

Small Island Developing States Position Paper and Call to Action

April 2024

unicef 

for every child

Executive Summary

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) consisting of fifty-seven (57) countries, areas, and territories, include some of the most vulnerable countries on the planet. Even though they are a heterogeneous group located across the Caribbean, the Pacific, the Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea - SIDS are inherently and uniquely vulnerable to exogenous shocks owing to, inter alia, their small size, geographical remoteness, highly dispersed populations, the limited scale and undiversified nature of their economies, high dependence on external markets, extreme exposure to disasters and natural hazards, and the effects of climate change. Compounding global crises including the COVID-19 pandemic have considerably slowed SIDS progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and placed unprecedented pressures on their already constrained resources.

Children in SIDS are particularly vulnerable, facing risks including poverty and social inequity, health, food, and nutrition insecurity, child protection, mental health and psychosocial well-being risks, educational disruptions, displacement and migration challenges, and denial of full access to resources and opportunities. Efforts must focus on bolstering resilience and adaptive capacity, safeguarding essential services like healthcare, education, and food security, and promoting intergenerational leadership to accelerate progress towards sustainable development, including by empowering young people to shape programmes, policies, and advocacy strategies that drive sustainable development. The upcoming SIDS4 conference and its Child and Youth Action Summit are important opportunities to highlight the urgent need to address these challenges comprehensively.

UNICEF is committed to supporting children and young people in SIDS by addressing the complex challenges of climate change, disasters, and economic shocks, including through:

- 1) **Child-Sensitive Policies and Financing:** Developing and implementing policies, plans, and financing strategies that prioritize children's rights and recognize their role as agents of change. Tailored approaches are needed to address the unique needs, vulnerabilities, and strengths of children in SIDS.
- 2) **Child and Youth Empowerment and Engagement:** Involving children and young people in policymaking and action is crucial for shaping a sustainable future. UNICEF recommends initiatives to strengthen youth leadership, support youth-led policies and programs, institutionalize children and youth participation mechanisms, and appoint formal youth ambassadors.
- 3) **Increased Financing for Development:** Advocating for enhanced debt relief measures and increased concessional financing for SIDS. UNICEF emphasizes prioritizing the resilience of child-critical services and ensuring children's rights are central considerations in governance and decision-making processes.
- 4) **Local Capacity Enhancement:** Scaling up and improving the resilience of child-critical services, empowering local communities, and investing in early warning systems. Efforts should focus on reaching the most affected groups of children, integrating indigenous knowledge with scientific approaches, and providing varied levels of mental health and psychosocial support services across the continuum of care.
- 5) **Health Systems Strengthening:** Investing in health systems based on a primary health care approach to achieve Universal Health Coverage. This includes defining essential health services, strengthening supply chains, optimizing service-delivery models, improving digitalization, and ensuring adequate financing and governance. There is also a need for comprehensive, community-based mental health and psychosocial support for children, especially teenagers, and their caregivers, covering the full range of prevention, promotion and care. This includes investment and collaboration with community-based systems across sectors such as child protection, health, and education to support extended family care systems.

- 6) **Education Transformation:** Transforming education with a focus on new technologies and digital tools. UNICEF emphasizes the alignment of education with population and labour market needs, the development of lifelong learning policies, and the implementation of Family Life Education² programmes to address violence and adolescent pregnancy rates.
- 7) **Mobility Management:** Supporting child-sensitive pre-emptive evacuation and community relocation for children and families in climate-vulnerable locations. This involves expanding inclusive migration pathways, planning for pre-emptive evacuations and relocations, and ensuring safe and dignified movement.
- 8) **Data, Research, and Evidence for Informed Decision Making:** Strengthening data systems to collect and analyse population data, including sex- and age-disaggregated data, and generating mixed-methods research and evidence (including but not limited to implementation research, health systems and policy research, and participatory action research) to further the evidence base on the impacts of crisis on children and their caregivers. This enables evidence-based policymaking, tracking, and leveraging innovative technologies.

UNICEF is already actively engaged in supporting SIDS, focusing on enhancing resilience, ensuring access to essential services, promoting child protection, and facilitating youth engagement. Strategies include:

- 1) **Resilient Systems and Services for Children:** UNICEF is committed to 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.
- 2) **Nutrition:** UNICEF addresses children's nutritional needs by promoting climate-resilient food systems, healthy diets, and regulation of ultra-processed foods. Programs like nutrition-responsive cash transfer initiatives are implemented to combat malnutrition and poverty.
- 3) **WASH:** UNICEF focuses on building resilient WASH systems by developing infrastructure, sustainable practices, and disaster-resilient water policies. Collaborative efforts with governments involve training village water committees and rehabilitating water supply systems after disasters.
- 4) **Education:** UNICEF prioritizes access to quality education by implementing digital learning solutions and promoting foundational literacy, numeracy, social emotional learning and green skills.
- 5) **Social Protection:** UNICEF strengthens social protection systems to safeguard children by investing in enhancing disaster preparedness, implementing shock-responsive social protection mechanisms, and supporting child-sensitive policy development.
- 6) **Climate Resilience and Advocacy:** UNICEF collaborates with governments to develop climate-resilient policies and advocate for children's rights in global climate fora. Initiatives like the Children's Climate Risk Index-Disaster Risk Model (CCRI-DRM) assessment and the Today and Tomorrow Initiative (TTI)³ address climate and disaster risk finance gaps.
- 7) **Youth Engagement:** UNICEF prioritizes youth engagement in decision-making processes, supporting youth-led initiatives and partnerships. Efforts include hosting youth consultations and supporting the Child and Youth Action Summit to empower young people from SIDS regions.

