



**WALKING INTO THE  
EYE OF THE STORM:  
HOW THE CLIMATE CRISIS IS  
DRIVING CHILD MIGRATION  
AND DISPLACEMENT**



Save the Children

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Ahmad Baroudi / Save the Children

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



*“Even last year and in 2018, a lot of houses collapsed due to heavy rains. If it rains too much, our fields will be flooded so the harvest will not be good, in which case people will be forced to find [other] solutions to feed their families. But that is not possible all the time so the [only] solution is to leave this very hostile area.”*

**Boy, 14**  
Mali

Globally, an estimated **1.2 billion children** live in an area at high risk of **flooding**, **severe drought**, or other **climate threats** that pose a serious risk to lives and livelihoods<sup>1</sup>

Each year, growing numbers of vulnerable children are **forced to flee** their home to avoid **climate-related catastrophes**, often at great risk to their safety.

Millions of other children are **trapped**, unable to leave areas that will experience repeated **climate-related disasters**, despite the potentially devastating impact this will have on their lives.

At the same time, millions more children are displaced due to **conflict**, in some cases fuelled by **climate-related factors**.

1

This estimate is based on calculations and child population estimates used in table 6.



*“The consequences are numerous: houses fall, the sheet metal canvases are blown off by the wind. I am also worried about the animals because before we could easily find grass around the village; now we go very far to look for grass for the animals and often it is in the far fields and people are afraid to leave. We see that the animals are starving and many of us are starving too.”*

**Child, 15**  
Mali

## A perfect storm for the world’s most vulnerable children

Discussions about climate change often focus on the future, but millions of children are experiencing its devastating impacts *now*. The scale of the crisis is huge, and growing fast. It is children that will bear the brunt of climate change, yet its impact on them is understudied, their voices are not being heard, and current solutions are woefully inadequate. **It is a perfect storm that we must stop in its path – before it is too late.**

This study collates the findings of more than 420 research reports exploring the relationship between climate change and child displacement and migration, and the views of 125 global, regional and national experts in these fields. Importantly, it also shares the perspectives of 239 children in Fiji, Iraq, Mali, Mozambique and Peru, who live in high-risk climate settings or have relocated due to climate change – **bringing children’s voices to the dialogue as a starting point for age-responsive policy and practice.**

This report considers children’s vulnerability to key climate threats, and how those threats are driving child displacement and migration, in six high-risk settings: low-lying coastal areas, river floodplains, drylands, mountainous areas, cyclone zones and urban areas. It also provides examples of effective governance and responses.

**Our findings about the scale and impact of climate change on children’s migration and displacement are deeply concerning** and highlight the need for immediate global action that is informed, integrated, inclusive and sustainable.

## Climate change is *already* driving migration and displacement

Climate change is often seen as a ‘multiplier’ – something that increases the likelihood of displacement and migration but is not the main factor. However, our research shows that climate change is **directly driving migration and displacement**, through more intense, extreme weather events such as floods, cyclones and wildfires that disrupt services, damage infrastructure and destroy livelihoods. **Many of the children we interviewed described their decision to migrate as a matter of survival.** This is not something that ‘might’ happen in the future – it is happening right now. Over the last decade, displacements due to extreme weather have risen steadily, and become more recurrent and protracted. In 2020 alone, they caused 30 million people (including around 10 million children) to be displaced within their country – three times more than the number of people newly displaced by conflict and violence that year.

## Extreme weather events get headlines – but don’t under-estimate slow-onset change

Much focus is directed towards extreme weather events – because they can wreak havoc on the lives of children but we mustn’t overlook slow onset crises. Climate change also **contributes to migration**, through slow-onset processes such as drought, extreme temperatures, rising sea levels, and salinisation of agricultural land. Such events can prompt the decision to move, even if they are not the only factor.

The impact of slow-onset climate change is rarely captured in migration and displacement data, but it should not be under-estimated. For example, twice as many people were affected by slow-onset droughts than sudden storms in 2020 (EM-DAT). Slow-onset climate change is likely to become an increasingly important factor in future displacements and is already playing a significant role in some contexts. Migration triggered by slow-onset climate changes is also becoming increasingly permanent.

