

HEALTHY ENVIRONMENTS FOR HEALTHY CHILDREN

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Healthy Environments
for Healthy Children

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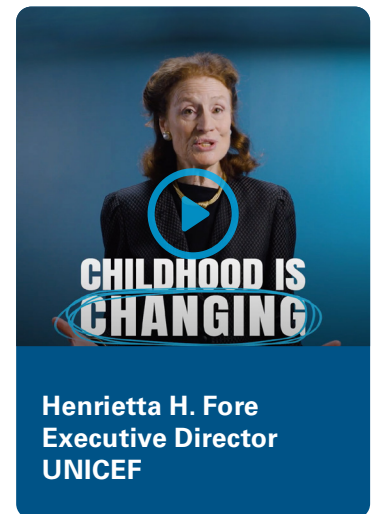
Childhood is changing fast and so must we

Every child has the right to grow in a healthy and safe environment.

Children today face a new set of challenges that were unimaginable just a generation ago. Across the world, climate change and environmental degradation are threatening child survival, health and well-being. Given children’s unique metabolism, physiology and developmental needs, no group is more vulnerable to environmental harm. Exposure can impact children early and have a lifelong effect.

The global community has taken positive steps in building commitments, resolutions and initiatives to protect children from climate change and environmental degradation. But tangible progress on-the-ground remains limited. The demand for action is growing and it’s critical now to scale up practical interventions to ensure a healthy environment for all children, especially for those that are the most vulnerable.

Action on climate change and environmental degradation – taken for children and with them – is now a key UNICEF priority. The [Global Programme Framework on Healthy Environments for Healthy Children](#) integrates this priority into UNICEF’s Health programme. In close coordination with the wider UN system in 190 countries and territories, UNICEF is uniquely placed to help nations develop healthy environments that enable children not only to survive, but also thrive.



The right to a healthy environment underpins the rights of all children not only to survive but to thrive and live in dignity.

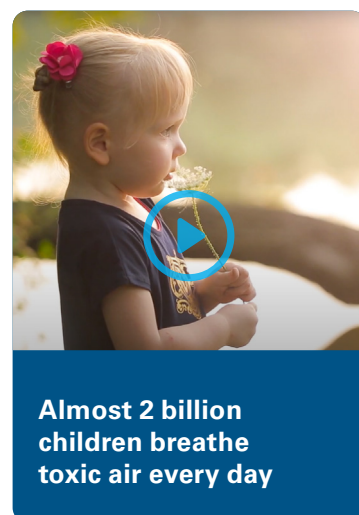
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

2

Progress on child survival, health and well-being is under threat

A child born today has a much better chance of reaching their fifth birthday than ever before, but progress on child survival, health and well-being is now at risk of reversal because of climate change and environmental degradation.

The toxic air 1.8 billion children under the age of 15 years breathe is putting their health and development at serious risk. Meanwhile, one in three children have unacceptably high levels of lead in their blood. Children's unique metabolism, physiology and developmental needs make them much more vulnerable than adults to pollutants, which can have a lifelong impact, causing disease, disability and an early death. Disturbingly, the extent of this issue can be seen in how patterns of disease among children are changing worldwide, with a clear shift from communicable to noncommunicable diseases as a growing cause of childhood morbidity. In addition, this generation of children will be the first to grow in a world made far more dangerous by climate change. Extreme weather events, heat waves, the spread of infectious and vector-borne diseases as well as detrimental impacts on air and water quality are direct threats to a child's ability to survive, grow and thrive.



Our economic system is driving climate change and environmental degradation

The very economic system that has helped deliver many gains for children over the past three decades, is now threatening their survival, health and well-being as it drives climate change and causes pollution that is poisoning the places where children live, play and go to school.

Tens of thousands of pollutants now circulate through our water, air, soil and food with the potential health effects on children yet to be fully understood. Besides household, industrial and medical waste, the improper disposal and unsafe recycling of e-waste from discarded computers, phones, lamps, used lead-acid batteries and other products is contaminating the environment. Still other pollutants, which have been banned, remain in use, while in some cases the contamination from these has never fully been cleaned up.