On the occasion of the 4th International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS4), taking place from 27 – 30 May 2024 and preceded by the Child and Youth Action summit on 24 – 26 May, it is crucial to recognize that addressing the needs of SIDS is not just about responding to current social, cultural, environmental or economic challenges, but about safeguarding our children's future and protecting future generations. Short- and long-term solutions should be tailored to the specific needs and context of each state. Ensuring that social services are resilient, and that young people are empowered and actively involved in solutions, should align with ongoing programmes in SIDS and will be vital for creating a sustainable, equitable and resilient future for these communities.

² <https://www.ncfr.org/cfle-certification/what-family-life-education>

³ <https://www.unicef.org/documents/today-tomorrow>

Introduction

UNICEF's mandate is to advocate for the protection and well-being of every child. In the context of SIDS, this responsibility takes on a new urgency. This paper seeks to highlight the specific impacts of various socio-economic constraints including poverty (especially extreme poverty), unemployment, gender inequality, marginalization, brain drain, marginalization, and climate change on children and young people in SIDS, particularly those that are Least Developed Countries (LDCs), in order to elevate their distinct rights, needs and perspectives in international dialogues and to present concrete, actionable strategies.

In this crucial moment, our collective action – or inaction – will determine the trajectory of countless young lives. It is a moral imperative that the children of SIDS do not become overlooked casualties, given the ongoing global polycrises, but rather are elevated as central figures in the narratives of resilience, adaptation, empowerment and sustainable development.

The fifty-seven (57) countries, areas and territories which comprise the Small Island Developing States (SIDS)⁴ include some of the most vulnerable countries on the planet. Even though they are a heterogeneous group located across the Caribbean, the Pacific, the Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea, SIDS are inherently and uniquely vulnerable to exogenous shocks owing to, inter alia, their small size, geographical remoteness, highly dispersed populations, the limited scale and undiversified nature of their economies, high dependence on external markets, extreme exposure to disasters and natural hazards⁵, and the effects of climate change. Compounding global crises have considerably slowed SIDS progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), while the COVID-19 pandemic placed unprecedented pressures on their already constrained resources. SIDS have the highest vulnerability to natural disasters and the financial damage caused by such disasters is significantly higher than the world average⁶. Furthermore, accessing concessional development finance – including climate financing – remains difficult and increases SIDS fiscal constraints. The potential productive capacities in SIDS are further undermined by rampant poverty (especially extreme poverty), unemployment, gender inequality, marginalization, brain drain and marginalization. All these constraints impede SIDS overall socio-economic development and progress towards the SDGs.

The vulnerability of children in SIDS is stark, including not only specific and heightened physical risks from slow and sudden-onset events such as being uprooted from their homes and communities – but also long-lasting psychological, behavioural, educational, social and cultural impacts. For instance, livelihood disruptions and displacement, triggered by extreme climate and ecological crises, can have profound effects on the fundamental supports that safeguard children and their caregivers. Coupled with the strain on community resources, these factors can contribute to insecurity and elevate the risk of psychological distress among the affected. In these small, close-knit communities, even small losses in resources and infrastructure can have devastating, enduring effects on children's access to essential social services and the nurturing environment vital for their development. The heightened vulnerability of children is a clarion call for action and finance to enhance the resilience and adaptive capacity of SIDS. Such action must include practical and proven solutions to safeguard child-critical essential social services such as healthcare, education, food security and nutrition, safe water and sanitation, and child protection and

⁴ Full list of SIDS (three regions: Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea; Caribbean; and the Pacific): Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cabo Verde, Comoros, Cook Islands, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Fiji, Grenada, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Kiribati, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Micronesia (Federated States of), Mauritius, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, São Tomé and Príncipe, Singapore, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, Suriname, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tuvalu, Vanuatu.

⁵ The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023. Special edition. United Nations; 2023 (<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023>)

⁶ Sustainable Development Report for SIDS 2023: Addressing structural vulnerability and financing the SDGs in SIDS. Sustainable Development Solutions Network (<https://sdgtransformationcenter.org/reports/sustainable-development-report-for-small-island-developing-states-2023>)

social protection as vital determinants of the well-being and resilience of children and their communities. In parallel, young people must be heard and empowered, as key stakeholders in policy development, as future leaders, and as accelerators of SDG progress.

Background

SIDS comprise a unique and diverse group of 39 states and 18 associate members across the Caribbean; the Atlantic; the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the Pacific. SIDS are inherently and uniquely vulnerable to exogenous shocks owing to, inter alia, their small size, geographical remoteness, highly dispersed populations, the limited scale and undiversified nature of their economies, high dependence on external markets, extreme exposure to both rapid and slow onset disasters and natural hazards, and the effects of climate change. Several SIDS are classified as Least Developed Countries including Comoros, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Kiribati, São Tomé and Príncipe, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste and Tuvalu. This LDC status highlights their heightened vulnerability and the need for focused international support.

SIDS face multiple challenges including:

