

# Children's right to a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment

Taken from  
*Children's Realities in Europe:  
Progress & Gaps*  
Eurochild 2024 flagship  
report on children in need  
across Europe.



**Eurochild**  
Putting children at  
the heart of Europe

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# Children's right to a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment

*On 20 November - World Children's Day - Eurochild released its flagship report on children in need titled "Children's Realities in Europe: Progress & Gaps", which compiles information from 57 Eurochild members in 31 countries across Europe. Members from 21 of the 31 countries covered in the report provided insights into how children's right to a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is being addressed. The sub-report concludes with recommendations to the European governments and the European Union to uphold children's rights to a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.*

## Introduction

Environmental challenges - such as climate change, extreme weather events, food and water insecurity, air, water and soil pollution, biodiversity loss and deforestation - disproportionately affect children in the EU and beyond. Compared to previous generations, children today face these challenges on a much larger scale, with deprivation caused by climate and environmental degradation during childhood leading to lifelong consequences. Moreover, despite contributing little to these issues, current and future generations<sup>1</sup> of children will bear the brunt of their long-term effects. This makes the protection of their rights a matter of **intergenerational fairness**.

Children living in vulnerable situations, particularly in the Global South, are disproportionately affected by environmental challenges despite their minimal contribution to emissions. Therefore, upholding children's environmental rights is inherently tied to advancing social justice and **addressing historical inequalities**.

The findings from Eurochild members reveal that while some progress has been made, significant gaps persist in safeguarding children's environmental rights across Europe. Legal and policy frameworks are evolving, with some encouraging initiatives emerging, yet specific measures to address children's vulnerabilities to environmental challenges remain limited.

As highlighted by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in General comment No. 26 (2023), the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment is **a right in itself and is essential for the realisation of a wide variety of rights**. Across Europe, several rights and principles enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child are particularly at risk:

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<sup>1</sup> Future generations refer to children who will be born and live in the future

## 1. Legal and policy frameworks

**Best interest of the child (Article 3):** As all environmental decisions concern children, their best interest should be a key consideration in their adoption and implementation. A child rights impact assessment is therefore needed but rarely carried out.

## 2. Pollution and environmental challenges

**Right to life, survival and development (Article 6) and right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24):** Due to their physical and psychological development, children are severely impacted by toxins and pollutants, even at lower exposure levels. Younger children are particularly vulnerable to it. Pollution and climate change impact children's health by causing respiratory issues, heat-related illnesses and nutritional deficiencies. Environmental damage can impair cognitive development. Mental health challenges can result from environmental stressors and severe weather events.

**Right to benefit from social security (Article 26) and adequate standard of living (Article 27):** Environmental challenges, leading to air and water pollution, heat stress, and inadequate access to clean resources, threaten children's well-being.

**Right to freedom from all forms of violence (Article 19):** As stated in *General comment No. 26 (2023)*, "Environmental degradation, including the climate crisis, is a form of structural violence against children and can cause social collapse in communities and families."

## 3. Children's views and climate change

**Right to be heard (Article 12), right to freedom of expression (Article 13) and association and peaceful assembly (Article 15):** Children are increasingly taking leadership roles on issues and decisions that affect their rights and the rights of future generations and are also increasingly at risk for this. Including children's voices is not only a matter of children's rights, but it is also beneficial for decision-makers, as they have unique perspectives and innovative ideas.

## 4. Environmental education and awareness

**Right to education (Article 28), goals of education (Article 29) and access to information (Article 13 and 17):** Europe has experienced instances of education disruption caused by extreme weather events, such as floods, heatwaves, and storms. Additionally, while education should be directed at the development of human rights and the development of respect for the natural environment, environmental education and awareness are lacking in many countries.

## 5. Environmental inequalities

**Right to non-discrimination (Article 2) and right of indigenous children and children of minority groups (Article 31):** Environmental challenges have a discriminatory effect on certain groups of children, such as children of minority groups and with an ethnic background, children living in places more affected by disasters and climate change.

## 6. Access to green spaces for children

**Right to leisure, play and culture (Article 31):** Climate change affects children’s right to rest, leisure, and play due to limited access to green spaces. Disadvantaged groups, including those from low-income backgrounds and marginalised communities, face the greatest barriers.

## Findings from Eurochild members

Out of members from 31 countries, members from 21 countries focused on children’s environmental rights: Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Kosovo, Latvia, Malta, Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Scotland, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Ukraine, and Wales.

