



## THE COVID-19, CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIROMENTAL DEGREGATION CRISES

A triple threat to children's rights or an opportunity to reimagine a fairer, greener more sustainable world for all?

*Key Asks for Public Sector Partners*

### Background and Context

Climate change and environmental degradation undermine the rights of every child, especially the most disadvantaged and those living in fragile contexts and countries. These twin crises -- threatening the world's clean air, waters, land, species and humanity itself -- were already major issues of concern before a third crisis emerged, the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused untold human suffering, devastated economies and disrupted health, education, food and social protection systems globally.

COVID-19 may not have been directly caused by climate change, but there are strong parallels and linkages, pointing to [environmental degradation as a common underlying risk factor](#). In sum, humanity has been on an unsustainable collision course with nature, and the emergence of this pandemic, as well as our vulnerability to similar risks in the future, will only increase if we continue on this path.

Despite these major challenges facing the world, opportunities are emerging. This crisis has demonstrated on a deeply personal level that as the world reopens and reemerges from this crisis, *going back to previous practices is not a*

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*“We recognize that children and young people are positive change agents and commit to partner with them now and in the future, to ease the lasting impact COVID-19 will have on human health, society and the economy and secure a healthy, safe and sustainable future and planet for all in line with the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals.”*

--“Protect our Children” Covid-19 Statement endorsed by 172 Member States and UN Permanent Representatives

*viable option*. Rather, the long-term response to the pandemic must be investment at-scale in processes, practices and systems that are sustainable and inclusive, and that increase our resilience and ability to respond to future crises.

## The Covid-19 Crisis and Children

As of July 2020, the COVID-19 has spread to over 215 countries and territories, with over 580,000 reported deaths and 13 million confirmed cases<sup>1</sup>. Despite the fact that children are not as *physically* vulnerable to becoming seriously ill from the disease, the effects of lockdown measures, school closures, disruptions to routine health, food and social protection systems are having a devastating impact on children's rights and well-being. Following the release of the UN Secretary-General's COVID-19 [policy brief regarding the impact of COVID-19 on children](#) which further articulated these risks, [172 Member States and permanent observers to the United Nations issued a powerful statement](#), developed by the European Union (EU), the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States (GRULAC) and the co-chairs of the Group of Friends of Children and the SDGs<sup>2</sup>, committing to take action on children's rights and well-being in light of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

Both the policy brief and the joint statement explicitly recognized that the long-term response to the pandemic must ensure that this crisis does not impede our ability to achieve the global objectives that the international community has adopted - the *Sustainable Development Goals articulated through the 2030 Agenda*, the *Paris Agreement* and the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction*. In fact, this crisis has demonstrated just how critical it is to pursue international cooperation and partnership to achieve these goals.

The ultimate objectives for both achieving the SDGs and *building back better* post COVID-19 is creating the conditions for children and future generations to have

a better life than what exists today and a viable and vibrant planet for all species to live on. Therefore, we must put people, especially children, at the centre of the crisis response and sustainable recovery to achieve more sustainable, peaceful, just and resilient societies.

A central tenet of building back *better* should be building back *greener* and building back *fairer* and to [#reimagine](#)<sup>3</sup> a world fit for every child. Investments in education, child protection, health and nutrition, and water and sanitation can mitigate the impact of COVID-19, build resilient societies and systems, and enable adaptations needed to face the long-term challenges posed by climate change and environmental degradation.

As children and young people have been the most vocal stakeholders on the climate and environmental crises, listening to their voices, engaging them on these issues and working with them are essential in the short and long-term.



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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children (HAC): <https://www.unicef.org/appeals/files/2020-HAC-CoronaVirus-updated-07.19.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Bulgaria, Jamaica and Luxembourg

<sup>3</sup> For more info on UNICEF's #Reimagine campaign, visit: <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/covid-19/donate>





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## The Triple Threat of COVID-19, Climate Change and Environmental Degradation: Essential Facts

### 1) Children are bearing the brunt of the consequences of climate change directly and indirectly:

- 160 million children live in high drought-severity zones.
- 500 million children (almost a quarter of the world's child population) live in extremely high flood occurrence zones.
- It is estimated that approximately 90% of climate-related health effects will be borne by children under five years of age.

