



CHILDREN

CAN'T WAIT

**DELIVERING CHILD-CENTRED
CLIMATE ACTION AT COP26**



**Save the
Children**

Executive summary

Our planet is in the midst of rapid and intensifying climate change. [Evidence](#) suggests that 1 billion children, nearly half of all children worldwide, live in countries at 'extreme high' risk of the impacts of climate change.¹ As research sets out in Save the Children's new report [Born into the climate crisis](#):²

- A child born today is likely to experience on average twice as many wildfires, 2.8 times the exposure to crop failure, 2.6 times as many drought events, 2.8 times as many river floods, and 6.8 times more heatwaves in their lifetime than their grandparents.
- Nearly 95,000 more deaths in children under five will occur every year due to climate change-related malnutrition by 2050 unless fossil fuel reliance decreases.
- Half of all disruptions to education globally are due to climate and other environmental threats, resulting in over 37 million children missing out on education, with disproportionate impacts on girls.
- Worsening environmental degradation and extreme climatic conditions are exacerbating drivers of inequality and conflict, resulting in additional risks of violence, malnutrition, sexual exploitation and abuse, child marriage, child labour and children separated from families.
- Climate-related events are disrupting livelihoods and services, driving children and their families into deeper poverty and with more people in harm's way and without humanitarian support in crises.

The climate crisis is a children's rights crisis. Children did not cause the climate crisis, but they are bearing the brunt of its impacts, with current and future generations of children left to face its most severe consequences.³ And children are demanding change from world leaders. From London to Lagos, Cape Town to Colombo – at school strikes, youth summits and on social media – children are showing how passionately they care about the threats of climate disaster, environmental destruction and mass species extinction.

Too often, commitments on climate action, finance and children's participation in decision-making remain dangerously inadequate. The scientific evidence shows that the world's window of opportunity to act and reduce the scale of climate impacts and runaway catastrophic climate change is closing fast. Unless global leaders scale up their ambition at COP26 children's rights will suffer.

As the President of COP26, the UK has a position of privileged access – and a global responsibility – to influence the summit's outcome for the best. It is time for the UK to take bold action to put children's rights at the heart of the climate change agenda and take bold action to:

- **Enshrine children's rights and their right to a better future at the heart of the climate change agenda.** At COP26 governments, including the UK government, must accelerate commitments to the next five-year cycle of the Paris Agreement and commit to limiting warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.
- **Scale up the ambition of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to urgently reduce emissions and take serious immediate action on delivering a minimum of \$100 billion of promised financing** and scale up all efforts to support adaptation and loss and damage.
- **Empower children and ensure they are present and included in COP processes** and other policy fora – not just as a source of youthful inspiration, but as true rights-holders and the most acutely affected, and as agents of urgent, necessary, and transformative change.

Why must we tackle the climate emergency now

In August 2021, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released the starkest warning on the unfolding climate crisis yet. The Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) on the physical science basis of climate change found that the climate crisis is ‘**rapid, widespread, and intensifying**’, affecting the whole climate system in every region of the planet.⁴ The report also confirmed that climate change is **unequivocally human-made**, with human activities driving around 1.1°C of warming from 1850-1900. The AR6 warns that unless **CO2 emissions undergo an ‘immediate, rapid and large-scale reduction**,’ it will be impossible to keep warming beyond the critical threshold of 1.5°C, resulting in more frequent and extreme weather events. The United Nations Secretary General (UNSG) António Guterres warned that we stand on the edge of an unprecedented planetary disaster and called the report ‘a code red’ for humanity.⁵

As the IPCC report made clear, we have reached a turning point: no matter how quickly and drastically we act to counter climate change, we are already locked in for further impacts – such as loss of lives, increasing sea level rise, storm surges and more erratic weather – which are now irreversible. However, there is also still limited time to rapidly curb emissions and avert the worst impacts of the climate crisis. The gravity of the crisis is not lost on the British public, which in August 2021 ranked climate change and pollution as the **biggest issue of concern** for the country after COVID-19.⁶

