



Climate, Environment, Energy & Disaster Risk Reduction

Championing children and young people with disabilities in navigating the triple planetary crisis

February 2024

Every child on Earth is already impacted by the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution,¹ along with environmental degradation. The crisis is exacerbating existing inequalities.²

Notably, children, young people and adults with disabilities are disproportionately affected during and after disasters, which are becoming more frequent and destructive. The impacts can change the course of a child's life forever. During disasters:

- They are often more likely to experience stigma, discrimination and violence or be left behind, abandoned or neglected;³
- They often face barriers to accessing protection and humanitarian aid — especially when forced to flee their homes;⁴
- They and their families are more likely than others to experience negative psychosocial consequences from disasters; and
- Girls with different disabilities and children and young people with intellectual disabilities are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and violence — including sexual violence.⁵

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Despite these impacts, children and young people with disabilities can also be active agents of change. For instance, they can:

- Lead on climate change mitigation and climate change adaptation;
- Determine ways to keep themselves and their communities safe;
- Ensure early warning systems are inclusive for everyone;
- Identify paths to safety during an emergency;
- Offer guidance for accessible shelters; and
- Advocate for the rights of people with disabilities by sharing experiences and solutions with decision-makers, and at local, national, regional and international events.⁶

The needs and priorities of children and young people with disabilities are individual. They differ based on age, gender, migration and displacement experience, access to support, and other factors. When adults treat children and young people with disabilities as a homogenous group or passive victims of disasters and climate impacts, they miss the vast potential of their personal and collective capacities to drive solutions.⁷



Disability

An evolving concept resulting from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis.⁸

Children & young people with disabilities

Term for those with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which – in interaction with various barriers – may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.⁹



While some persons with disabilities use aids and devices, like a wheelchair or a cane, others may have less visible support needs. For all children with disabilities, the barriers they face increase their risk of adverse impacts from hazards, shocks and stresses and threaten their rights. A few among many include:

Stigma and discrimination

Children and young people with disabilities can face stigma (negative judgement) and discrimination (unfair treatment) driven by a myriad of factors. This can lead to a misguided view of their skills and capacities.¹⁰ Cultural or religious beliefs about disability can drive stigma and discrimination, which intersecting factors like gender or age can compound. The intersectionality can create multiple layers of exclusion and hinder the full inclusion and participation of children and young people with disabilities in disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate change adaptation (CCA) measures, and during disaster response and recovery.¹¹

Physical and environmental barriers

Barriers create vulnerabilities for children and young people with disabilities during both slow- and sudden-onset hazards. For instance:

- Slow-onset hazards (e.g. drought, environmental degradation, glacial retreat) can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and create new risks and obstacles. For example, drought can lead to power outages that endanger those relying on devices like respirators.

- The scarcity or deterioration of water sources during dry spells or disasters means children and young people with disabilities may have to overcome the extra difficulties of travelling long distances for water.
- Climate change can limit water and sanitation access as accessible infrastructure may be destroyed during drought, floods or other disasters.¹²
- During sudden-onset hazards, evacuation routes and evacuation transports may be inaccessible to certain children with disabilities, leading to delays or an inability to evacuate.
- Information and resources inaccessible to persons with hearing, visual or intellectual disabilities can impede preparedness, evacuation and response efforts.
- Humanitarian assistance after a disaster may be inaccessible due to where it is located, its physical design and how information is shared.

Poverty

Persons with disabilities are twice as likely to experience poverty as persons without disabilities. They are 30 percent more likely to be unemployed.¹³ This can lead to them being disproportionately impacted by the limited availability of food, water and livelihood assets in the face of climate change and disasters. Financial limitations can also result in inadequate or unsafe housing in high-risk areas, increasing vulnerability during disasters.

Poverty (as well as a lack of trained teachers, stigma and discrimination, and limited accessibility in schools) can prevent children with disabilities from attending school. This can lead to children with disabilities not having access to opportunities to learn about DRR and safety measures.

