in

various weather conditions, serve as valuable examples of how full immersion in the environment forms the foundation of early learning.

However, if experiences in and about nature reinforce anthropocentrism, perpetuating a hierarchical separation between humans and the natural environment, they may prove inadequate and potentially harmful. Therefore, early learning practitioners must reassess how individuals relate to the environment.



LEARNING ABOUT ECOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AS A PARTICIPATORY, EMPOWERING AND TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE.

Transformation occurs not only through a shift in instruction from anthropocentrism to biocentrism but also through the active participation of young children in transformative actions.

Children are influenced by their ecological environment and are also capable of effecting change within it. This requires that, as active members of their classrooms, communities, societies and the planet, children have a genuine opportunity to engage and make tangible contributions.

Education that involves children, adolescents and youth in environmentally sustainable practices –such as reducing consumption, reusing, or recycling materials and conserving resources like water and energy– not only alters their own behaviours but also positively influences the attitudes and actions of those around them.



ECOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AS ACCESSIBLE, CONTEXT-SENSITIVE LEARNING

Children benefit from learning experiences where problems or situations are presented with complexity adjusted to their developmental level, fostering creative thinking and problem-solving skills.

Traditional, one-size-fits-all educational models often fail to accommodate the individual needs and diverse ecological contexts of each child, which can exacerbate inequalities and hinder learning outcomes.

In contrast, from the perspective of ecological well-being, early learning is inclusive. It recognizes each child as a unique individual with varying abilities, employs methodologies accessible to different learning styles and takes into account the cultural, urban-rural and environmental context in which children live, play and learn.

Developing localized environmental knowledge requires integrating early learning, ecology and historical and cultural perspectives. This involves incorporating the viewpoints and worldviews of indigenous peoples, whose wisdom and relationship with the environment can offer solutions to the current environmental crisis.

Indigenous worldviews, such as the ancestral knowledge of *suma qamaña* from the Aymara people in the Plurinational State of Bolivia and *sumak kawsay* from the Quechua people in Ecuador, converge on the profound concept of “good living.” Good living emphasizes the importance of living well and fostering reciprocal dignity for all beings. It calls for balance and interconnectedness, advocating for the harmonious coexistence of humans with nature.⁶



ECOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: EXPLORATION AND PLAY

Children are inherently curious and remarkably adept, making active engagement and exploration of their ecological surroundings essential for understanding and connecting with them. By safely exploring urban or rural environments, children learn to investigate, critically analyze challenges and creatively propose solutions to ecological issues in their communities.

Early learning professionals play a crucial role in transitioning away from traditional didactic and transmissive teaching methods, which are deeply ingrained at all levels of education. They should offer a diverse range of multisensory play and learning experiences while encouraging questions and observations from their students.

INTEGRATING ECOLOGICAL WELL-BEING INTO EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMMES

Conceptual aspects of ecological well-being can be seamlessly integrated into all dimensions of early childhood education, including:

1. Curriculum and pedagogical approach:

through experiences, learning routines, content and teaching methodologies to understand ecological well-being and develop practical skills within this new paradigm.

2. Teacher training, professional development and competencies:

through pre- and in-service training for educators and administrators on approaches, pedagogical content, competencies and experiential learning experiences.

3. Learning infrastructure: through school and community spaces that emphasize the importance of ecological well-being and facilitate outdoor activities and nature exploration.

4. Family and community participation:

encouraging the influence and involvement of significant adults in children's lives, who, through their example, reinforce environmentally responsible behaviours.

5. Management and leadership:

incorporating strategic planning, formulation, coordination, implementation and governance to ensure quality content and approaches in early learning programmes that prioritize ecological well-being.

From surviving to thriving: a new approach

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In the face of an uncertain future, prioritizing the concept of ecological well-being can serve as a strategic approach in any endeavour to enact meaningful transformation. This involves:

1. Urgently addressing two priorities that cannot be postponed if countries are to strive towards sustainable development, particularly concerning early childhood survival and development in Latin America and the Caribbean:

- Ensuring the comprehensive development of young children, which requires the engagement of various actors, ranging from parents and caregivers to teachers and professionals in fields such as health, nutrition, social assistance and protection services.
- Taking immediate action to mitigate the consequences of the climate and environmental crises affecting both humanity and the planet.

2. Recognizing that the relationship between early childhood development and sustainable development operates in two directions:

- Sustainable development policies and programmes must prioritize holistic early childhood development and resilience building to enable children to thrive.

- While often overlooked, early childhood learning policies and programmes yield significant benefits for the sustainability agenda, offering a less costly, more equitable, enduring, fundamental and cross-cutting contribution to humanity's sustainable development.

3. Recognizing nature itself as a valuable teaching partner in illustrating the interconnectedness between human beings and ecosystems. This enables children to engage in intergenerational dialogues, exchanging ancestral ecological knowledge and traditional practices that have sustained communities throughout history.

4. Understanding that the holistic approach to child development aligns seamlessly with environmental education and education for sustainable development. This intersection represents the understanding of individuals as multidimensional beings who learn most effectively when their minds, bodies and emotions are fully engaged in a relational and contextually relevant process.

By nurturing the intrinsic interconnectedness between humans and nature, early learning centred around ecological well-being can serve as a catalyst for transformation within traditional education. It has the potential to become the cornerstone of a movement toward sustainable development, as outlined in the 2030 agenda.

Endnotes

1. These key elements for early childhood development are outlined in the Nurturing Care Framework, a global strategy promoted by UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) since 2016, in collaboration with other organizations.

2. United Nations Children's Fund, *Healthy Environments for Healthy Children: Global Programme Framework*, UNICEF, New York, January 2021, <<http://www.unicef.org/documents/healthy-environments-healthy-children-global-programme-framework>>, accessed August 12, 2021.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. World Health Organization, 'More than 90% of the World's Children Breathe Toxic Air Every Day', Press Release, WHO, Geneva, October 29, 2018, <www.who.int/news/item/29-10-2018-more-than-90-of-the-worlds-children-breathe-toxic-air-every-day>, accessed August 12, 2021.

6. Hernández, Gustavo and Henkjan Laats, 'Buen vivir: A concept on the rise in Europe?', *Green European Journal*, December 28, 2020, <<http://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/buen-vivir-a-concept-on-the-rise-in-europe>>, accessed August 13, 2021; Rangel, Maia L., 'El origen del concepto del buen vivir o vivir bien', *Apporeia*, October 1, 2010, <<http://www.aporrea.org/ideologia/a109244.html>>, accessed August 13, 2021.



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