It is estimated that the best implementation of commitments contained in NDCs would still see a minimal warming of between 2.6° and 3.1°C,⁷ significantly above the 1.5° threshold established in the Paris Agreement and leading to increasingly severe and sustained impacts. While the costs of climate action are often cited as the biggest barriers, evidence shows that the benefits of strong and early action greatly outweigh the costs of inaction and that prevention is better than later intervention.⁸⁹ An investment of \$1.8 trillion globally in five key areas of adaptation over a period of 10 years could generate \$7.1 trillion in total net benefits.¹⁰ It is also estimated that the combination of increasingly frequent extreme events and deepening poverty as a result of climate change will double the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance by 2050 and bring the cost of assistance from between \$3.5 and 12 billion today to beyond \$20 billion annually by 2030.¹¹¹²

Why COP26 is the world's best last chance

As governments’ NDCs¹³ will be reviewed as part of a process of ratcheting up of commitments, this COP could be the last opportunity to meaningfully raise the level of ambition to limit global warming to stay below 1.5°C. **COP26 will become a major political moment in history, defined either by its ambition and leadership to tackle our planetary emergency or by its failure to secure a safe and fairer planet for all.**

This COP also comes amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which is exacerbating poverty and inequality. The intersection of COVID-19 and climate change impacts is most harshly felt by an increasing number of children. Investments in COVID recovery must align with the objectives of the Paris Agreement so the Build Back Better rhetoric to forge a just and green transition is more than just a slogan.

Critically we are also at a juncture where the combined burdens of a COVID-induced economic crisis and vaccine inequity could lead poorer economies and vulnerable countries to lose faith in the COP process if advanced economies are not perceived to be playing their part on issues such as emissions reduction and climate finance, accelerating the decline in multilateral cooperation and solidarity more broadly.



How is the climate crisis impacting children?

Nearly half of all children worldwide are at ‘extreme risk’ of the impacts of the climate crisis, meaning that the crisis is continuing to erode children’s chances to thrive and survive with grave implications upon their rights.¹⁴ Save the Children’s new report *Born Into the Climate Crisis* finds that climate change is infringing on the very basis of children’s rights to live healthy lives¹⁵, receive education¹⁶, be protected¹⁷ and participate¹⁸ (Figure 1), upheld in international law by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).^{19,20}

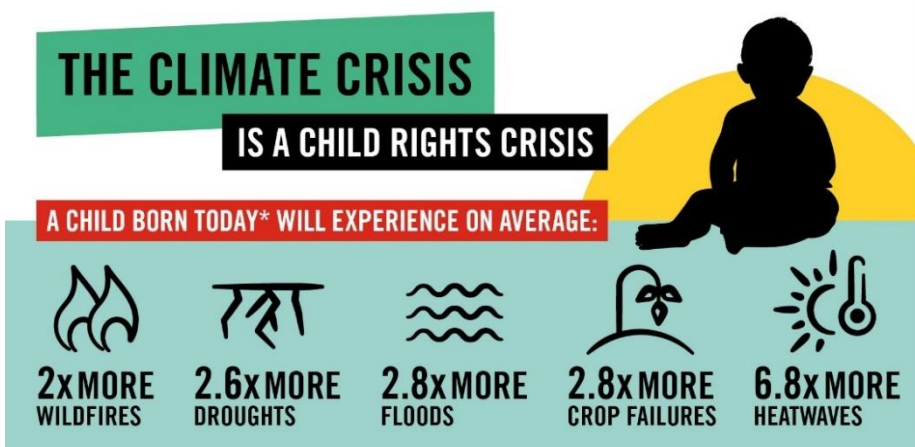
The climate crisis is not only undermining children’s rights, but also deepening inequalities among them. Climate change does not affect all children equally. Despite the fact that low-income countries are responsible for only 14% of global CO2 emissions,²¹ children in low- and middle-income countries will likely be disproportionately affected by climate change-related losses and damage to health and human capital, land, cultural heritage, indigenous and local knowledge, and biodiversity.²² Climate change compounds inequality and deepens deprivation for children, particularly those exposed to multiple hazards – including the additional challenges of conflict and COVID-19 – or those experiencing discrimination based on gender, disability, indigeneity, displacement or other, often intersecting, factors. Worsening climate conditions and widening inequality are mutually reinforcing, ultimately pushing children affected by poverty and inequality further behind. This stands in stark contrast to the core principle of the Sustainable Development Goals to ‘leave no one behind’, which dictates that the furthest behind are reached first and take the greatest strides forward. This therefore jeopardises the UK’s commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda.^{23,24}

