

# Every child has the right to a healthy environment



Healthy Environments  
for Healthy Children

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The right to a healthy environment is a powerful tool to protect children from the impact of environmental degradation and climate change.

**More than 1 million premature deaths among children under the age of 5 are caused by pollution and toxic substances annually.<sup>1</sup>**

Children are physically, socially and economically more vulnerable and less able to survive shocks from floods, droughts, severe weather and heatwaves.

Children are more vulnerable physiologically to toxic substances such as lead and other forms of pollution, affecting them at even low levels of exposure.

Children are more at risk of death, compared with adults, from diseases that are likely to be exacerbated by pollution and climate change, such as pneumonia, malaria and diarrhoea.

Any deprivation caused by climate and environmental degradation at a young age can result in a lifetime of lost opportunity.

<sup>1</sup> Boyd, David R. 'The Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment: Non-toxic Environment – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Issue of Human Rights Obligations relating to the Enjoyment of a Safe, Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment.' Forty-ninth session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, 28 February – 1 April 2022.

# Children are at risk everywhere<sup>2</sup>

All children, but especially indigenous children, internally displaced children, girls and young women, children with disabilities and children living in poverty, are the most vulnerable to environmental risks and climate change.



**2 billion** children

(almost 90 per cent globally) are exposed to **air pollution** that exceeds PM 2.5 of 10 µg/m<sup>3</sup>.




**1 billion** children

(nearly half of the world's children) live in extremely **high-risk countries**.



**920 million** children

(over 1 in 3 globally) are exposed to **water scarcity**.



**820 million** children

(over 1 in 3 globally) are exposed to **heatwaves**.




**815 million** children

(over 1 in 3 globally) are exposed to dangerous levels of **lead** from air, water, soil and food.



**600 million** children

(over 1 in 4 globally) are exposed to **vector-borne diseases**.



**400 million** children

(nearly 1 in 6 globally) are exposed to **cyclones**.



**330 million** children

(1 in 7 globally) are exposed to **riverine flooding**.



**240 million** children

(1 in 10 globally) are exposed to **coastal flooding**.



**40 million** children

annually have their education disrupted because of hazards including **disease outbreak** following extreme weather.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> <https://data.unicef.org/resources/childrens-climate-risk-index-report/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.results.org.uk/blog/let%E2%80%99s-ensure-everyone-has-right-climate-learn>



Tragically, **ONE IN FOUR CHILDREN WHO DIE BEFORE THEIR FIFTH BIRTHDAY** do so because of unhealthy environments. **UNICEF** believes that the health and future of children must be the primary consideration in environmental and health decision-making.

## ACTION IS NEEDED

### Governments

- Conduct national assessments and monitor children's environmental health, collecting disaggregated data, and identifying and taking action on areas of concern.
- Set ambitious national targets to mitigate environmental degradation and climate change, and institute protections for children from impacts already occurring.
- Integrate child-specific interventions in disaster risk reduction, environment and climate change policies, such as in Nationally Determined Contributions and National Adaptation Plans.
- Adopt and enforce public health, environmental, climate and labour laws to protect children from environmental degradation and climate change.
- Recognize the right to a healthy environment in national, regional and global instruments.
- Create sustainable and child-friendly urban spaces by increasing and improving public transport, green spaces and safe walking and cycling paths.
- Monitor and enforce industry compliance to all health, safety, labour, environmental and consumer laws and standards, and require businesses to adhere to human rights and environmental due diligence that integrates child rights throughout the process.
- Ensure social protection measures are adaptive to environmental and climate shocks and address pollution's impact on children's health.
- Ensure adequate funding to prepare and equip health systems to monitor and respond to children's environmental health issues.
- Establish spaces for dialogue with children, adolescents and youth on environmental health.
- Eliminate child labour, which enslaves tens of millions of children globally and exposes them to hazardous environments from dangerous pesticides in the agriculture sector to toxic metals and chemicals in the mining, manufacturing and waste sectors.





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## Health sector

- Prevent, detect, and treat disease in children considering the environmental burden.
- Provide caregivers advice and support to address environmental exposure.
- Train all health care workers to understand the health impacts on children from environmental degradation and climate change.
- Invest in climate-resilient health care facilities that reduce vulnerability to disasters, such as through safe medical waste disposal and implementing net-zero health systems.
- Conduct research and advocate for policies that protect children's health from environmental risks and climate change.
- Institutionalize early warning systems to detect changes in environmental health and allow the health system to respond rapidly.
- Raise awareness in the public, especially among caregivers, on environmental and climate health risks to children's health.

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## Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector

- Achieve universal access to safe and affordable drinking water for all children, promoting low-carbon and nature-based solutions for improving water quality and controlling water-borne diseases.
  - Provide access to adequate and equitable sanitation for all children, end faecal contamination, and ensure environmentally safe and sustainable waste water treatment and disposal.
  - Give access to adequate and equitable hygiene for all, paying special attention to the needs of women, girls and those in vulnerable situations, and preserving access to menstrual hygiene management in emergency contexts.
  - Improve resilience to environmental degradation and climate change in WASH services and systems.
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## Education sector

- Establish and invest in climate change and environmental education that supports children and young people, including marginalized youth, to protect their health and contributes to a safe and sustainable future.
- Offer an environment free of noise and pollution; and promote good nutrition in schools.
- Build resilient infrastructure to ensure children's education is not interrupted by environmental degradation and climate change.

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## Private sector

- Go beyond compliance of health, labour, and environmental laws and standards to protect children's health as part of extended producer responsibilities, especially within supply chains.
- Manage hazardous waste and reduce the use of harmful chemicals.
- Examine and prevent industry impacts on the environment and climate, which can indirectly create risks for children such as those associated with climate-induced migration and displacement.
- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions, increase action towards net zero emissions and provide transparency on industries' carbon footprint.
- Work with government to accelerate transition to a safe and sustainable circular economy.
- Partner with governments to provide equitable access to affordable technologies that mitigate and adapt to environmental degradation and climate change.
- Value and invest in adaptation and improve environmental and climate resilience when considering externalities, or uncompensated costs that pose a risk to the planet and the business.
- Share industry research and disaggregated data to improve policy and regulation on children's environmental health.
- Appropriately factor environmental cost in financial decision-making.

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## The public

- Share equal responsibility to protect and maintain the health of our planet for ourselves and future generations.
  - Consume responsibly and live more sustainably to reduce environmental degradation and climate change through individual and community actions.
  - Advocate for environmental and climate action to protect children's health by influencing decision-makers such as voting.
  - Voice concerns to elected officials of the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation upon children.
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for every child

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