At the same time, greenhouse gas emissions are driving climate change causing more and more extreme weather events such as flooding, heatwaves and wildfires, as well as slower-onset impacts such as

Tens of millions of children and young people are employed around the world and are frequently exposed to hazardous working conditions, particularly in mining, agriculture, recycling and manufacturing sectors.

drought and expanding disease-vector ranges. The dangers of climate change are more pronounced for children than adults. They are more vulnerable to undernutrition, or vector-borne and diarrhoeal diseases. The physical dangers of extreme weather events – flooding, mould growth in homes and schools, building collapse, and more – also pose unique threats to young bodies and minds.

Children are the least responsible, yet most vulnerable to environmental harm

Climate change and environmental hazards affect children in different ways during all phases of their development – even before birth. A mother’s body can store harmful chemicals, such as lead, mercury and persistent organic pollutants, and she can pass these on to her child during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Meanwhile, a pregnant woman exposed to toxic chemicals can have premature births or babies with low birth weights. As a child grows, their developing bodies and organs are more vulnerable than adults’ to damage from toxicants and pollutants. These early years are known as ‘windows of vulnerability’ for children’s development. Exposure can remain invisible for many years but ultimately affect a child’s ability to live a healthy life and to reach their full potential.

Children most at-risk are the most vulnerable

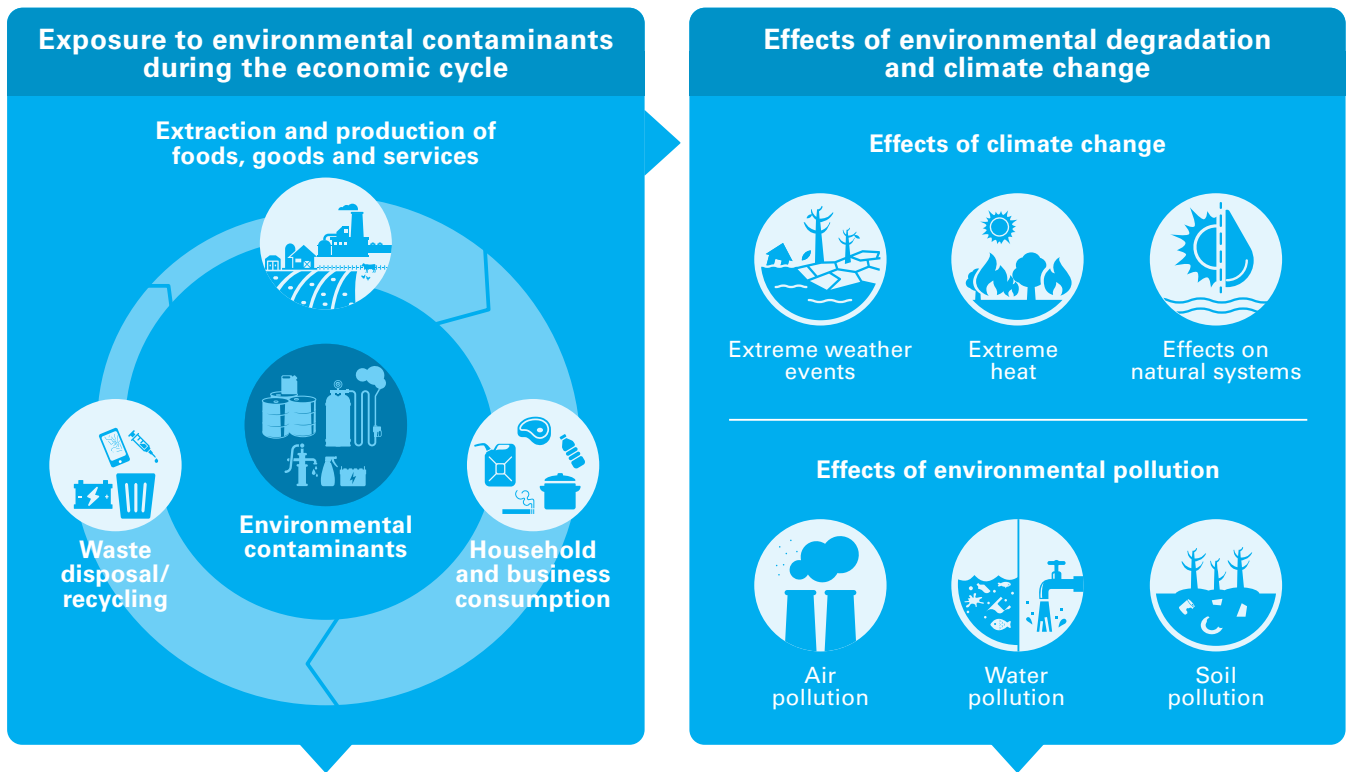
Children who live in the poorest communities and those affected by conflict are the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and our degrading environment. In fact, nearly 92 per cent of pollution-related deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries, with children being the most affected. These children are the most at-risk when climate-driven disasters strike, or because they live in slums, informal settlements or near industrial areas, or are working in toxic dumpsites and hazardous agricultural or mining operations.