“In 2014, the sea level rise really hit hard on my life. It took my disabled brother’s life. He was crawling from our kitchen to our house and suddenly he fell into the sea. Helplessly, he was under the sea for more than 10 minutes before my elder sister saw him. Not long after that, the nurse at One’oneabu clinic pronounced him dead. It was a very sad moment for my family, but who was to be blamed?”

...By looking at Solomon Islands as a whole, its contribution to global warming was very little. Activities like logging, slashing and burning trees for gardening, cutting mangrove trees for firewood and household cooking every day adds very little compared to other industrialised countries. Yet, we are the ones directly facing the effects of global warming.”

- Jerma, Solomon Islands²⁵





THE CLIMATE CRISIS EXACERBATES INEQUALITY:



IN COUNTRIES THAT ARE HARDEST HIT AND LEAST PROTECTED, CHILDREN ARE ON THE FRONTLINE OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS:

- Climate disasters and shocks are already disrupting **livelihoods and services**, exposing children and families to deeper poverty and danger.
- 37 million children are missing out on **education**. Girls are disproportionately affected.
- A rise in **climate-related conflict** puts children at greater risk of violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, child marriage, child labour, and separation from their families.

Why should children be at the heart of the UK's COP26 presidency?

Evidence shows that climate change is a global emergency and has triggered a **child rights crisis** of unprecedented scale.²⁶²⁷ **Children are disproportionately exposed and vulnerable to climate change.**²⁸²⁹ They are physically and psychologically more vulnerable to both the direct and indirect effects of climate change, e.g., the immediate shocks from droughts and heatwaves, but also other long term complex shocks and stresses such as diseases and economic uncertainty (see Figure 1).³⁰ Data shows that over 3 in 4 children (1.7 billion) are exposed to at least three overlapping climate and environmental hazards, shocks, and stresses.³¹ Heightened risk of exposure to catastrophic events is only one of several factors putting children at higher risk of the impacts of climate change: they are also **more likely to be living in poverty** (making up 25% of the worlds' population³² but over 50% of the worlds' poor people³³) and are **disproportionately affected by humanitarian situations**, such as conflict or displacement.³⁴

Children around the world have the **right to be heard**. This is enshrined in the UNCRC,³⁵ and the growing global movement of children demanding climate action has clearly demonstrated that they have important views and recommendations on how the climate crisis should be addressed. However, children and their rights have been conspicuously absent from national and international climate discussions, commitments, and policies. Almost no policy or financial measure for tackling climate change explicitly targets children: Less than half of all NDCs contain direct reference to children or youth while only 20 per cent mention children specifically. Less than two per cent mention the rights of children and no global climate financing mechanisms are explicitly targeted at children.³⁶³⁷

Policy recommendations

Deliver a truly child-centred response to the climate crisis by:

1. Leading solutions that highlight children as inheriting an increasingly climate damaged world and acknowledging children are both agents of change and those most impacted, requiring substantial targeted support.
2. Ensuring all climate initiatives are reviewed against their impact upon both current and future generations of children.
3. Implementing the UN Human Rights Council resolution on realising child rights for a healthy environment³⁸ and establishing a UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Climate Change.
4. Signing and implementing the Declaration on Children, Youth and Climate Action³⁹ to accelerate inclusive, child and youth-centred climate policies and action at national and global levels.
5. Scaling up child-centred anticipatory action and social protection systems to reduce the impact of climate shocks upon children and their families.
6. Promoting specific policies and climate financing solutions with assessments of the impact of climate change on diverse groups of children and utilising specific criteria to ensure child-sensitive investment and the protection of the rights of children.
7. Systematically assessing the impact of climate related laws, policies, financing and programmes on different groups of children, making these assessments publicly available.
8. Ensuring integrated preparedness plans are in place to respond to future crises that impact children's learning and wellbeing via sustained investments in key sectors such as education, health, social protection and child protection.
9. Ensuring governments include children and their rights in revised national climate plans, especially the NDCs and National Adaptation Plans.
10. Scaling up social protection systems and climate initiatives to minimise climate shocks on children and their families.