## High-risk settings



Low-lying coastal areas



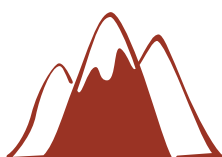
River floodplains



Drylands



Cyclone, hurricane and typhoon zones



Mountainous areas



Urban areas



### Born into the Climate Crisis

As part of Save the Children's increased focus on how the Climate Crisis affects children, we recently released a global flagship report quantifying the risk children born in 2020 face due to the climate crisis, looking at a range of issues in addition to climate driven migration and displacement.

*Born into the Climate Crisis* shows that the climate crisis is fundamentally reshaping our world, with grave implications for the rights of current and future generations of children.

The report highlights that under the original Paris Agreement emission reduction pledges, a child born in 2020 will experience on average **twice as many wildfires, 2.8 times the exposure to crop failure, 2.6 times as many drought events, 2.8 times as many river floods, and 6.8 times more heatwaves across their lifetimes**, compared to a person born in 1960. The *Walking into the Eye of the Storm* and *Born into the Climate Crisis* reports collectively provide a stark reminder of the challenge ahead – and why urgent action is required **now**.

## Children are inherently more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change

Children are poised to flee more wildfires, face food shortages as a result of crop failure, experience increasing floods, and brace for rolling, relentless heatwaves around the world compared to their elders<sup>2</sup>.

Our study underscored existing findings that children are **more likely to be physically affected** by climate-related events than adults – because anatomically, immunologically, physiologically and metabolically, they are more vulnerable. They are more sensitive to malnutrition arising from climate-induced food insecurity, and to infections and water-borne diseases that can increase due to climate-related water impacts such as scarcity; they are less able than adults to regulate their body temperature, so more vulnerable to extreme heat; and more likely to suffer from asthma and respiratory conditions, which are increasing as a result of more dust storms and rising temperatures.

The children we interviewed nearly all identified climate change as a **critical issue for their generation** and a key driver in decisions to move or migrate, with or without their parents' consent. As many as 300,000 children migrated alone or without their families in 2017, which is five times more than in 2012.

Being on the move can also **significantly harm a child's mental health**, particularly if they have experienced an extreme event or become separated from their family. They are also at **greater risk of violence** as well as child marriage, child labour, trafficking, begging, prostitution or joining armed militias.

However, there is no one size fits all solution. Policy makers must understand that the context is nuanced. In some cases, despite the risks of leaving home, migration is the preferred or possibly the **only** option to ensure that the best interests of the child are met. This study reveals that while climate change is clearly driving **increased** migration and displacement, there are also rare examples where it is **preventing** families from moving, even when migration is the most appropriate response.

<sup>2</sup>  
Save the Children (2021)  
*Born into The Climate Crisis*



Sacha Myers / Save the Children



*“Life hasn’t improved much [since moving to the city]. I have accepted. Sometimes I go without the things I need like food or stationery.”*

**Boy, 17**  
Fiji

*“We miss our parents, and in some cases, they send us to the people who will take care of us and not to school, and we must work for them.”*

**Adolescent, 14–17**  
Peru

Some of the children interviewed mention that **climate risks increased their poverty levels, making it harder for them to cope with shocks, denying them the financial resources to move, and leaving them “trapped”** in high climate risk locations. Some children were skipping meals, not attending school, engaging in child labour, child marriage, street begging, or resorting to sex work.

A more sophisticated analysis and understanding of the drivers of migration is essential, together with more integration of migration thinking into climate planning and vice versa. Save the Children’s research shows that when a child feels safe and feels their aspirations are likely to be met locally, they are less inclined to migrate. In the context of climate change, children continuously weigh up the risks of migrating versus the risks of staying and being exposed to climate threats. The point at which migration becomes the best-case alternative is determined by the local context and individual circumstances (e.g. severity/immediacy of the climate risk, the need to find better livelihood opportunities, to escape violence or have better access to services).

**We are failing to sufficiently integrate migration thinking into climate planning and vice versa.**

A lack of disaggregated data on gender, disability, age or other socio-economic factors limits the sector’s ability to respond effectively to children who have migrated or been displaced by climate change. Our study reveals that climate change drives migration and displacement in much the same way for boys and girls. But, children are not a homogenous group. Gender, age, disability, race, sexual orientation, income, age, and other socioeconomic factors shape a child’s vulnerability. Children impacted by inequality and discrimination are more likely to experience the impacts of climate change most acutely. Investing in better data and analysis is a pivotal step in developing more effective and durable responses, and must be prioritised.