- **Poverty:** Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the measurement of poverty across SIDS remains somewhat polarized: in 60 per cent of SIDS (with data), less than 5 per cent of the population lived below the poverty line, while in the rest, the share living in poverty was more than 10 per cent⁷. And even though data are scarce, working poverty remains a serious concern for some SIDS^{ibid}.
- **Environmental and climate vulnerability:** SIDS are at a critical juncture, with escalating impacts from sea-level rise, extreme weather events, rapid biodiversity loss, degradation and scarcity of freshwater resources, poor environmental sanitation, environmental degradation and out-of-control plastic pollution,⁸ among other challenges. All of these pose severe threats, including losses and damages associated with the rising sea levels and coastal erosion, such as loss of sovereignty, heritage, culture and homes. This vulnerability has been starkly illustrated during historically destructive tropical cyclone seasons across SIDS regions in past years, triggering mass displacements and inflicting extensive damage to crucial infrastructure, including communication networks, energy systems, transportation, homes, health care facilities, and educational institutions⁹. Furthermore, from 1970 to 2020, SIDS suffered losses of around US\$153 billion due to weather, climate and water-related hazards¹⁰. Individual events can be devastating - total losses and damages caused by Hurricane Maria are estimated to have amounted to 224 per cent of GDP in Dominica¹¹. At the same time, economic development can also exacerbate vulnerability to climate change in SIDS through, for example, increased pressure on limited freshwater resources.
- **Economic vulnerability:** The polycrises (climate, COVID-19, insecurity, etc) greatly affect the economic foundations of SIDS, i.e. tourism, agriculture and fisheries. There are multiple factors which explain higher levels of debt in many small island economies relative to other developing countries. As suggested, these include vulnerability to shocks such as extreme weather events and terms of trade shocks, as well as weaker revenue bases and poor institutional and debt management capacities. Economic decline due to COVID-19 lockdowns was extremely significant as various SIDS have tourism-intensive economies which were even more severely affected than those in which commodities export is the main source of revenue¹². Income inequality is also high in many SIDS, as is the share of informal employment in many small island economies and the gender gap in labour-force

⁷ UNCTAD Development and Globalization: Facts and Figures 2021

⁸ Small Island Developing States call for ambitious Global Plastics Treaty – INC-2 Paris - Story | IUCN

⁹ About Small Island Developing States | Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States

¹⁰ <https://climatepromise.undp.org/research-and-reports/snapshot-small-island-developing-states>

¹¹ World Bank (2017), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2017/11/28/a-360-degree-look-at-dominica-post-hurricane-maria>

¹² [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2181\(UNDP%20&%20OHRLS%202015\)%20Financing%20for%20development%20and%20SIDS%20A%20snapshot%20and%20ways%20forward.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2181(UNDP%20&%20OHRLS%202015)%20Financing%20for%20development%20and%20SIDS%20A%20snapshot%20and%20ways%20forward.pdf)

participation. According to [ILO \(2020b\)](#), informal workers make up nearly half of the global workforce, and 80 per cent of them have suffered massive damage to their capacity to earn a living during the pandemic as many of them were working in the hardest-hit sectors, such as tourism. Labour force participation continues to be consistently higher for men than women in the Pacific region¹³.

- **Limited fiscal space and budget pressures:** High levels of public debt remain a key challenge for many small island states, especially in the Caribbean. Current approaches, which have relied on SIDS to negotiate solutions with their creditors on an ad-hoc basis, combined with fiscal retrenchment have not, in many cases, been sufficient to adequately address the problem¹⁴. Moreover, the need to manage and reallocate public assets towards sustainability further complicates fiscal stability, highlighting a pressing need for strategic, resilient financial planning, including innovative approaches such as debt-for-climate swaps.
- **Fuel price shocks:** Many SIDS are highly dependent on imported fossil fuels for power generation, leaving them vulnerable to volatility in international oil prices. This exposure presents a disproportionate burden for poorer families while reducing public funds available for crucial investment in other areas including renewable energy sources that are not subject to external shocks.
- **Under-resourced institutional capacity and resources:** Access to higher education has stagnated across SIDS with the gross enrolment rate in higher education moving only from 20 per cent in 2000 to 29 per cent in 2022 (and still lagging behind the global average of 42 per cent)¹⁵. To further compound the problem, many of those individuals which do receive skills, usually youth, seek better opportunities overseas away from their home countries. This “brain drain” further undermines the self-sufficiency of SIDS through the attrition of talent and skills.
- **Gender inequalities in education and employment persist across many SIDS:** especially with boys’ disengagement from, and disadvantages in, education remaining as a persistent challenge. Social norms, poverty, and other socio-economic issues such as adolescent pregnancy greatly influence the poor educational outcomes and lack of opportunities for youth – especially girls¹⁶.
- **Health challenges** that are experienced by large subpopulations in SIDS, such as noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), high levels of overweight and obesity, adolescent pregnancies, mental health conditions, injuries and violence, especially gender-based violence, substance abuse and maternal and neonatal mortality, also have a significant impact on development and SIDS’ capacity to accelerate progress towards the SDGs.

Impact on children and young people in SIDS

The effects of the aforementioned challenges on SIDS are disproportionately severe, with children – particularly girls, indigenous children, disabled children and other groups of children exposed to intersecting forms of discrimination and inequality - among the most vulnerable and marginalized. According to the UN’s Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI), SIDS have the highest levels of structural vulnerability and a notable lack of resilience compared to all other country groups¹⁷. Challenges affect children in SIDS in many ways including:

- **Child poverty and social inequities:** The consequences of poverty can last a lifetime. Children who experience poverty have less chance of completing school and earn lower wages as adults. Those

¹³ https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/UN_WOMEN_WEE.pdf

¹⁴ [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2181\(UNDP%20&%20OHRLS%202015\)%20Financing%20for%20development%20and%20SIDS%20A%20snapshot%20and%20ways%20forward.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2181(UNDP%20&%20OHRLS%202015)%20Financing%20for%20development%20and%20SIDS%20A%20snapshot%20and%20ways%20forward.pdf)

¹⁵ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) [online database]. (<http://data.uis.unesco.org/>).

¹⁶ The status of Pacific education 2022: a regional monitoring report based on internationally comparable statistics. Suva, Fiji: Pacific Community; 2023. (<https://pacificdata.org/data/dataset/oai-www-spc-int-bd12d54f-921a-410a-8603-294050a498d0/resource/820e6a27-a419-4c2e-a930-881f68e01935>).

