

A FAIR START FOR EVERY CHILD IN EUROPE

First Years, First Priority is a joint initiative of Eurochild and ISSA.

We are the leading European networks representing the children's rights and the early childhood sectors. Our partnership pools our respective strengths to campaign for the prioritisation of early childhood development in public policies across Europe.

Early childhood development and climate change: prioritising the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment for all children

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Introduction

This scoping paper examines the right of all children to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a fundamental right, and underscores the urgent need to address the impacts of climate change on very young children, who are often invisible in policy and decision-making processes. It attempts to gather available information on some of the current and future implications of climate change for very young children. It also underscores the importance of including young children and their families and caregivers in policies, programmes and initiatives to prevent, respond and adapt to the climate crisis. The paper draws on existing research and analysis in this area, worldwide.

The right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment has been increasingly recognised nationally¹ and internationally, including by the General Assembly of the UN² and the Human Rights Council.³ The effects of climate change on children's rights, and the corresponding obligations of states, are increasingly addressed by human rights bodies, including the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.⁴

According to UNICEF's Children's Climate Risk Index 'the climate crisis is creating a child's rights crisis' and threatening children's survival.⁵

¹ *What is the Right to a Healthy Environment? Information Note*, OHCHR, UNEP, UNDP, 2023

² *United Nations General Assembly Resolution 76/300*

³ *Human Rights Council resolution 48/13*

⁴ *States' Human Rights Obligations in the Context of Climate Change, Guidance Provided by the UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies, 2022 Update; Children's Rights Obligations of States in the Context of Climate Change. Synthesis of Statements on Climate Change by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2022 Update)*, The Centre for International Environmental Law (CIEL) and The Global Initiative for Economic Social and Cultural Rights

⁵ *The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis: Introducing the Children's Climate Risk Index*, UNICEF, 2021

In 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child published guidance to states on upholding children's rights in relation to the environment and climate change. *General comment No. 26 (2023) on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change* outlines the ways in which a healthy and sustainable environment is both a human right in itself and also necessary for the full enjoyment of a broad range of children's rights, including the right to life, survival and development, the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to food, health and education, the right to adequate housing, the right to be free from violence, and the right to play.⁶

All children, no matter their circumstances, have the right to live in a safe and healthy environment, where they can grow, learn, play and thrive. The principle of inter-generational equity also underlies the imperative to act and protect the rights of future generations.⁷

Understanding and addressing the impacts of climate change on children's early years is increasingly important. Climate change affects early childhood development both directly and indirectly. Direct effects include the physiological effects of extreme heat and air pollution, and the availability of nutritious food. Indirectly, climate change also affects caregivers' ability to care for infants and young children.

'The climate crisis is a child rights crisis', UNICEF.⁸

The impacts of climate change on nurturing care

1- Health and wellbeing risks

Children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, which threatens their lives, health and wellbeing.⁹ Children from minorities, such as indigenous and Roma children, refugee and internally displaced children, children with disabilities, and those living in poverty are at higher risk of harm.¹⁰

Climate change affects children's health and wellbeing in a number of ways, including through exposure to extreme weather events such as heatwaves, storms and flooding, air pollution, the rise in childhood diseases due to environmental factors, and disruptions to food systems, water scarcity, access to healthcare and education and to social protection services.¹¹

2- Developmental and learning disruptions

⁶ *General comment No. 26 (2023) on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change*

⁷ *There is no plan(et) B - environmental "crossroads" of children's rights*, Kecskés G. and Lux Á., Hungarian Journal of Legal Studies, June 2023

⁸ *The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis: Introducing the Children's Climate Risk Index*, UNICEF, 2021

⁹ *The climate-changed child. A children's climate risk index supplement* UNICEF, 2023

¹⁰ *"Children's Unique Vulnerabilities."* UNICEF, Children's Environmental Health Collaborative

¹¹ *Prioritizing women's, children's and adolescents' health in the climate crisis* Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, 2023

A safe and healthy environment is fundamental for children's healthy growth and development, starting in infancy and the early years. The environment in which children are born and grow affects their physical and mental health, their development, their education, and their relationships with parents, family, caregivers and the wider community.¹² Climate change therefore has the potential to undermine and threaten all areas affecting nurturing care for young children, and their ability to survive and thrive.