Support children's full participation and inclusion in climate policy at COP26 and all future climate negotiations and policy by:⁴⁰

1. Establishing child-friendly mechanisms and platforms to ensure safe, equitable and meaningful child participation at all levels in all climate-related processes and negotiations, including and beyond COP26.
2. Ensuring up-to-date, accessible, age and gender responsive information in different languages on how the COP negotiations and conference work, explanations of negotiated texts and daily agendas, also for children with disabilities.
3. Ensuring children have a 'seat at the table' during all COP discussions, panels and high-level processes, can observe relevant negotiations and have access to a child-friendly space where they can access the resources and support they need.
4. Creating an enabling environment for children's participation where their views and recommendations are respected, valued and have a real opportunity to influence decision-making.
5. Recognising children's role as both victims of the direct impacts of climate change and agents of change in the fight against it.
6. Ensuring a comprehensive focus on children, especially those most impacted by inequalities and discrimination, in international and national climate-related commitments, policies and frameworks.
7. Following up appropriately after COP providing real opportunities for children to exercise their right to speak out, mobilise, campaign, demand accountability and participate fully in climate and environmental discussions and policy development at all levels.
8. Enacting laws that guarantee the rights of children to participate in all matters affecting them, including public decision-making processes with implications for the climate and environment.



9. Ensuring that children have access to justice, including effective remedies and reparation of violations due to environmental harm and climate-related child rights violations, through child-friendly and gender-responsive complaints mechanisms at all levels, including by ratifying the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure.

Undertake urgent, bold, comprehensive and transformative climate action now to limit warming to a maximum of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels by:

1. Quickly phasing out destructive subsidies for all fossil fuels and other environmentally destructive practices including a rapid end to the use of coal, deforestation and carbon-intensive land use.
2. Scaling up nature-based solutions that prioritise the needs of children and support poverty alleviation and the protection of human rights and child rights, for the present generation and those to come.
3. Integrating child-centred climate goals into economic, fiscal and budgetary policy, by developing new sustainability and resilience-oriented fiscal UK policy goals for forthcoming budgets.
4. Reducing the UK's impacts, by applying a 'child centred-net zero test' to the 2021 public spending package.
5. Developing financial sector regulation with child-centred climate goals. The UK must establish mandatory processes for financial institutions to publish plans for how they will align investment/lending activities with the Paris Agreement goals (net zero), and by supporting the development of frameworks to encourage the private sector to incorporate child-centred climate issues/risks into all decision-making.

Scale up climate finance and delivery for mitigation, adaptation, loss and damage and anticipatory humanitarian action by:

1. Fulfilling the promise to mobilise at least \$100 billion annually to help poorer countries.
2. Allocating at least half of the \$100 billion/year investment to adaptation, resilience and disaster risk reduction measures.
3. Including new and additional financial support, given as grants and based on principles of predictability, transparency, and being locally-led. Countries with the highest levels of historic responsibility must address their carbon debt for causing climate change and climate damage by contributing their fair share of climate finance flows.
4. Providing incentives to ensure the families most affected by inequality and discrimination are supported to access new economic opportunities driven by the green economy.
5. Specifically targeting finance that benefits children most affected by inequalities and discrimination.
6. Creating a new international climate finance mechanism by 2023 to address loss and damage.