¹⁷ <https://odi.org/en/insights/small-island-nations-need-a-multidimensional-vulnerability-index/#:~:text=The%20average%20composite%20MVI%20score,MVI%20score%20of%20over%2060>.

living in extremely poor households often lack the food, sanitation, shelter, health care, and education they need to survive and thrive. Furthermore, children from poor households are often pushed into early marriage, pregnancy and/or labour, further hindering their educational and development prospects. The adolescent birth rate is increasing in 6 out of 14 Pacific Island countries and territories. In Latin American and the Caribbean adolescent girls from families in the lowest wealth quintiles, living in rural areas, and from indigenous and Afro-descendant groups, are disproportionately affected by adolescent motherhood¹⁸. The concomitant socio-economic deprivations accruing to both mother and child include stigma, interrupted schooling, diminished earning capacity, etc. Poverty also often forces families to focus on survival, sometimes at the expense of education. This situation can lead to higher rates of children and youth not in education, employment, nor training (NEET).

- **Health, food and nutrition security:** Economic and climate shocks (e.g. COVID-19, breakdowns in supply chains, extreme heat, droughts, floods, etc.) have significantly impacted children's physical and mental health in these regions¹⁹. For example, loss of biodiversity, damage to limited fresh drinking water supplies, sanitation, air and soil have dramatically lowered the quantity, diversity and quality of food available to children and families, increasing food insecurity and nutrition poverty among vulnerable children, households and populations. Rising global temperatures are also heightening exposure to vector-borne diseases like malaria and dengue, which combined with lack of access to diagnosis and care are especially lethal in children under five years of age. These physical health risks are intertwined with mental health, as the stress of experiencing these environmental hazards can lead to an increase in the occurrence and severity of mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, memory impairment, sleep disturbances, isolation, severe levels of distress, or other psychological impacts. Research studies assert that Caribbean children and youth are more likely to be victims of psychological distress due to climate-related events such as natural disasters⁵. To address this, UNICEF's office in the Eastern Caribbean Area executed a study in 2022 titled: "Participatory Research on Climate Change and Other Shocks on the Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-Being of Adolescents and Youth in the Eastern Caribbean Area." The study revealed the need to develop educational material for children and youth and further in-depth research. As a result, a U-Report Survey was executed in 2023 in collaboration with PAHO. The survey revealed that of the 1370 young people surveyed from Eastern Caribbean countries, 80% reported thinking about how climate impacts their health and almost 70% called for large-scale efforts to tackle the effects of climate change on health. Access disruptions to clean and safe water and sanitation combined with weak health systems are exposing children to life-threatening diseases such as diarrhoea and respiratory infections. SIDS are also affected by the triple burden of malnutrition:²⁰ undernutrition, hidden hunger caused by a lack of essential nutrients, and obesity which is particularly prevalent in Caribbean and Pacific SIDS.
- **Child protection and well-being risks:** Some of the highest levels of violence in the world have been recorded in a number of SIDS (Haiti and in the Pacific). Severe disruptions to livelihoods, schooling, social protection, family support networks and the rule of law, all heighten the risk of violence, exploitation and abuse. For example, in the Caribbean islands that have become increasingly hurricane-prone, children uprooted to evacuation zones have become more vulnerable to abuses of their rights.²¹ For the Pacific, gender norms play an integral part in perpetuating the cycle of violence. This includes high rates of gender-based violence against adolescent girls, as well as child marriage. Low levels of legal documentation in the form of birth registration, vital during displacement, heighten such risks. Mental health concerns are also on the increase, associated with displacement and climate anxiety, potentially worsening already high levels of psychosocial distress and mental health conditions among adolescents and youth. Mental health conditions affect an estimated 15 per cent

¹⁸ "Trends and inequities in adolescent childbearing in Latin American and Caribbean countries across generations and over time: a population-based study" Sanhueza et al. [Lancet Child Adolesc Health](#). 2023 Jun; 7(6): 392-40

¹⁹ <https://www.who.int/news/item/18-05-2021-dynamic-SIDS-report-climate-change-health>

²⁰ [Poor diets damaging children's health worldwide, warns UNICEF](#)

²¹ UNICEF, 'Children Uprooted in the Caribbean: How Stronger Hurricanes Linked to a Changing Climate Are Driving Child Displacement'.

of the population in the Caribbean and 11 per cent of the population in the Pacific²² and are likely still undercounted. Estimated suicide rates vary across the SIDS, with a median of eight suicide deaths per 100,000 population, and Guyana having one of the highest suicide rates in the world (17 per 100,000 for women and 63 per 100,000 for men). However, data on NCDs and, specifically, suicide mortality are limited due to stigma, context-specific legal reasons, and weak data and health information systems²³. Agricultural-based economies are also a threat multiplier for child labour²⁴. Migration and displacement (socio-economic and/or climate-related) can also reduce levels of care and supervision for children, further exposing them to violence and other violations of their rights.

- **Displacement and migration:** Between 2016 and 2021, extreme weather events led to 43.1 million child displacements globally - the equivalent of 20,000 children displaced every day. SIDS and regions in the Caribbean and Pacific experienced the most significant impacts. Cuba, Dominica, the Northern Mariana Islands, Saint Martin, Sint Maarten and Vanuatu, recorded the most child displacements from storms relative to the size of those child populations. In Dominica, the number of displacements of children was equivalent to 76 per cent of the child population, while in Cuba, it was 31 per cent. Such large proportions of the child population experiencing displacement has significant implications for how health care, education and protection services for children must be run. In Haiti, where an average of over 16,000 children have been displaced by disasters from 1988 to 2018, many rural families end up in growing urban slums²⁵. In addition to extreme weather events, Haiti is simultaneously coping with violence, poverty and repeated hazard impacts including earthquakes. Designing services to be portable and able to follow children as they move within countries or across borders is critical. This means prioritizing portable skills and education certification and online access to identity documents, health records and other information that enables children to reunite with family, maintain access to health care, continue to learn and stay connected with their communities.
- **Educational disruptions:** Poverty, COVID-19 and other socio-economic shocks have also led to significant educational disruptions among the SIDS. Lengthy school closures and damaged educational infrastructure due to extreme weather events, intensified by climate change, impact learning continuity and children's development²⁶. In the Pacific, a 2021 assessment of 6,000 school buildings in Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu found that between 50 to 90 per cent may not withstand a strong cyclone or earthquake²⁷.