### 1. Legal and policy frameworks

In Belgium, the Constitution explicitly states a right to a healthy environment, and children are one of the target groups of the *National Plan for Endocrine Disruptors*. In the preparation for the new *Flemish Youth and Children's Rights Policy Plan (2025-2029)*, there is a focus on the environment, and challenges and opportunities in this area are identified. The **Welsh** government made a climate emergency declaration, and some positive steps have been taken to reduce the speed limit on residential roads, introduce legislation to improve air quality, ban single-use plastic, and lower pollution levels. The **Latvian** *Climate Change Adaptation Plan* identifies families with young children as a vulnerable group, highlighting the need for specific measures to protect children from climate risks.

In **Northern Ireland**, official climate action and policy are still in their infancy, and the first proposed *Carbon Budget* was only published in June 2023, following the passing of the *Climate Change Act* in 2022, which set out clear targets and timescales. **Romania** has enacted several laws and policies to address environmental challenges and protect children's rights. These include the *Protected Children and Safe Romania*, which includes plans to address environmental issues affecting children, the *National Strategy on Education for the Environment and Climate Change 2023–2030* and environmental protection and waste management legislation. In 2021, **Germany's** highest court reminded the government to consider climate protection and children's right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment in national legislation.

**Croatia** has developed a *Climate Change Adaptation Strategy*. In **Albania**, although there is a *Law on Environmental Protection*, there are no specific policies on children's rights to a healthy environment. While **Malta** has enacted several policies to address environmental issues, none specifically address children’s needs. **Spain** has national plans and regulations that give special consideration to vulnerable groups; however, these lack concrete local measures to protect children's environmental rights. In **Serbia**, while some environmental laws focus on clean water, air pollution and disposal of hazardous waste, they do not

consider children. Recommendations from the *European Semester 2024 Country Report in Cyprus* include enhancing climate adaptation measures.

In **Finland**, there is a need to include children's rights in climate action initiatives. **Slovenia** also lacks a focus on children's environmental rights. In **Germany**, climate protection and children's rights are frequently overlooked in national policies, thus highlighting the need for the country to systematically adopt the obligations set out in *UNCRC General comment No. 26 (2023)*. No policy/law is in place to ensure a sustainable, healthy environment for children in **The Netherlands**.

## 2. Pollution and environmental challenges

Across **Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Poland, Romania, Malta** and **Scotland**, pollution continues to pose severe risks to children's health. Coal burning is a specific contributing factor in **Kosovo**. In **Poland**, burning wood and coal contributes to poor air quality, particularly affecting children in deprived areas. **Romania** also faces inadequate access to clean water and sanitation and exposure to hazardous waste, compounding the environmental challenges.

**Bulgaria** has a high score on the Children's Climate Risk Index, as calculated by UNICEF, and the highest premature death rate due to particulate matter in 2021. In **Belgium**, where air quality is below the EU average, there is a risk of exposure to lead and pesticides. Similarly, in **Scotland**, children in deprived areas are disproportionately affected by air pollution. In **Latvia**, many households still lack access to centralised water and sanitation, with private wells at risk of contamination. There are major challenges in reaching climate neutrality in **Slovenia**. In **Malta**, where there are high levels of air pollution, fresh water is becoming scarcer, with possible increases in water bills and more limited access to drinking water for children. **Malta** may, in the future, suffer from food insecurity.

Climate change severely impacts **Greece**, with extreme events like heatwaves, droughts, floods, and forest fires occurring regularly and air pollution levels exceeding the recommended guidelines, despite improvements in emissions. In 2023, the Court of Justice of the EU found that **Greece** had been violating EU Directives over air pollution in Athens for many years. **Croatia** faces extreme heat and rising sea levels, with coastal areas already becoming less habitable in the summer and cities facing heat stress; prolonged exposure of children to harmful emissions is a major concern, but there is no appropriate response from the competent authorities.

## 3. Children's views and climate change

Children and youth are increasingly concerned about climate change. For instance, 90% of youth from **Hungary** expressed feeling some level of anxiety about it, and children in **Serbia** experience eco-anxiety. In **Wales**, 75% of children think governments must take more action to tackle climate change and inequality, and 70% are worried about the world they will inherit. 70% of **Dutch** children are concerned about climate change.

Children’s needs and voices should be integrated into climate-related policies in **Portugal**. In **Wales**, children specifically call for more engagement with green spaces. In **Northern Ireland**, children’s views need to be considered when making decisions regarding the environment.