Impoverished areas are also more likely to be exposed to higher levels of air pollution due to their proximity to polluting sources; and women and children experience higher rates of indoor exposure to pollutants emitted by stoves and open fires.¹⁴ Poor air quality can exacerbate the health inequities children and young people with disabilities experience.

Disability Rights

Nearly 240 million children and young people have disabilities.¹⁵ Their rights are enumerated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)¹⁶ to

- Survive and develop in the best possible way;
- Be nurtured and supported through responsive care and education;
- Receive proper nutrition and social protection;
- Enjoy play and leisure time;
- Be protected from violence, abuse and neglect; and
- Give their opinions freely on issues that affect them.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) reaffirms that all persons must enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms.¹⁷



Nearly 240 million children and young people have disabilities

UNICEF's rights-based approach

UNICEF's mandate is to uphold the rights of all children, focusing on those left furthest behind. This means working to ensure that the most marginalized and vulnerable children can enjoy their rights and have a fair chance to realize their full potential, including children and young people with disabilities.

UNICEF's actions support their right to live in a safe and clean environment, to be secure and protected, and to participate in decision-making – recognizing that children with disabilities are their own best advocates in what they need to respond to the planetary crisis.¹⁹ The UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025 positions disability inclusion as one of the organization's cross-cutting priorities.¹⁹ Actions by UNICEF and its partners include to

- Support national and global planning and policymaking on inclusive climate action, DRR and resilience-building;
- Remove barriers to including children and young people with disabilities in policies, services and programmes. This includes actions on non-discrimination and universal design;²⁰
- Empower individuals with disabilities to reduce their climate and disaster risk; and
- Support actions explicitly targeted at children and young people with disabilities, such as improving access to assistive technologies (e.g., equipment or systems that enable people with disabilities to do tasks they might find hard or impossible otherwise) and relevant services. Such technologies, for example, can help before, during or after a disaster by improving access to information, mobility and services.²¹

Fanyah, aged 14 and blind, and her niece search for water during a severe, prolonged drought in her village in Madagascar. To improve opportunities to reach her full potential, Fanyah participated in a UNICEF-supported life skills course that helps young people adapt to climate change. Since the climate crisis began, UNICEF Madagascar and its partners have built sustainable water infrastructure and taken nutrition, health and social protection action, such as cash transfers to 7,850 households, which include children, young people and adults with disabilities.²²



Young people with disabilities inform child rights policy

To influence the Convention on the Rights of the Child's **General Comment no. 26 on children's rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change**, UNICEF and the International Labour Organization (ILO) hosted a consultation with 28 young people with disabilities. The consultation workshop focused specifically on paragraphs 50 and 51 of the draft general comment on non-discrimination. The young people shared the importance of adults listening to them and responding to their views and ideas, and how this contributes to feelings of safety and agency.

They also shared that information and learning environments are often not accessible (and the impact this can have) and how some have experienced intersectional discrimination in learning spaces. Due to climate change, they said certain individuals are experiencing the impacts more intensely. The young people also stated that they felt heard when policies and plans reflect the concerns of children with disabilities. Still, they emphasized that it is not enough to simply write about suggestions – action is necessary.



UNICEF spotlight: DRR guidance for children with disabilities

UNICEF Iran is developing DRR guidelines for earthquakes focused on improving the preparedness of children with disabilities, to be released in 2024. This is in collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Iran and The International Institute of Earthquake Engineering and Seismology (IIEES).

The guidelines focus on children with hearing impairment (HI), children on the Autism spectrum (ASD) and children with physical disabilities and will be expanded.