Safe and healthy environments, starting in pregnancy and throughout childhood, with access to nutritious food, clean air and drinking water, safe green spaces to play and surroundings free of harmful materials, have a positive effect on children's healthy development.¹³ Conversely, air and water pollution, water scarcity, extreme temperatures, a lack of green spaces, lack of access to nutritious food, and environments with toxic substances such as asbestos, lead, or second-hand smoke can all hinder children's healthy development.¹⁴

Climate change can have severe impacts on young children and their caregivers, especially if they live in situations of poverty, insecurity, crisis or emergency. A disruption of the components of nurturing care – health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, early learning opportunities, and safety and security – can be detrimental to young children in several ways.¹⁵

Extreme weather events (such as flooding¹⁶) can also disrupt access to education, including early learning, as a result of school closures, damage to educational facilities, transport and infrastructure or the use of schools as emergency shelters.¹⁷ Children's learning can also be undermined by extreme heat.¹⁸

The effects of climate change can also affect early learning by limiting children's access to safe and healthy green spaces, thus restricting opportunities for learning, play, exercise and building social relationships.

Protecting and building climate resilience in early childhood education and care facilities can help ensure that children do not miss out on early learning.¹⁹

3- Access to safe water, nutrition and clean environments

¹² Center on the Developing Child Harvard University *Place Matters: The Environment We Create Shapes the Foundations of Healthy Development Working Paper No. 16*. 2023

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ *Promoting Climate-sensitive Early Childhood Care and Education in Emergencies* Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), 2023

¹⁶ *Born into the Climate Crisis. Why we must act now to secure children's rights*. Save the Children, 2021

¹⁷ *There is no plan(et) B - environmental "crossroads" of children's rights*, Kecskés G. and Lux Á., Hungarian Journal of Legal Studies, June 2023

¹⁸ *Born into the Climate Crisis. Why we must act now to secure children's rights*. Save the Children, 2021

¹⁹ *Promoting Climate-sensitive Early Childhood Care and Education in Emergencies*. Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), 2023

The effects of climate change can lead to a lack of safe water and nutritious food – for example as a result of storms, floods, droughts and other extreme weather events. In 2022, an estimated 739 million children worldwide were exposed to high, or very high, water scarcity.²⁰

The effects of climate change can also make young children more vulnerable to disease and climate-related illnesses.²¹ Events such as floods and storms can lead to the spread of water-borne diseases, and to the disruption or destruction of water and sanitation infrastructure.²²

High temperatures can increase pathogens in food and water, increasing children's risk of diarrhoeal disease.²³ Extreme heat is also linked to food insecurity, thereby increasing the risk of childhood undernutrition, especially in children under the age of two.²⁴

Infants and young children can be more vulnerable during extreme heat, as they are less able to regulate their body temperature and are more susceptible to dehydration²⁵ and heatstroke.²⁶ Newborn babies' developing temperature regulation systems and their dependence on others for care (including cooling, shading and feeding) make them more vulnerable to climate change.²⁷ Exposure to extreme heat and air pollution is associated with increased infant mortality and morbidity from stunting, respiratory disease and negative neuro-developmental outcomes, with potential future adverse health effects in adulthood.²⁸ An estimated 605 children under five die each year in Europe from lower respiratory tract infections.²⁹

There is expanding evidence of the effects of heatwaves on rates of pre-term and early-term births and of associations between extreme heat and higher rates of stillbirths, premature births and babies with lower-birth-weight.³⁰ There is also growing evidence of pregnant women's vulnerabilities to heat exposure, including maternal hypertension, pre-eclampsia, gestational diabetes, anxiety and poor mental health.³¹

²⁰ *The climate-changed child. A children's climate risk index supplement*, UNICEF, 2023