Research from the **Netherlands** in 2023 concluded that children are active in the climate movement because they are very concerned about climate change, are frustrated that not enough is being done and want to speak out. In **Germany**, young people taking part in peaceful protests to demand more government action on environmental protection and climate change have sometimes been met with repressive responses, including heavy-handed policing, physical violence, detention, and criminalisation of protesters.

Children from **Northern Ireland**, **Ukraine** and **Croatia** contributed to the UNCRC’s General Comment 26 (2023) on Children’s Rights and the Environment. Children from **Ukraine** highlighted the need to take care of nature, including recycling, and emphasised the war’s impact on the environment and the climate.

In the 2023 civil society report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, children from **Scotland** voiced their concerns about the environment and climate change: *“We want to have a say in decisions about the environment and climate change at the local, national, and international level.”*

#### **4. Environmental education and awareness**

In **Latvia**, schools are encouraged to teach environmental protection, but no extra funding is provided. In **Albania**, environmental rights for children are a new concept, and only a handful of civil society organisations are working in this area. In **Greece**, environmental education is lacking in schools, particularly on recycling and reforestation. In **Poland**, recent efforts have been made to enhance climate education in schools. In **Slovenia**, decision-makers don’t talk about children’s environmental rights.

#### **5. Environmental inequalities**

Certain groups of children are vulnerable to environmental issues primarily due to socio-economic factors, geographical location, and systemic discrimination. Across **Belgium**, **Germany**, **Romania**, **Scotland**, and **Wales**, there is a clear pattern where children from disadvantaged backgrounds face greater environmental harm. This includes not only socio-economic factors but also specific minority groups, such as Roma communities in **Romania**, that are particularly affected by environmental racism. In **Belgium** and **Scotland**, children from low-income backgrounds suffer from poor air quality and environmental conditions. In **Scotland**, positive changes have included investment in public transport – including free travel for under 21s, although uptake has been inconsistent.

**Germany** highlights a broader range of vulnerable groups affected by environmental harm, including minority children, children with disabilities, and those from poorer backgrounds. The UNCRC recommended that **Finland** evaluate the possible effects of climate action on

children, including *Sami* children. In **Malta**, children living in poverty suffer from heat stress due to limited access to air conditioning.

## 6. Access to green spaces for children

Across **Belgium, Malta, Latvia, Spain, and Wales**, limited access to green spaces is a common challenge. In **Belgium** and **Malta**, urbanisation has reduced the availability of these areas, particularly in cities, with privatisation further compounding this issue in **Belgium**. Similarly, in **Spain**, the lack of green spaces is a barrier to ensuring children's right to a healthy environment. In **Latvia**, local authorities, supported by *EU Structural Funds*, play a key role in implementing solutions like creating green spaces for children. In **Wales**, further progress is needed to support the logistical difficulties low-income families face in accessing green areas due to public transport issues.

## Recommendations

### 1. Strengthen legal and policy frameworks

**To the European governments:** Enact and enforce national legislation and strategies that align with international standards, **including the UNCRC General Comment No. 26**. Integrate climate action into child protection policies to ensure resilience and protection from environmental hazards and ensure an **impact assessment** for all decisions affecting children, including those carried out by the business sector, with a specific focus on younger children.

**To the European Union:** Ensure key initiatives, such as the upcoming **EU Strategy for Intergenerational Fairness**, embed the right to a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. **Recommend impact assessments** for all decisions impacting children's environmental rights, as well as programmes and funding for both EU and enlargement countries. A human rights approach to the implementation of the *European Green Deal*, as detailed by the *European Agency for Fundamental Rights*, is needed.

### 2. Address pollution and environmental challenges

**To the European governments:** **Tackle the root causes** of pollution and environmental challenges, including eliminating toxic substances and equitably phasing out coal. **Guarantee access to clean water and sanitation**, prioritising rural and underserved areas. **Enhance social protection systems**, ensuring resilience in the face of environmental challenges, including high-quality health care and housing, and tackle energy poverty. **Collect and analyse data** on children's specific risks to guide policy development and interventions.

**To the European Union:** When monitoring EU initiatives and funding, including the European Child Guarantee and within the European Semester process, **focus on building resilience** in children and families (at risk of being) affected by environmental challenges.

**Increase investment in climate finance**, including adaptation and mitigation, ensuring investments build resilience, and support sustainable development.