UNICEF's response

UNICEF has supported the implementation of the Small Island Developing States Accelerated Modalities of Action Pathway (SAMOA Pathway) 2014 – 2024 and previous programmes of action for SIDS and is focused on accelerating support towards mitigation and adaptation measures that ensure that infrastructure, social services, communities and individuals are climate-responsive and resilient to crises, such as pandemics and natural disasters. With climate and economic resilience heavily entwined in SIDS, UNICEF, is supporting the development of climate-resilient, affordable, and safe service delivery models as well as supporting income and business support programmes. The agency is also building shock-responsive, resilient systems and communities by applying multi-hazard risk analysis and linking development, humanitarian and peace-building programme interventions. Specific strategies include:

²² 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>)

²³ Noncommunicable diseases and mental health in small island developing states. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2023. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO. (<https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/368900/9789240072213-eng.pdf?sequence=1>).

²⁴ ILO and UNICEF, 'Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020, Trends and the Road Forward'

²⁵ UNICEF CLAC Haiti (2019)

²⁶ <https://unu.edu/publication/climate-change-displacement-and-right-education-small-island-developing-states>

²⁷ [unicef.org/pacificislands/media/4041/file/CEED Investment Case.pdf](https://unicef.org/pacificislands/media/4041/file/CEED%20Investment%20Case.pdf)

Resilient, portable and inclusive systems and services for children including education, health, social protection, child protection, food and nutrition, water and sanitation: UNICEF is committed to enhancing the resilience of all services to withstand shocks – including climate-related ones – to ensure that the delivery of essential services for children is not disrupted.

- **Health:** Ensuring health care facilities remain operational during and after disasters including with sufficient water, sanitation and hygiene supplies and service delivery. In São Tomé and Príncipe, UNICEF is strengthening the country's health system capacity through bottleneck analysis training and has supported the capacity of the National Institute of Statistics to disseminate analyses on deprivation. With gaps in immunization management systems revealed and intensified by COVID-19, expansion of digital solutions and immunization management systems have been a focus of UNICEF in many countries. For example, in Jamaica, UNICEF contributed to the modernization of the cold chain system through procurement and distribution of state-of-the-art cold chain equipment to 140 public health centres across the country. In collaboration with UNICEF Supply Division, there is also the impending establishment of an oxygen-plant-in-a-box at two major hospitals in Jamaica. In Antigua and Barbuda and Trinidad and Tobago, the HOPE Management Information System (MIS) was rolled out (covering all aspects of cash programme implementation, registration, targeting, payments, etc.), and in São Tomé and Príncipe, vaccine management was improved and digital tools for hygiene, sanitation and water supply assessments introduced. UNICEF is also accelerating efforts to roll out renewable energy for health care centres to ensure provision of health services during and after disasters. In Belize, UNICEF supports the government in the use of digital technology to enhance immunization service with the installation of remote temperature monitoring devices to all the cold chain equipment in the country.
- **Nutrition:** UNICEF seeks to address the nutritional needs of children in SIDS, particularly amidst climate- and other shock-induced food security challenges. This includes programming that supports climate-resilient food systems that prioritize availability and affordability of nutritious foods, promoting healthy diets that have less of a negative impact on the environment and efforts to regulate the production of ultra-processed foods. In Belize, UNICEF is implementing nutrition-responsive cash transfer programme among vulnerable population with malnutrition in line with global guidance on building synergies between child nutrition and social protection to address malnutrition and poverty.
- **WASH:** UNICEF's focus on building accessible WASH systems that are resilient to climate change involves the development of infrastructure and sustainable WASH practices, as key interventions for ensuring community access to safe WASH services in the face of changing socio-economic and environmental conditions. Examples span the national, subnational, and local level, covering interventions ranging from strengthening national water policies to reviewing and altering the location or design of water points or latrines to make them resilient to floods or cyclones. For example, in Fiji and Vanuatu, UNICEF is working with governments to roll out a drinking water safety planning approach involving training village water committees to prepare plans that identify, prioritize and mitigate risks to the supply. Following Cyclone Pam in 2015, this approach resulted in rehabilitated or replaced water supply systems that were more resilient than those previously in use. Specific guidelines for WASH professionals in island communities like the Pacific have also been elaborated²⁸.
- **Education:** With COVID-19 exacerbating the learning crisis, in countries such as Papua New Guinea, UNICEF is focusing on foundational literacy and numeracy, as well as transferable, green and digital skills, so that girls and boys become more agile, adaptive learners. In the Pacific Island countries, UNICEF is prioritizing holistic learning, ensuring children develop with Pacific cultures and values embedded in their education, while promoting a rights-based environment. Resilient and inclusive educational resources that remain operational during and after disasters including with sufficient water, sanitation and hygiene, is also a priority. Another example, in São Tomé and Príncipe, UNICEF

²⁸ <https://www.unicef.org/pacificislands/media/736/file/WASH-Resilience-Guidelines.pdf>

collaborates with local authorities to implement digital learning solutions, ensuring educational continuity amid climate disruptions and health crises like COVID-19.