The guidelines cover each part of the disaster management cycle (mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery) and focus on disasters like earthquakes. They are being developed based on focus group discussions with 40 teachers, 60 parents and 80 students at disability-inclusive schools and meetings with rescue teams and 80 other stakeholders, including aid workers from the Iran Red Crescent Society (IRCS), teachers and staff from the Special Education Organization (SEO) affiliated with the Ministry of Education and Social Welfare organizations (SWO) and members of local non-government organizations (NGOs).

The guidelines cover a range of recommendations, including:

- The best ways to construct safe and accessible evacuation routes;

- The use of color to guide children and young people to safety; and
- The best ways to teach earthquake safety to children with ASD, HI and Physical Disability.

The guidelines for children and young people with ASD encourage using color to show escape or evacuation routes from houses or schools or the location of emergency materials. They also emphasize the importance of using smooth, firm and stable materials to construct evacuation routes to ensure everyone can use them and specify the ideal and maximum gradation of slopes to ensure accessible evacuation routes.

The guidelines are unique in separately addressing the needs of children and young people with disabilities. They encourage the use of teaching methods that are personalized to each child and young person's specific needs and learning styles, such as the use of game-based learning, infographics, poems and songs for children and young people with ASD or the use of posters and sensory games for children and young people with HI.

The guidelines also discuss how best to support children's mental health and prevent violence against them during and after a disaster. After the first release this year, UNICEF and its partners will expand the guidelines and material to include children with visual impairment.



Examples of educational infographics for determining safe and unsafe places from the Guidelines for Improving Preparedness of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) for Potential Earthquakes.

Areas for Action

Action must be taken to ensure children and young people with disabilities are included in climate, environment, energy and DRR activities and can participate in decision-making. This includes key areas for action:

Data and evidence

Data and evidence inform planning and resource allocation. Globally, however, more research is needed to better understand the impacts of the triple planetary crisis on all children, including children with disabilities, and to identify how resulting needs may differ according to disability, gender, age and other diversity factors. Climate impacts and adaptation needs and benefits are key areas requiring more disability-disaggregated data, as well as qualitative data on the lived experiences of individuals.

Humanitarian actors often have limited capacity to conduct disability-inclusive needs assessments. Thus, including the experiences and needs of children and young people with disabilities in evidence-gathering activities and findings can help them advocate, design responses and allocate resources vital for the safety and protection of children with disabilities.

Accessible and inclusive information and communication

Information and communication barriers can affect the ability of children and young people with disabilities to fully engage in prevention and mitigation measures and make informed decisions during a hazardous event, shock or stress. Thus, information should be communicated in ways that everyone understands.²³

For instance, climate change adaptation and DRR measures must be inclusive, and information must be presented using multiple and accessible formats in child-friendly language. For example, early warning systems should not rely solely on audible methods or visual or televised messages but use numerous communication means. Variations can include oral and written communication, video captions, messaging in easy read formats,²⁴ sign language interpretation and audio descriptions. First responders must be trained to communicate in multiple formats with children and young people with diverse communication needs and preferences.

Participation

Children and young people with disabilities, their households and local organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) must be engaged as key partners in DRR and climate action. This may require proactive measures to ensure that they have equal opportunities for participation, including capacity sharing and ensuring accessibility and inclusiveness of all community engagement processes.

Household preparedness

Children and young people with disabilities, as well as their family members and caregivers, need to be trained in humanitarian response as they might be among the first responders during a hazardous event.²⁵ Everyone in a household should have a personal preparedness plan for disasters. This is especially important if family members face evacuation obstacles during a disaster. In a UNDRR survey of adults with disabilities, only 16 percent of respondents had a personal preparedness plan.²⁶



Disaster mitigation and preparedness

The needs of children and young people with disabilities must be integrated into the disaster management cycle. Their input is necessary to ensure that schools, governments, national authorities and community structures develop safe and accessible evacuation routes and inclusive disaster preparedness and response processes. Preparedness plans must consider the specific risks that children and young people with disabilities may face, and potential barriers to accessing preparedness and mitigation measures and disaster response. Plans should incorporate past experiences of persons with disabilities in disasters, ensuring that learning occurs from these past experiences to ensure more inclusive preparedness and mitigation.