- ¹ UNICEF, 2021. *The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/reports/climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis>.
- ² Save the Children International, 2021. *Born into the Climate Crisis*. Available at: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/born-climate-crisis-why-we-must-act-now-secure-childrens-rights>.
- ³ UN Conference of the Parties, 2013. *Report of the Conference of the Parties on its eighteenth session, held in Doha from 26 November to 8 December 2012 – Addendum Part Two: Action taken by the Conference of the Parties at its eighteenth session*. Available from <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2012/cop18/eng/08a01.pdf>.
- ⁴ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2021. *Climate change widespread, rapid, and intensifying – IPCC*. Available at: <https://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr/>. From AR6 Climate Change 2021: the Physical Science Basis, available at: <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/>.
- ⁵ United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe, 2021. *Guterres: The IPCC Report is a code red for humanity*. Available at: <https://unric.org/en/guterres-the-ipcc-report-is-a-code-red-for-humanity/>.
- ⁶ Ipsos MORI, 2021. 'Public concern about climate change and pollution doubles to a near-record level.' Available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/public-concern-about-climate-change-and-pollution-doubles-near-record-level>.
- ⁷ Save the Children International, 2021. *Born into the Climate Crisis*. Available at: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/born-climate-crisis-why-we-must-act-now-secure-childrens-rights>.
- ⁸ Nicholas Stern, 2006. *The Economics of Climate Change: The Stern Review*. Cambridge University Press. ISBN 9780521700801. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/earth-and-environmental-science/climatology-and-climate-change/economics-climate-change-stern-review?format=PB>.
- ⁹ Oliver Milman, 2021. 'Governments falling woefully short of Paris climate pledges, study finds.' The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/sep/15/governments-falling-short-paris-climate-pledges-study>.
- ¹⁰ Global Commission on Adaptation, 2019. *Adapt Now: A Global Call for Leadership on Climate Resilience*. Available from https://gca.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/GlobalCommission_Report_FINAL.pdf.
- ¹¹ Global Commission on Adaptation, 2019. *Adapt Now: A Global Call for Leadership on Climate Resilience*. Available from https://gca.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/GlobalCommission_Report_FINAL.pdf.
- ¹² International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2019. *The Cost of Doing Nothing: The Humanitarian Price of Climate Change and How It Can Be Avoided*. IFRC, Geneva. p. 5.
- ¹³ Instruments developed by Paris Agreement signatories outlining localised climate actions, targets, policies and other measures.
- ¹⁴ UNICEF, 2021. *The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/reports/climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis>.
- ¹⁵ UNCRC Art. 6, 24, 32, and 39.
- ¹⁶ UNCRC Art. 29.
- ¹⁷ UNCRC Art. 8, 19, 32, 34, 35, 36.
- ¹⁸ Art. 6, 12, 13, 15, 31.
- ¹⁹ Save the Children International, 2021. *Born into the Climate Crisis*. Available at: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/born-climate-crisis-why-we-must-act-now-secure-childrens-rights>.
- ²⁰ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989. *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>.
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- ²² UN Conference of the Parties, 2013. *Report of the Conference of the Parties on its eighteenth session, held in Doha from 26 November to 8 December 2012 – Addendum Part Two: Action taken by the Conference of the Parties at its eighteenth session*. Available from <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2012/cop18/eng/08a01.pdf>.
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- ²⁴ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2021. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Available at: <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>.
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- ³¹ UNICEF, 2021. *The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/reports/climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis>.
- ³² Calculation based on estimates of world population of 8 billion people and child population of 2.2 children globally.
- ³³ Katharina Fenz and Kristofer Hamel, 2019. 'More than half of the world's poor are children.' Brookings. Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/.../2019/06/20/more-than-half-of-the-worlds-poor-are-children>.
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- ³⁵ UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12.
- ³⁶ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2021. *National Adaptation Plans*. United Nations Climate Change. Available at: <https://unfccc.int/topics/adaptation-and-resilience/workstreams/national-adaptation-plans>.
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- ³⁸ UN Human Rights Council Resolution A/HRC/45/L.48/Rev.1. Available at: <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/45/L.48/Rev.1>.
- ³⁹ Children's Environmental Rights Initiative, *Declaration on Children, Youth and Climate Action*. Available from <https://www.childrenvironment.org/declaration-children-youth-climate-action>.
- ⁴⁰ For more detailed recommendations, see *A COP fit for children* by Save the Children International. Available at <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/cop-fit-children-how-support-childrens-participation>.