Over 200 hazardous substances have been detected in umbilical cords and placentas.

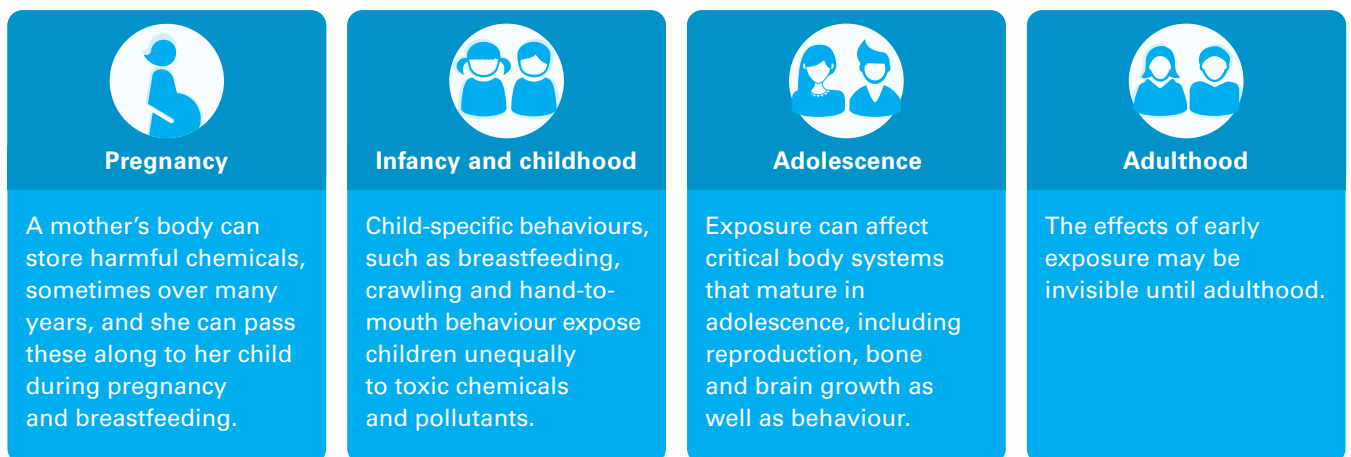


How pollution and climate change affect the health and well-being of children



Children are the least responsible, yet most vulnerable

Children are not little adults – climate change and environmental degradation can damage their growing bodies much more than those of adults. Children take in more air, water and food per kilogram of body weight than adults. As their detoxification systems are not fully formed, their bodies and organs are more vulnerable to damage from toxicants, pollutants and other environmental hazards at all stages of their lives. Children are more vulnerable to extreme weather, heat stress, infectious and vector-borne diseases caused by climate change. This is in addition to disrupted food systems, water scarcity and damaged infrastructure that children need to become healthy adults. Children in places suffering from conflict and where poverty is prevalent are most at-risk.