²¹ Ibid

²² *There is no plan(et) B - environmental "crossroads" of children's rights*, Kecskés G. and Lux Á., Hungarian Journal of Legal Studies, June 2023

²³ *Protecting maternal, newborn and child health from the impacts of climate change: a call to action*, WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA, 2023

²⁴ *Protecting maternal, newborn and child health from the impacts of climate change: a call to action*, WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA, 2023

²⁵ *The climate-changed child. A children's climate risk index supplement*, UNICEF, 2023

²⁶ *The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis: Introducing the Children's Climate Risk Index*, UNICEF, 2021

²⁷ *Protecting maternal, newborn and child health from the impacts of climate change: a call to action*, WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA, 2023

²⁸ *Protecting maternal, newborn and child health from the impacts of climate change: a call to action*, WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA, 2023

²⁹ Cited in *The challenges environmental degradation and climate change present for children*, Plataforma de Infancia, 2022

³⁰ Dresser C., Mahalingaiah S., Nadeau KC. *Preterm and Early-Term Birth, Heat Waves, and Our Changing Climate*. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2024;7(5):e2412026. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.12026

³¹ F. Scorgie, A. Lusambili, S. Luchters, P. Khaemba, V. Filippi, B. Nakstad, J. Hess, C. Birch, S. Kovats, M.F. Chersich, *"Mothers get really exhausted!" The lived experience of pregnancy in extreme heat: Qualitative findings from Kilifi, Kenya*, *Social Science & Medicine*, Volume 335, 2023, 116223, ISSN 0277-9536

4- Increased vulnerabilities among marginalised children

Families living in informal settlements face particular risks from extreme heat and flooding, due to poor quality housing and the lack of infrastructure and services.³²

Displacement and migration due to the effects of climate change can hinder the ability of parents and other caregivers to provide nurturing care for young children, and result in unsafe and insecure living conditions. Destruction of homes due to climate change, and subsequent displacement of families, can lead to homelessness and to makeshift and unsafe housing. This affects families' ability to provide nurturing care for infants and young children, and can take away the space and time for young children to play, learn and grow in a safe and secure environment.

'Article 8: A clean, healthy and sustainable environment is both a human right itself and necessary for the full enjoyment of a broad range of children's rights. Conversely, environmental degradation, including the consequences of the climate crisis, adversely affects the enjoyment of these rights, in particular for children in disadvantaged situations or children living in regions that are highly exposed to climate change.' **General comment No. 26 (2023) on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change**

ECD and climate change – who is most affected?

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recognises that those who are socially, economically, politically or otherwise marginalised are particularly vulnerable to climate change.³³ Families and children living in poverty are disproportionately exposed to extreme climate events and affected by the climate crisis.³⁴

Climate change exacerbates the vulnerabilities of women, children, and adolescents, especially those living in humanitarian settings, who are marginalised or experiencing discrimination.³⁵ Indigenous children, migrant children, children with disabilities, displaced children, and girls, among others, face particular risks, as do children who experience intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalisation.³⁶

Across Europe, many Roma children under six years old, and their families, lack essential facilities such as access to running water, hot water, electricity, or sanitary facilities inside their homes³⁷, making them more vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

³² *Generation Hope. 2.4 billion reasons to end the global climate and inequality crisis*, Save the Children, 2022

³³ IPCC cited in: *There is no plan(et) B - environmental "crossroads" of children's rights*, Kecskés G. and Lux Á., Hungarian Journal of Legal Studies, June 2023

³⁴ *A Disproportionate Burden: Children in Poverty Bearing the Brunt of the Climate Crisis*, End Child Poverty Global Coalition

³⁵ *Prioritizing women's, children's and adolescents' health in the climate crisis* Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, 2023

³⁶ *Born into the Climate Crisis. Why we must act now to secure children's rights*, Save the Children, 2021

³⁷ *Breaking the silence. The Right of Young Roma Children in Europe to Develop and Thrive*. The International Step by Step Association and Romani Early Years Network, 2023

Many Roma children live in informal or illegal housing, which often excludes them and their families from accessing EU funded programmes aimed at clean energy sources. These programmes, designed to support vulnerable populations, typically have stringent eligibility criteria related to housing ownership that prevent access to the most marginalised. As a result, those who need the support the most are left out. The eligibility criteria should be made more flexible, making the support more inclusive and accessible.