Response, recovery and reconstruction

Children and young people with disabilities can encounter significant barriers to evacuating or seeking safety during emergencies. Many rely on assistance, making it challenging to quickly relocate or access necessary support during emergencies. They also may have limited access to inclusive emergency information and warnings, risk reduction plans, support and shelter.²⁷ Due to the existence of various barriers, persons with

disabilities are often not equally reached nor equally benefit from humanitarian assistance and recovery efforts. Those in low- and middle-income countries may also have limited or no access to assistive technology (AT) products or the relevant services needed during and after a disaster, or only access to low-quality AT products.²⁸

Short- and long-term recovery and reconstruction should consider the experiences and impact of a crisis event on children and young people with disabilities. For example, temporary housing after a disaster needs to consider the specific needs that children and young people with disabilities might have and ensure accessibility.

Children and young people with disabilities may also need rehabilitation and other types of specific supports after a disaster event. Planners must also incorporate children's and young people's needs when building back better, as more inclusive societies have benefits for the whole population and are better for everyone. Recovery and reconstruction provide an opportunity to build more inclusive societies through support services and accessible infrastructure and communication networks.



Recommendations for a disability-inclusive approach

Policies, plans, strategies and interventions

- Integrate climate and disaster considerations into policies and programmes on disability inclusion.
 - Ensure climate and disaster policies and plans, and DRR response and recovery measures are disability-inclusive and address the specific vulnerabilities of children and young people with disabilities to reduce disproportionately negative impacts.
 - Identify and recognize the specific risks, stigma and discriminatory practices children and young people with disabilities may face in differing contexts – including physical, communication and attitudinal barriers. Account for these factors when developing disability-inclusive climate and DRR policies, impact and risk assessments.
 - Ensure policies, plans, and strategies that address slow-onset events are disability-inclusive. Slow-onset events (e.g., drought, biodiversity loss, rising sea levels, etc.) disproportionately impact children and young people, especially those with disabilities.²⁹
 - Engage with children and young people with disabilities and organizations of persons with disabilities in designing and implementing all interventions related to the planetary crisis.
- Ensure that post-disaster rebuilding and recovery are inclusive of children and young people with disabilities. This includes reflecting disability inclusion in Post Disaster Needs Assessments (PDNAs) and equipping PDNA teams to assess and address the needs and rights of persons with disabilities.
 - Involve children and adults with disabilities in all PDNA processes. Ensure meaningful participation through diverse forms of engagement, such as creating disability-specific focus groups, providing reasonable accommodations to enable participation in meetings and events, and ensuring multiple and accessible means of communication.
 - Incorporate inclusive interventions in recovery strategies that address the needs and rights of children, young people and adults with disabilities.
 - Support policies, investments and research on the transition to green economies to include children and young people with disabilities (e.g., public transit is low or zero emission, accessible and inclusive).

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Data and evidence generation

- Conduct detailed localized studies and assessments to understand the specific needs and vulnerabilities of children and young people with disabilities in the context of climate change and disasters. Use the data to inform, shape and influence policies.
- Develop data and evidence on climate change, disasters, and environmental impacts on children and young people with disabilities, with data also disaggregated by age and gender.
- Include children and young people with disabilities in child risk assessment research as participants and in measuring the impact of climate change, disaster, biodiversity loss, air pollution and environmental degradation.
- Disseminate disability-disaggregated data and evidence on disability-inclusive DRR and climate action. This ensures reliable data is available to inform inclusive actions and policies, planning, and implementation at all levels, and good practices are shared.
- Build the capacity of humanitarian actors in conducting disability-inclusive needs assessments and response planning.