3

Every child has the right to a healthy environment, and we all have a role to play

While international commitments to deal with the impact of environmental degradation and climate change on children exist, tangible results have been limited. Now, the demand for urgent action on-the-ground is growing.

In October 2020, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a historic [resolution](#), emphasizing the specific need for States to protect children from environmental harm. Children themselves are also mobilizing and strengthening global efforts to protect the environment. They are increasingly realizing their right to information and to participate in decision-making. Decisive, sustained and collective action globally and nationally is needed to ensure healthy environments for children everywhere, and we all have a role to play.

At the core of the existing international framework to protect children against climate change and environmental degradation is the 2030 Agenda, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015. This Agenda clearly addresses the challenges of environmental pollution and climate change, with specific targets directly related to healthy environments. At the same time, the Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly affirms children’s right to grow in a healthy and safe environment. The Paris Agreement commits signatories to keeping global warming below 2 degrees. And numerous interrelated environmental instruments, such as the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm as well as the Minamata Conventions seek to protect human health and the environment from hazardous chemicals and wastes. Despite these numerous agreements, children face a world not on track to avoid the worst impacts of climate change alongside dangerous and unacceptable risks from a degrading environment.

Decisive action is needed: States, businesses and civil society all have a role to play

Governments

In its October 2020 resolution on realizing the rights of the child through a healthy environment, the UN Human Rights Council calls on States to take the lead in protecting children from environmental harm. Even so, much more tangible action is needed, such as adopting and enforcing national legislation and mandatory environmental standards, and



To mitigate climate change, governments and business must work together to tackle the root causes by reducing greenhouse gas emissions in line with the Paris Agreement.

UNICEF Executive Director
Henrietta H. Fore

Wealthy countries generally have better child health and development outcomes, but their historic and current greenhouse gas emissions threaten the lives of all children.

A future for the world’s children?
A WHO-UNICEF-Lancet
Commission



improving environmental monitoring so that children – both boys and girls – are properly protected. States should enhance cross-sectoral cooperation and strengthen regulatory agencies and ministries.

Specifically, States can ensure that child-specific interventions are included as part of national environmental and climate action, in particular Nationally Determined Contributions and National Adaptation Plans. Efforts to support families facing multiple health inequalities, such as poverty and malnutrition on top of pollution and climate change, should be prioritized.

States have a key role to ensure access to quality health services, monitoring exposure to environmental hazards, and environmental education that enables primary prevention. States should ensure that businesses comply with health, labour, and environmental laws and standards. It is essential that children are part of decision-making processes at all levels, so making information on hazards caused by pollutants and climate change accessible to them and their caregivers is vital.

Private sector

The business community is also making important moves to address climate change and environmental degradation, but there is still a long way to go. A first and urgent step that all businesses, large and small, can take is to ensure that they comply with relevant health, labour and environmental laws, standards and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Every business can also look at their processes and identify the risks to prevent children from being exposed to environmental harm.

Civil society

Civil society, with its unique perspectives and community networks, can boost advocacy efforts, help develop and enforce better laws and standards, support the evaluation of interventions, and reduce the gap between science, policy and action.

The UN system

As a key development partner to nations around the world, the UN system can ensure that child-specific action on healthy environments is a core part of national-level United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks. The UN system can also articulate and highlight healthy environments for healthy children in global forums.



UNICEF has co-founded the Protecting Every Child's Potential initiative to prevent children's exposure to lead



Building schools with plastic bricks in Côte d'Ivoire

4

UNICEF is elevating action on healthy environments for healthy children

Action on climate change and environmental degradation – taken for children and with them – is now a key UNICEF priority.

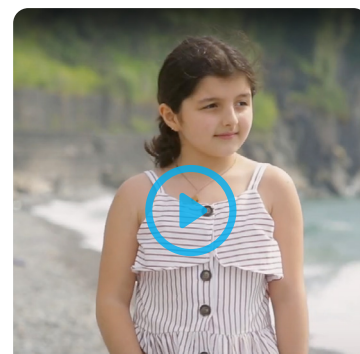
In collaboration with the UN system, UNICEF will assist governments and stakeholders to apply a child-specific lens to national health as well as environmental policies and programmes, with a focus on primary health care and prevention. At the core of this work is ensuring that children themselves are able to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes, and that they and their caregivers have access to information they need to stay safe.