### **3. Integrate children's views in climate related decisions**

**To the European governments: Ensure children's meaningful participation** in decision-making processes regarding environmental policies at local, national, and international levels. **Create safe, supportive spaces for children's activism.** Collaborate with the civil society to amplify children's voices.

**To the European Union: Ensure children**, especially those from the most impacted communities, **are involved in policies linked to the environment**, including within the *EU Child Participation Platform* and the *EU youth advisory board*.

### **4. Promote environmental education and awareness**

**To the European governments: Introduce and fund comprehensive environmental education in schools**, focusing on sustainability, climate change, recycling, and the role of individuals in combating environmental challenges. Partner with civil society to increase community awareness.

**To the European Union: Promote and support the integration of comprehensive environmental education into national curricula through EU funding instruments. Raise awareness about environmental rights** among policymakers, educators, and the general public.

### **5. Address environmental inequalities**

**To the European governments: Develop policies and programmes targeting environmental inequalities** affecting vulnerable groups, including children from ethnic and migrant backgrounds, those with disabilities, and low-income families. **Particular attention should be given to areas where vulnerable children live**, such as slums, refugee settings, industrial zones, and informal settlements, to reduce their exposure to pollution and environmental degradation.

**To the European Union: Prioritise financial and technical support** for low-income, and marginalised communities. Priority should be given to areas where these children are most at risk. **Promote international cooperation** to support other States in the Global South that are most impacted by environmental challenges despite minimal contribution to emissions.

### **6. Access to green spaces for children**

**To the European governments: Develop and implement national strategies**, with a focus on disadvantaged children, to preserving and restoring biodiversity and increasing **access to green spaces. Integrate green space planning into urban development policies** and improve accessibility through affordable, safe, and child-friendly public transport options.

**To the European Union: Direct EU funding mechanisms** to investments to protecting and restoring biodiversity in **creating and maintaining accessible green spaces**, particularly in



disadvantaged urban and rural areas, to promote children's well-being and environmental equity.

## Summary

While European countries are increasingly addressing environmental challenges and integrating them into national plans and strategies, **many lack comprehensive policies prioritising children's environmental rights**. Key gaps include weak local implementation and a limited focus on children's rights.

**Pollution and climate change pose significant risks to children's health across Europe**. Poor air quality, driven by coal and wood burning, impacts children in deprived areas, while inadequate access to clean water and sanitation remains a concern. Heatwaves, floods, and droughts worsen living conditions. **This highlights the urgent need for targeted measures** to address air pollution, water scarcity, energy poverty and food insecurity while mitigating the long-term effects of climate change on their well-being.

**Children and youth across Europe are deeply concerned** about climate change, with many **demanding stronger action from governments** and providing input to UN processes, such as the consultation on *UNCRC General comment No. 26 (2023)*.

**Limited access to green spaces** is a widespread issue. Urbanisation, privatisation, and inadequate public transport exacerbate inequalities, leaving children in disadvantaged areas more vulnerable to pollution and lacking opportunities for outdoor recreation.

**There is limited education and awareness on environmental rights, especially on issues like recycling and reforestation**. Civil society involvement is minimal.

**Children from disadvantaged backgrounds, minority groups, and specific regions face greater environmental harm** due to socioeconomic factors and systemic discrimination. Vulnerable groups, including Roma, indigenous Sami children and children with disabilities, require targeted interventions.

**Eurochild calls on the European governments and the European Union to ensure strengthened legal and policy frameworks and funding to address children's vulnerabilities to environmental challenges**. It is necessary to guarantee children's participation in decision-making, tackle environmental inequalities affecting vulnerable groups, and enhance environmental education. Investments in sustainable development, building resilience and ensuring financial support for marginalised communities are also crucial. A focus should be given to ensuring clean water, sanitation, green space access, and addressing environmental damage in disadvantaged areas.

**Immediate and decisive action by European institutions and European governments is crucial to safeguard the current and future generations of children, in the EU and beyond.**

**For more information, contact:**

Francesca Pisanu  
EU Advocacy Officer, Eurochild  
[francesca.pisanu@eurochild.org](mailto:francesca.pisanu@eurochild.org)

**Eurochild AISBL**

Avenue des Arts 7/8, 1210 Brussels  
*Tel. +32 (0)2 511 70 83*  
[info@eurochild.org](mailto:info@eurochild.org) – [www.eurochild.org](http://www.eurochild.org)

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