### 2) Polluted environments with little access to basic sanitation and hygiene have compounded the impact of the pandemic in many countries:

- Air pollution is a major contributing factor in the deaths of close to 600,000 children under five every year, making it the second leading cause of death for this age group. Given COVID-19 attacks the respiratory system, children most exposed to indoor and outdoor air pollution will be particularly vulnerable.

- Some 2.1 billion people around the world do not have access to safe water at home.
- 3 billion people lack basic handwashing facilities with soap and water at home (in Least Developed Countries three quarters of the population do not have basic handwashing facilities). That means 40% of the world's population are at immediate risk of COVID-19 simply because they lack basic handwashing facilities.

### 3) The learning crisis has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 response on a number of fronts. On the environmental front, schools that have not adopted climate-resilient measures are also less safe in the face of the pandemic:

- Nearly 1.19 billion students in 150 countries continue to be affected by school closures. Re-opening them will require a massive and coordinated effort to ensure that all children and teachers can go back to school safely. Only 30% of schools globally have handwashing facilities, making this return challenging.
- Climate-resilient schools can serve the dual purpose of having infrastructure that makes schools safer and greener while also providing

an education that sensitizes children to the concepts of sustainability, combatting climate change and environmental degradation and thus preparing them for the new green economy and job market.

**4) For the wrong reasons, COVID has resulted in a decrease in emissions and air pollution due to reduced travel and economic activity in regions that have been particularly badly affected:**

- Before COVID-19, approximately 93 per cent of children under 15 – a full 1.8 billion young people - breathed dangerously polluted air.
- During the height of lockdown measures, air quality temporarily improved which, in turn, can have a positive outcome on children's health.
- Yet, this reduction in pollution clearly came at a massive cost in terms of economic slowdown. It is imperative that an "either/or" narrative does not take hold in that the only way to achieve positive outcomes for the environment is by damaging the economy and losing jobs. In fact, these data points should become the centrepiece for why governments and the private sector alike need to accelerate their efforts in creating inclusive and sustainable green jobs -- especially for young people entering the workforce and investing in the circular economy.

**TURNING THE TRIPLE THREAT INTO UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITY: KEY ASKS FOR PARTNERS**



**Make children the centre of climate change and environmental strategies and plans**

- Child rights should be explicitly integrated into key national climate change and adaptation strategies, policies and planning documents, including the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), as well as COVID-19 response and recovery plans and budgets. The views and voices of children should also be sought for both the development and implementation of said policies and plans, through inclusive dialogue and consultation with children and young people.
- By including children and young people as active protagonists of climate policies, children and young people will feel ownership over the solutions that will be implemented in the years and decades to come. This ownership is essential in transforming such practices into behavioural and social norms.
- Education systems, infrastructure and curricula<sup>4</sup> need to be adopted to teach children about climate change, the environment and responsible and sustainable consumption and production. This will equip children and young people with the skills needed to build the green economies and assume the green jobs of tomorrow.



**Build climate-resilient services and systems for every child**

- Building resilience and disaster preparedness directly into health, social protection, WASH and education systems ensures that people are not only more protected from the effects climate change and environmental degradation but from other crises, including pandemics and economic shocks and downturns. For example, renewable energy can improve the self-reliance of schools and health clinics, minimizing the effects of disruptions that occur with many of the current and traditional systems and infrastructure. Resilient social

<sup>4</sup> Initiatives such as the *World's Largest Lesson* can be integrated into existing school curricula to teach children

about climate change, the environment and the SDGs: <https://worldslargestlesson.globalgoals.org/>

protection systems are better able to manage the impacts of a variety of shocks -- climate change, natural disasters, epidemics and economic shocks.