- **Social protection:** In São Tomé and Príncipe, UNICEF leveraged the Parental Education Programme to improve demand for social services, supported equitable access to education, and strengthened the child protection system to improve coordination and implementation of multi-sectoral responses to violence against children and gender-based violence. In Belize, UNICEF is working with national authorities and academia to institutionalize and streamline the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) Protocol for the Integrated Protection of Children and Adolescent in Emergency and Disaster Situation across the line ministries. The protocol allows for an integrated and multi-sectoral approach to preparedness and response as well as enhancing a child-sensitive shock-responsive system. To strengthen social protection services in SIDS, UNICEF is implementing measures to safeguard children from the secondary impacts of climate change like displacement and exploitation. In Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago, UNICEF collaborates with partners to enhance disaster preparedness and child protection. Further, UNICEF is advancing shock-responsive social protection mechanisms for vulnerable communities in Belize, Fiji, Haiti and Jamaica²⁹ alongside establishing child-responsive and inclusive climate and disaster risk finance mechanisms to address the underlying factors for displacement and exploitation. UNICEF worked with ILO, UNESCO and WFP under the Sustainable Development Fund to implement the Resilient Caribbean: Engaging and Training, Strengthening Integrated Social Protection Services project. This supported social assistance reform in the British Virgin Islands, including a transition towards a digital system for operationalization and data management, as well as the development of pragmatic and user-friendly tools to support the implementation of social assistance programmes, such as making social protection systems more shock- and gender-responsive. In the Pacific UNICEF is partnering with the University of the South Pacific to better understand the protection impacts for children left behind when their care-takers leave seeking better opportunities. Results from the multi-country study in Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu to inform policy design for donors and national governments are due in July 2024.
- **Mental Health and Psychosocial Support:** In 2024, UNICEF and Let's Unpack It developed a Child and Youth Mental Health Focal Point Network comprised of children and youth from 17 Caribbean countries. To address climate change and mental health, the young people developed the youth for youth resource: "The Young Caribbean Minds Mental Health & Well-being Technology Enhanced Workbook" and website www.youngcaribbeanminds.com to be launched on May 8th, 2023. The young people who experienced climate change and natural disasters shared tips in the book that helped them with their mental health amidst climate change and natural disasters and addressed the concept of ecoanxiety. The workbook also links users to the Young Caribbean Minds website, allowing users to read an educational child-friendly storybook on climate change action written by UNICEF Youth Advocate Priyanka Lalla and her nine-year-old sister. The Focal points were recently trained in the Youth Advocacy Guide in collaboration with UNICEF LACRO and continue to execute awareness projects in their communities.

Climate resilience is a priority for all SIDS. UNICEF's Eastern Caribbean Area Office is collaborating with governments in Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica and Saint Kitts and Nevis on the Children's Climate Risk Index-Disaster Risk Model (CCRI-DRM) assessment. The objective is to ensure that national development and humanitarian planning processes are built on a multi-hazard assessment of risk, leading to improved resource allocation and resilient interventions. To address the growing climate and disaster risk finance gap for children and young people, UNICEF has launched the Today and Tomorrow Initiative (TTI), which seeks to close that gap by creating a new climate financing mechanism that invests in current risk reduction and climate resilience, while using parametric insurance to protect children against future climate shocks. UNICEF supports SIDS governments to develop child-sensitive policies that consider

²⁹ <https://www.unicef.org/jamaica/social-policy>

children's vulnerability to climate change and disasters (e.g., Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Adaptation Plans and disaster risk reduction strategies). For example, UNICEF works with CDEMA to enhance community resilience to hazards, prioritizing essential services such as education, child protection and social protection systems and WASH. Moreover, advocating for children's rights in global fora like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), UNICEF works for, and with, children to call for urgent action and climate finance, and provides technical support to Parties and negotiation groups, including the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), on key workstreams such as the thematic targets elaborated under the Global Goal on Adaptation. Our work also includes involving young people in climate discussions, such as consultations for the Loss and Damage Fund mechanism and in advocating for youth as part of national delegations. The challenge of accessing climate finance, due to complex processes and limited project development capacity, underscores the need for tailored support for SIDS. In addition, NDC financing strategies that protect social spending for children are critical. In this context, and, as part of the Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF) Facility, UNICEF is working to bring the children's social sector dimension to NDC financing strategies and relevant public and private finance reforms to ensure better access to climate finance opportunities from climate funds as well as private investors.

Climate information services, research, evidence generation and data collection:

- System strengthening: UNICEF supports the development of early warning systems accessible to all in SIDS, vital for preparing and mitigating impacts on children during climate- and hazard- related emergencies. In addition, UNICEF collaborates with governments and communities in SIDS to build capacities for disaster preparedness and climate change adaptation. This involves education on climate risks and training in disaster response and planning for pre-emptive evacuations.
- UNICEF Pacific Multi Country Office is developing technical guidance with the Government of Fiji on Climate Relocation. This is based on local research and learnings from direct multi sectoral support to communities who have already been located. Key issues include access to basic WASH, Mental Health, rising levels of Family Violence and substance misuse.
- Understanding the specific impacts of climate change on children and young people in SIDS, and how this differs based on intersecting factors such as gender, migration status and disability, is vital. Since 2017, dozens of UNICEF country offices around the globe, including Cabo Verde, Eastern Caribbean Area, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica and soon Guinea-Bissau and São Tomé and Príncipe, have conducted a Climate Landscape Analysis for Children (CLAC). CLACs represent an important milestone in UNICEF's programming cycle, contributing to improving the understanding of how climate change impacts on children and facilitating integration of climate change action into strategies and interventions. CLACs also support the mobilization of resources for strengthening child-responsive resilience programmes and climate action.