Engaging children

Children and young people have been increasingly involved in environmental issues, with their leadership and activism ever more visible. Children and young people's activism has led to their international recognition as human right defenders.³⁸

The potential for inter-generational learning and activism on climate change, within early childhood education, can empower young children and adults (teachers, parents, caregivers) to work together on the challenges posed by the climate crisis.³⁹ Incorporating climate literacy in early childhood education, through age-appropriate activities including play, storytelling and the creative arts, can help to foster children's understanding and responses to climate change, now and in the future.⁴⁰ Teacher training on climate change education for early childhood education and care providers is also important in this regard.⁴¹

The role of the Council of Europe, the European Union and its Member States

Recognising and addressing the links between climate change and children's rights, including early childhood development, should be a priority for both the Council of Europe and the European Union, alongside their Member States. The Council of Europe, through its commitment to human rights, democratic governance, and social inclusion, plays a crucial role in promoting and protecting children's rights across Europe. Coordination between the EU's initiatives (such as the European Child Guarantee, the European Green Deal, and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child) and the Council of Europe's frameworks can enhance support for nurturing care, green infrastructure, and climate-sensitive urban planning tailored to young children and their caregivers.

The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child acknowledges the multiple crises affecting children worldwide, including the climate crisis. The Strategy states an ambition 'to build the best possible life for children in the European Union and across the globe' and recognises the role of children in 'raising awareness on the nature and climate change crises, discrimination and injustice'.⁴²

³⁸ United Nations Human Rights Council *Recognizing the contribution of environmental human rights defenders to the enjoyment of human rights, environmental protection and sustainable development*, 2019

³⁹ Jane Spiteri (22 Feb 2024): *Climate crisis activism in early childhood: building capacities to boost intergenerational learning*, Children's Geographies, DOI: 10.1080/14733285.2024.2318379

⁴⁰ *Growing Climate-Conscious Children: Early Interventions for Climate Literacy*, Dr Jane Spiteri, University of Malta, Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education

⁴¹ Jane Spiteri (12 Mar 2024): *Pre-service ECEC teachers' conceptions of climate change: a community funds of knowledge and identity approach*, Education 3-13, DOI: 10.1080/03004279.2024.2322999

⁴² Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, *EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child*, 2021

Policy responses to preventing, mitigating and responding to climate change – and its impacts on young children – can be integrated in the implementation of the European Child Guarantee and the Revised Barcelona Targets on Early Childhood Education and Care. And early childhood development considerations should be integrated in countries' responses to climate change, through planning, policies and programmes that protect young children and their families, especially those most vulnerable to its effects. Actions that support nurturing care for young children – such as investing in green spaces, public parks and play areas, reducing pollution and improving air quality, investing in child-friendly urban planning and in climate-sensitive infrastructure – can also help address the impacts of climate change.

Confronting the unprecedented challenges of climate change, including through EU initiatives such as the European Green Deal, the European Child Guarantee and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child must include specific attention to the needs of young children and their particular vulnerabilities.

Our recommendations

Urgent, concerted and sustained action on climate change – both mitigation and adaptation – is essential to protect the wellbeing of the youngest in society, but will also benefit whole communities and societies. We urge EU governments and institutions to take measures to:

- Enact robust policies and programmes to protect young children from the impacts of climate change, ensuring that climate policies and actions uphold children's rights from infancy and early childhood.
- Ensure that climate action strategies explicitly include attention to early childhood development, with specific plans to address the impacts of climate change during pregnancy, infancy and children's early years.
- Ensure that climate action strategies and plans include a focus on the most marginalised young children and their families, and their particular vulnerabilities.
- Develop and implement national and EU legislation to guarantee the right of all children to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, in line with international standards, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and General Comment No. 26 on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change.

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