- Globally, governments must protect and increase investments in sustainable and climate-sensitive water, sanitation and hygiene. This is a key strategy to decrease COVID-19 transmission, prevent future disease outbreaks and secure access to safe and clean water for all communities including during extreme weather episodes like droughts and floods.
- Access to healthcare and good nutrition are every child's right. In the wake of COVID-19, governments and partners should scale-up their investment in quality, affordable and accessible healthcare and protect, promote and support good nutrition for all. Of utmost importance in the immediate response to COVID-19 is to keep health systems functioning and to ensure that vital routine services that protect children's health, such as immunization campaigns, continue. As part of the longer term/building back better response, training a new generation of young people as

health workers should be part of the investment made in sustainable and inclusive jobs. Investments in health care services should be systemic and increasingly prevention focused integrated with nutrition – including more sustainable food systems and consumption, as well as other sectors like education and social protection. Health centres should also be climate-resilient, for example being powered by using renewable energy.



### Commit to reimagine and invest in a better world for children

- Measures aimed at recovery need to create enabling conditions that protect the environment for present and future generations. While climate change poses universal threats, tackling it is also an imperative for ensuring equity for most vulnerable, marginalized and poorest groups who are often the most affected and least able to recover. Hence, climate change commitments must be translated into concrete programming priorities. For



### Principles to Building Back Better

**Grow back green, grow back together**  
link COVID recovery and response to climate and environmental action



**We have the tools and solutions to address these challenges:** need to build resilience, strengthen systems, improve monitoring.



**Build resilience and disaster preparedness** directly into our programmes.



**Strengthen health systems** so that they address environmental risks.



The **pandemic cannot be used as an excuse to slow down** our collective efforts.



We need to **listen to the science**.



A unique moment to do things differently



A moment for **intergenerational solidarity**.



A moment to **adjust our lifestyles**, with local, global, individual and systemic implications.



A moment to **take a longer-term perspective** of the implications of our actions now.



Consider the **broader environmental dimensions** behind children's rights.



A moment to **spend time with kids** –to discuss their views on issues that affect them.



example, for the EU this is through allocating a consistent part of the 25% of the *Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)* to support climate change resilience for disadvantaged communities and countries, including for children within these communities.

- Decades of evidence show that widespread changes in positive societal behaviour often begin with children becoming aware of the problems they observe in their own communities. This also applies to sustainable consumption patterns. As younger consumers gain greater purchasing power, ethical investment and employment has become a growing trend. For example [90% of Generation Z consumers believe companies have a responsibility to address environmental and social issues](#), and offer better opportunities for employment. Governments must invest in communication, education and laws to change societal norms, as well as industry behaviour related generation of waste, chemicals and emissions, food waste and sustainable practices, such as recycling and reuse.
- As countries increasingly move towards reopening business and industries, there is a risk that these entities increase production to make up for lost time, and that pollution could spike again in the recovery phase. Governments should ensure that stimulus packages and recovery measures incentivize a 'green' reopening, for example by linking public sector bailout and relief funds for businesses to key performance indicators (KPIs) that have environmentally responsible and socially inclusive targets.
- Finally, it is imperative to demonstrate intergenerational solidarity & equity between older generations/decision-makers and children by taking urgent action on these issues today. Climate change and environmental experts estimate that we have only 10 – 12 years left to change the course of climate change, after which trends are irreversible. This means a child born today will already have *no chance* to rectify mistakes made

by leaders in charge now, if we do not act urgently. By taking climate change seriously and taking the necessary action today, we leave a chance of agency to future generations. Otherwise, we are already depriving children born today and future generations to be able to take any action other than to cope with the ramifications of our short-sightedness and inaction, and this a fundamental violation of their human rights as enshrined in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis has presented us with a unique window of time and an unprecedented moment in our lifetime to [reimagine what a new global social contract looks like](#). It has shown us that together we have the tools and the experience to fight climate change. Together, we can harness science, evidence and momentum to reimagine and build back better, greener and fairer, for every child.