A new global framework to address five categories of environmental hazards

The [Global Programme Framework – Healthy Environments for Healthy Children](#) – outlines a new ‘healthy environments’ pillar as part of UNICEF’s existing Health programme. It complements the organization’s WASH strategy, food system approach, and UNICEF’s overall policy on climate change and the environment. Recognizing the ongoing and critical work governments, UN agencies, civil society and the business community are already doing, the Framework also clearly defines how UNICEF can bring added value to national, local and community-based health programmes. Our focus is on five categories of environmental hazards. Through the existing UNICEF Health programme, we are taking action in five major areas.

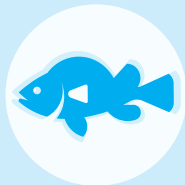


UNICEF is working to prevent children's exposure to lead and other environmental hazards in Ghana



A successful screening effort helps families deal with lead exposure in Georgia

The Framework focuses on five categories of environmental hazards



Toxic metals

Lead, mercury, cadmium, arsenic and other toxic metals impair children's healthy development. One in three children worldwide is estimated to have lead poisoning.



Toxic chemicals

A number of widely used chemicals can be damaging to the health of mothers, infants and children. These include highly hazardous pesticides, asbestos, benzene, dioxins and PCBs, excess fluoride and additional chemicals from household products.



Hazardous waste

Household and industrial waste and waste/recycling sites can expose children to a wide range of toxic chemicals and metals. Unsafe burning of e-waste and medical waste can release toxicants into the air and water of a community. Conflict-related contamination can include toxic oil fires and chemical weapons.



Environmental risks

Air pollution kills hundreds of thousands of children under 5 each year and contributes to chronic respiratory infections, lung disease, cancer and other health effects. Mould, noise and radiation are also health threats in children's communities.



Climate change

Climate change is a great threat to children's environmental health. This includes increased frequency, intensity and uncertainty of extreme weather events, extreme heat and effects on natural systems. The effects of climate change impact many aspects of our society, disease transmission, prevalence and severity, food security, trauma and mental health, and access to health and education services.

The five areas of intervention



Strengthen climate-resilience and environmental sustainability in health care facilities

Helping to solarize health facilities, increasing their resilience; while supporting the safe disposal of end-of-life equipment, alongside sustainable procurement procedures. For example, UNICEF helped solarize 61 health facilities in Syria, while in [Madagascar](#) 500 basic health-care centres and millions of children are set to benefit from new solar fridges.



Develop responsive primary health care

Incorporating children's environmental health into primary health care and essential public health functions; also engaging with community health workers and networks on key issues; and promoting multi-sectoral action with local governments. For example, in [Bangladesh](#) UNICEF and partners are promoting the use of more fuel-efficient cook stoves for the poorest households.



Embed environmental health in school programmes

Ensuring that critical issues related to environmental health are integrated in the education system to support safe school environments and climate change education. For example, in the Chinese city of Shenzhen, six park-based natural education centres have been set-up and environmental education is conducted regularly in the city's schools.



Promote climate and environmental action with children, adolescents and young people

Supporting children and adolescents to be instrumental on climate and environmental action at all levels. This involves facilitating their meaningful participation at the decision-making table, while also enabling children's access to information. The [Healthy and Environment-friendly Youth \(HEY\) Campaign](#), a youth-led action on climate change and health, is an example of this.



Mobilize collective action

Accelerating progress through advocacy and awareness strategies around policy and legislation, government capacity, data collection and monitoring, and by building partnerships. For example, in [Mongolia](#), where an alarmingly high number of children were falling ill and dying from air pollution, UNICEF and the Government teamed up to mobilize national and subnational partnerships to collectively tackle the problem.



Healthy Environments for Healthy Children



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unicef 
for every child

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A list of all references used is available in the full
[Healthy Environments for Healthy Children:
Global Programme Framework](#)



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