

CHILD-FRIENDLY EDUCATION

Transforming the lives of children
affected by climate change



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Climate change has the potential to jeopardize progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – particularly the goals related to reducing poverty and child mortality and morbidity, strengthening gender equality and ensuring universal access to primary education for all children. Thus, climate change threatens the broader sustainable development agenda. Child-friendly education is a means by which children and adolescents can develop the capacity and skills needed to withstand projected climate shocks and natural disasters.



Children and climate change

On any given day, more than a billion children are in primary or secondary school. Far too many of them fail to complete their education, however, dropping out because of fees, distant location and poor quality of schools; because of discrimination based on gender, HIV and AIDS, and disabilities; or because their education is disrupted by emergencies, conflict and chronic environmental degradation.

Scientific findings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change clearly indicate that a changing climate has had and will continue to have a significant impact on human life and natural systems. The evidence suggests that developing countries will be most affected by changes in rainfall patterns, greater weather extremes and the increasing incidence of droughts and floods, especially where resilience to shocks is low and livelihoods depend on such natural resources as water and land. Disasters strike hardest in poor communities, where people often live in substandard housing, unsafe settlements and dangerous areas such as earthquake zones, flood plains or steep slopes at risk of erosion.

Nearly 90 per cent of the world's children live in developing countries. Although the impact of climate change and natural disasters on children has not been fully researched, the available evidence shows that children constitute one of the most at-risk groups, given their specific vulnerabilities. Children's physiology and cognitive immaturity make them more susceptible to the effects of environmental degradation than adults, and they are therefore more vulnerable to adverse environmental conditions such as poor air quality, contaminated water and extreme heat. The effects are more severe for children in developing countries with weak governance and poor education systems, for children in small island states, for children living in poverty, for girls, for children from ethnic minorities and indigenous groups, and for children living with disabilities.

Maldives:

Multi-sectoral approach to climate change education

The low-lying nature of the islands of the Maldives makes this country one of the most vulnerable in the world to climate change. Environmental studies had been part of the school curriculum since the 1980s but it was only in 2001 that a national strategy recognized the essential role of quality education in adapting to climate change, and in 2003–2009, the subject of climate change and natural disasters was officially integrated into environmental studies curriculum. UNICEF and NGO partners supported efforts by the Maldives Government to train teachers and government officials in the revised curriculum and to develop materials, including an e-learning course for primary school teachers, a resource pack containing hands-on activities and a sanitation and hygiene manual to promote these issues in schools. The revision was accompanied by environmental awareness campaigns and the creation of diploma and undergraduate programmes on environmental management.

The benefits of child-friendly education

Child-friendly education – in quality schools, inclusive of all girls and boys – strengthens children’s resilience to cope with the effects of climate change. It responds to the needs of children most at-risk and marginalized by climate change.

Quality education helps build people’s adaptive capacity by imparting the knowledge and skills that will enable them to make informed decisions about how to adapt their lives and livelihoods to the ecological, social and economic realities of a changing environment. Such education is most effective when it begins in the early years, before children start primary school, continues through the secondary level of education and leads to lifelong learning in adulthood.

Quality education can be transformative if it entails:

- active, inclusive and participatory learning and teaching processes;
- supportive and qualified teachers;
- enabling and safe learning environments; and
- an inherent link to local communities and local issues.

Children can be powerful agents of change, and they can be resilient when faced with challenges. Research has shown that providing them with empowering and relevant education on disasters and climate change in a child-friendly school environment can reduce their own and their community’s vulnerability to risk while contributing to sustainable development. Children’s knowledge and capacities can be invaluable to the development of realistic and practicable adaptation plans.

Studies have found, too, that one of the best ways of strengthening community adaptation to climate change is by educating girls and women. Gender-sensitive participatory approaches to community development and action – including environmental education and stewardship, disaster risk reduction and preparedness – can create economic opportunity, reduce vulnerability and enable the most marginalized citizens to become contributors to and beneficiaries of a sustainable society.

Madagascar:

Partnerships for change and adaptation

Connecting Classrooms, Communities and Youth for Biodiversity Conservation is enabling Malagasy children and youth to understand, cope with and respond to their rapidly changing environment. In its first three years (2011–2014), the programme will engage an estimated 75,000 children and youth in environmental education and mobilize them to participate in activities related to conserving this country’s rich biodiversity. Locally developed e-learning modules around such themes as climate change adaptation, natural resource management and conservation ‘connect’ youth to engage in dialogue with their peers both in Madagascar and beyond. Saturday Schools for local students cover environmental science and a range of other subjects, and the Junior Reporters Club trains youth as citizen journalists to produce educational radio broadcasts and documentary films on climate-related and other issues affecting them in their communities. The initiative, in partnership with local organizations, is part of UNICEF’s global Connecting Classrooms programme.

A resource pack for educators

UNICEF is developing a resource pack on scaling up and mainstreaming climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction in the education sector. The resource pack will serve as a tool for governments and development partners in their efforts to guarantee the right of all children to a quality education. Content is guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Millennium Development Goals, the Education for All movement and the 2005 Hyogo Framework for Action, the first internationally agreed plan to reduce disaster risks and achieve disaster resilience.

Within a context that clearly stresses child rights and equity, the resource pack focuses on:

- supporting the development and strengthening of capacity within the education sector to scale up and mainstream climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction;
- promoting the integration of climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction into learning and teaching, in line with the child-friendly education approaches;
- protecting and strengthening learning facilities from the worst impacts of climate change and disasters through sustainable design;
- setting and implementing standards for addressing climate change and disaster risk in a comprehensive and cross-sectoral way; and
- guiding stakeholders to advocate for increased resources to mainstream comprehensive education-sector responses to climate change and disaster risks.

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East Asia and the Pacific:

Children as agents of change

A UNICEF-commissioned study carried out in countries of the East Asia and Pacific region describes children's interest in climate change and their contributions to finding practical solutions. In Vanuatu, children are cleaning up rivers and visiting coral reefs with their schools, becoming more environmentally aware in the process. In the Solomon Islands, young people trained as peer educators track seasonal changes and communicate risks; they mobilize to protect their communities when natural disasters strike. In Indonesia, children raise awareness of disaster risk reduction and environmental issues using traditional and religious songs and music that they have adapted. In Thailand, a community youth network was instrumental in increasing flood preparedness; children were trained in the use of a rain gauge to monitor water levels and detect other signs of flooding. These activities all have educational components that increase children's understanding of issues and enhance their effectiveness within their communities.



The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012, aims to secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development. Marking the 20th anniversary of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), Rio+20 will assess progress to date in implementing the outcomes of UNCED and other major summits and will address new and emerging challenges. For UNICEF, Rio+20 provides a unique opportunity not only to play an active role in global advocacy and promote an equity-based and child-centred agenda around sustainable development, but also to highlight the importance of education in providing children with the skills and knowledge they need to adapt to a changing environment.

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