Participation, awareness, skills, capacities and livelihoods

- Support the active participation of children and young people with disabilities in climate justice networks and processes.
- Improve community resilience by strengthening the capacities of children and young people with disabilities in green skills, disaster preparedness and climate action. Do so by removing any physical, communication and attitudinal barriers in training, skills-building and information services.
- Prioritize adequate access to education for all and inclusive climate change, environment and disaster education to increase learning about the triple planetary crisis, and increase understanding of rights, decision-making opportunities and capacities by children and young people with disabilities, their teachers and peers.

- Involve children and young people with disabilities in creating inclusive and accessible climate action and disaster response measures. Ensure their perspectives and knowledge are not just heard but included.
- Promote inclusive Comprehensive School Safety (CSS), an 'all-hazards, all-risks approach to protecting children and education.' The practical CSS Framework guides safer learning facilities, school safety and educational continuity management, and risk reduction and resilience education.³⁰
- Ensure disaster and climate change education curricula are locally focused and sensitive to age, disability, gender and culture.
- Remove physical, communication and attitudinal barriers in training, skills-building and information services to strengthen capacity-building programmes on climate action, disaster preparedness, biodiversity and the environment.
- Ensure the representation of all genders and persons with disabilities in initiatives to strengthen climate, environmental and disaster resilience, leadership and environmental stewardship.
- Identify and address barriers for children and young people with disabilities to enter the job market to reduce vulnerability to the effects of climate change and disasters.³¹
- Ensure that children and young people with disabilities are included in climate change, environmental degradation, biodiversity and disaster issue consultations and that these consultations are accessible.
- Ensure the transition to a low-carbon economy is just so people with disabilities can take advantage of new opportunities. This can economically empower people with disabilities and reduce their vulnerability.³²

Inclusivity and social standards

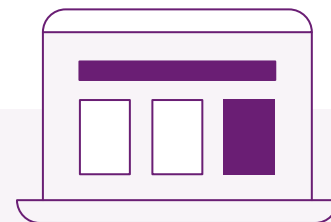
- Use 'people first language'³³ and avoid stereotypes and language that portray persons with disabilities as vulnerable or a burden on others.
- Promote an understanding of the intersecting and compounding discrimination that children and young people with disabilities can face in the context of the planetary crisis.
- Institutionalize disability-inclusive disaster risk management in local, national and regional systems to ensure that the knowledge and perspectives of persons with disabilities are always considered.
- Promote equal rights and opportunities in the labour market, particularly in green jobs.³⁴
- Identify referral mechanisms and support systems that ensure children and young people with disabilities can equally participate in actions. These include transport support, provisions of assistive devices and social security systems.
- Ensure climate-smart and resilient infrastructures, services and programmes include children and young people with disabilities, such as by improving the accessibility of climate-resilience WASH services and facilities.
- Approach efforts to become greener and more accessible as an interlinked opportunity.
- Guarantee the accessibility of all information, communication and education related to climate change, environmental degradation and disaster risk reduction.
- Train emergency workers, researchers, governments and partners on disability inclusion, such as accessible forms of communication.³⁵
- Ensure that children with disabilities and their families can access all humanitarian services, including mental health and psychosocial support, before, during and after disasters. Ensure targeted services are available, including assistive technology.

Investments

- Invest in child-responsive programmes that strengthen climate and disaster resilience and include children and young people with disabilities as active stakeholders. This includes ensuring that informative and training materials are age-, disability- and gender-responsive.
- Finance efforts that address the heightened risks that children and young people with disabilities face.
- Invest in research and disaggregated data collection that considers age, disability, gender and other essential factors such as culture, language and religion to expand opportunities for resilience and policymaking that is locally applicable.



Resources



UNICEF, [Disability-Inclusive Humanitarian Action Toolkit](#)

UNDRR, 'Children and Youth with Disabilities' from [Words into Action Guide: Engaging Children and Youth on the Frontline of Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience](#)

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Green Words – UNICEF

A document on essential words children and young people need to participate, learn, and ask questions on climate change.

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