Advocacy and policy support:

- **Public Finance for Children (PF4C).** UNICEF's work on PF4C seeks to make children more visible in finance systems and fiscal frameworks, whether related to budget, expenditure, revenue or debt policies, including through tapping into climate and sustainable finance opportunities.. It promotes better mobilization, allocation and spending outcomes for children in social sectors, including WASH, Education, Health and Social Protection.
- **UNICEF Climate finance service offer** advocates for robust climate finance frameworks that integrate children's rights, leveraging both public and private funding to support inclusive, sustainable growth. By collaborating with finance ministries and utilizing innovative financing mechanisms like green bonds and insurance, UNICEF aims to ensure economic development while promoting and protection social sector spending for the realization of Children's rights. More in particular, UNICEF is working together with the UN System to support ministries of finance aligning public finance systems with climate finance, reviewing National Determined Contribution (NDC) Strategies and supporting the

development of financing strategies with finance solutions such as green taxation and dedicated green bonds that prioritize social sector spending and children's needs. This includes carbon taxation options which can generate resources for investment in critical areas affecting children. Additionally, debt instruments, like green bonds or debt swap mechanisms, can be structured in a manner that directly benefits children, ensuring a coverage of key social sectors, while offering a responsible means to finance their future without imposing unsustainable debt burdens

- In response to growing needs for relocation, UNICEF Pacific is developing guidance for governments on child- and family-sensitive relocation. This is based on learning from the current response to transitional support to communities in Fiji and other communities.
- **Climate justice:** During the International Court of Justice (ICJ) advisory opinion process, UNICEF leveraged its partnership with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) to reach those responsible for drafting the state ICJ submissions across 12 Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) with information and legal arguments related to children's rights and climate change. UNICEF also worked with the group that spearheaded the campaign for an ICJ advisory opinion, Pacific Island Students Fighting Climate Change (PISFCC) to host a side event at the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference/Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC (COP28), enhancing the platform of the young people who have been at the forefront of the movement for climate justice. Additionally, UNICEF worked with the Australian law firm Corrs, Chambers, Westgarth to develop a legal briefing on arguments related to children's rights and climate change. This briefing was disseminated to governments across the Pacific to inform their submissions, including through a webinar session hosted by UNICEF, SPC, and PISFCC, and chaired by the Attorney General of the Government of Vanuatu. The recording of this session was later shared with other Small Island Developing States in the Caribbean to inform their submissions.

Youth engagement and participation:

Youth remain a powerful resource in SIDS. Targeted investment in youth is key to tapping into the potential of young people by investing strategically in health, education, employment retention and empowerment that enables the contribution of this important demographic to decision-making. Opening up opportunities to develop and implement innovative, solution-oriented actions based on their ideas and informed knowledge is equally essential. Meaningfully involving children and youth in decision-making processes including through youth councils, and advisory committees, supporting child and youth-led initiatives, creating opportunities for engaging children and youth in sustainable development in a manner that is age-appropriate, safeguarded, accessible, and inclusive and fostering new partnerships are key UNICEF objectives. In Antigua and Barbuda, UNICEF's Eastern Caribbean Area office is partnering with the Government and the Ashley Lashley Foundation to support the Child and Youth Action Summit in the days preceding the SIDS 4 conference to support a Commitment to Action. Consultations targeting children and youth between the ages of 14 - 25 years old from across the SIDS regions have been held to garner their substantive inputs toward the Children and Youth Action Summit and its call to Action.

Conclusion: UNICEF's call to action

UNICEF supports the forthcoming Commitment to Action by children and young people in SIDS to confront the escalating challenges of climate change, disasters and economic shocks by incorporating their experiences and innovative approaches to increase access to education; climate change resilience and disaster risk reduction; evidence-based and proven poverty mitigation and reduction strategies; health; protection from all forms of violence; digital technology; adequate transportation and infrastructure and access to clean water.

UNICEF is also fully in support of the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS) by recognizing the need for tailored and contextualized approaches needed in each small island developing state to ensure a sustainable and equitable pathway towards resilient prosperity. UNICEF recommends a comprehensive approach towards supporting them including through:

- **The development and implementation of child-sensitive and child-inclusive policies, plans and financing strategies that prioritize children’s rights.** The unique needs, vulnerabilities, and strengths of children and young people in SIDS must be addressed, and their role as agents of change must be recognized and supported.
- **Support to elevate attention to young people’s voices and their empowerment:** Involving children and young people in all their diversity in policymaking and action is crucial for shaping a sustainable future and contributing to intergenerational equity, ensuring that all perspectives and needs are represented. UNICEF calls for initiatives that **support and invest in strengthening youth leadership and governance** at national and subnational level to enhance their meaningful and equitable participation in decision-making, coordination of youth development-related policies and programmes and tracking of results in development frameworks. Such as to:
 - **Co-create, finance, and implement inclusive and evidence-informed regional, national youth-led policies,** programmes and projects that specifically target the challenges facing young people in SIDS.
 - **Ensure youth engagement mechanisms are institutionalized** and supported at the national and regional levels, and that youth perspectives are integrated in SDG decision-making processes.
 - **Appoint a formal ‘Voices of SIDS’ Youth Ambassador** in each SIDS Member State to build inclusion of youth in all decision making.
 - **Create national UN youth delegate programmes** to enable the inclusion of youth in official delegations to UN meetings.
 - **Empower young people with awareness, skills and capacities to mitigate climate change** and promote sustainable practices in key sectors such as renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and climate resilience in SIDS.
- **Establish and strengthen inclusive and representative multisectoral and multistakeholder mechanisms for collaboration,** including children, youth, gender, disability, public and private entities, educators, mental health and psychosocial support providers, employers, and workers’ organizations, and the international community to address the multi-rooted challenges of SIDS and enable coordinated decisions and action on education, skills, health and employment for human capital.
- **The enhancement of local capacities in SIDS.** This includes scaling up and improving the resilience of child-critical services that are risk-informed, gender transformative, and able to withstand the impacts of climate change and disasters; empowering local communities; and investing in early warning systems that enable communities to prepare and respond effectively, ultimately saving lives and preserving livelihoods. This should include the provision of mental health and psychosocial support services across the continuum of care, with services integrated across all levels of climate action policies and plans from preparedness and prevention to response and recovery. As a priority, these efforts should focus on reaching most-affected groups of children, such as girls, indigenous children, children living with disabilities, those displaced or on the move and those living in slum households and informal settlements. Integrating indigenous and local knowledge with scientific approaches is essential to provide more effective and culturally sensitive strategies for addressing and withstanding socio-economic and climate change threats and impacts.

- **Invest in health systems and improve resilience based on a primary health care approach to achieve Universal Health Coverage** including defining the list of essential health services and public health functions, making available corresponding essential medicines and health products including via strengthening supply chain and logistical capacity, optimizing service-delivery models, strengthening health and care workforce capacities, developing reliable information and early detection systems, improving performance through digitalization, ensuring adequate financing and strong health governance within the sector as well as across sectors, and enhancing accessibility to mental health and psychosocial support services across sectors, especially for children, adolescents and their caregivers.
- **Education** is particularly important in building a culture of resilience and sustainability. Transforming education, including a strong focus on use of new technologies and digital tools is especially urgent in SIDS. Building education capacity and aligning education with population and labour market needs by forging closer connections between Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), higher education, and industry to promote technological advancement and productivity, help to address skill gaps in the job market, and cultivate a skilled workforce. There should also be the development of lifelong learning policies and systems for foundational learning (including social emotional skills), skills for employment, entrepreneurship and education for sustainable development (ESD) in a coherent way that ensures all individuals have opportunities to continue learning throughout their lives. Enabling skills transition for green and digital economies by facilitating investments in people at all stages of the lifecycle, and the creation of green jobs for young men and women enhance the well-being of young learners. This is also furthered by implementing Family Life Education programmes to help reduce violence (including gender-based violence), and reduce adolescent pregnancy rates.
- **Support to manage mobility options including child-sensitive pre-emptive evacuation and community relocation for children and families in SIDS.** This means expanding inclusive, fair and accessible migration pathways for children, families and young people living in climate-vulnerable locations. The option to move safely, voluntarily and with dignity from weather-related hotspots to cities or across borders can provide opportunities for young people to adapt to a changing climate as they pursue their aspirations and livelihoods. Planning for pre-emptive evacuations and relocations ahead of time with, and for, affected communities is vital.
- **Strengthen data, research, and evidence for programming, advocacy, policy and decisions.** This means using national statistical systems to collect and examine population data to understand the changing characteristics and needs of the population and enable people-centered and evidence-based policy making. This includes through the **systematic use of sex- and age- disaggregated population estimates and projections** to understand how demographic changes impact human capital by affecting the demand for essential goods and services – including food, energy, water, sanitation, health, education, work, social protection and housing, among others, – and what pressures demographic change exerts on labour markets and public expenditure. Data systems should also plan for, track and monitor the weather-related displacement of children and leverage innovative technologies to help predict and simulate disasters. Additionally, by investing in and conducting research - and promoting participatory research approaches – key gaps in understanding the interplay between climate change and its impacts on children and caregivers across sectors and domains can be explored, ultimately strengthening the evidence base.
- **Increased financing for development including through enhanced debt relief measures for SIDS.** There is an urgent need to increase concessional financing and related human capital development in SIDS and prioritizing the resilience of child-critical services that reach the most vulnerable. Moreover, children’s rights should be central considerations in governance and decision-making processes and allocation of sustainable development financing. Enhanced debt relief measures, such as extended grace periods, lower interest rates and longer repayment schedules, can provide important fiscal space for SIDS, enabling them to allocate more resources towards protecting and fulfilling children’s rights in the face of environmental, socio-economic and other challenges.

- **Greater attention to the protection risks and need for mental health and psychosocial support for children, especially teenagers.** Access to mental health services continue to remain a significant unmet need, and the strain being placed on extended family care systems playing a vital role in remote communities needs to be taken into account, especially given the challenges for formal government systems to respond. These gaps are exacerbated by continued underfunding in the mental health sector. Investment in community-based protection systems, potentially linked to faith-based organizations that liaise with governmental systems in an auxiliary role, is recommended. Greater attention to the mental health and psychosocial risks posed by climate and ecological crises, and unique developmental needs of children and adolescents. Without appropriate individual, family and community mental health and psychosocial supports, exposure to climate disasters can lead to psychological distress, trigger mental health problems, and worsen pre-existing mental health conditions. Investment in community-based MHPSS across sectors is urgently needed at all stages of climate preparedness, prevention, and response.

Through comprehensive approaches, UNICEF is supporting SIDS with the aim of building resilience, protecting children's rights, and empowering youth in SIDS to address the challenges posed by climate change and other socio-economic factors. Tailored recommendations include child-sensitive policies and financing, youth empowerment and engagement, local capacity enhancement, health systems strengthening, education transformation, mobility management, data for informed decision-making, increased financing for development, and protection and mental health support. Customized solutions tailored to each SIDS's unique circumstances are essential for ensuring a sustainable, equitable, and resilient future for these vulnerable communities.

This position paper is the result of inputs from various UNICEF divisions and country offices.

For any additional information please do not hesitate to contact:

Valentina Buj de Lauwerier, Sr. Advisor,

Public Partnerships Division

vbuj@unicef.org