## Risky migration to urban centres

Rural to urban migration is not a new phenomenon. However, it is clear that children are increasingly migrating **from rural areas to urban centres** to avoid **climate threats** and to find employment, often travelling alone and undertaking casual work in return for shelter and other essentials, which leaves them vulnerable to exploitation. Once at their destination, many migrant children live in unsafe, informal settlements, where access to services may be limited.

Worryingly, this migratory journey is often a case of ‘out of the frying pan, into the fire’. The cities, urban centres and other locations that children typically migrate to are often just as hazardous as the places they have left, if not more so – often densely populated and located in low-lying coastal areas or on river floodplains.



*“The changes in weather affect me very much. Access to food is a problem. The plantation is ruined because of flooding and drought. We all go out to work then to replant our crops. The water flooding [from the sea] ruins our drinking water sources. The cyclone causes our school to close down.”*

**Girl, 16**  
Fiji

*“Some children live right on the coast. It’s dangerous, but they won’t leave because that’s their land.”*

**Girl, 14**  
Fiji

*“None of the stakeholders are supporting children’s sustainability after displacement. Before and during mobility, there is much, but after there are gaps. We have to look into funding children’s mobility projects sustainably.”*

**Save the Children**  
Senegal

Many of the child migrants we consulted for this study told us that they resorted to child labour, begging, prostitution, crime, or joining armed groups in order to cope in their new location – and they also highlighted the **negative impacts of displacement on their host communities**, such as overcrowded schools and a rise in informal settlements.

## Loss of cultural identity and increasing intergenerational tensions

In addition to the risks they face in their new location, children and families who are displaced or migrate as a result of climate change may also **experience a profound loss of cultural identity as a result of leaving their homeland**, as well as conflict over land and shared resources in their new location, and lack of access to services. The link between home and cultural identity can be so strong that some parents or grandparents may choose, despite the possible danger, to stay in high climate-risk locations because of their ancestral ties and deep sense of cultural obligation to the land – leaving children to move alone, weakening their cultural identity and increasing intergenerational tensions.

## Lack of global and national regulations that provide protection for displaced children

**Climate-related child migration and displacement does not attract the funding or attention it deserves.** Although there is an emerging focus on the link between climate change and displacement, it remains largely ‘child-blind’ with a notable gap in research and analysis focused on children. Yet, as we mention above, it is children that will bear the brunt of climate change.

There are currently no global policy frameworks that comprehensively address the needs and rights of people who are displaced by climate change, let alone the specific needs of children. Yet, just as the 1951 Refugee Convention provides protection for refugees, there is an opportunity to develop a regulatory framework for climate related displaced populations. Or alternatively, we must ensure that existing global norms and standards are sufficiently agile and robust to effectively respond to/encompass such emerging challenges.

There is emerging good practice in some regions and in countries including Fiji, where an inclusive planning framework has been developed for climate-related government-led relocations. However, **most national policies on displacement do not consider climate-related events to be a trigger for displacement**, so do not offer guidance on child migration that results from climate change. What is more, **the voices of children are largely absent from national policies on migration, displacement and climate.** This needs to change.

## A need for sustainable solutions

Government responses to climate-related displacement tend to focus on disaster preparation before sudden weather events, incentivising young people to stay in rural areas (even if there is a slow-onset climate risk), and returning children and families to their home after disasters, rather than supporting them to move and adapt to climate change. Government relocation of entire communities following coastal erosion, mudslides or flooding is also occurring in some countries. Children and their families often move to areas that are equally high-risk, and get little support to build their resilience and integrate in their destinations. **It is clear that many current responses to climate-related migration and displacement are not sustainable or fit for purpose – and with the scale of the crisis growing, urgent action is needed before it is too late.**

## Summary of our recommendations

### Programming

**We are failing to sufficiently integrate migration thinking into climate planning and vice versa.** For optimum integration, programmes should be designed and implemented with both climate and migration expertise. All programme implementers and designers should adopt a set of key principles and guidelines to ensure that programming is integrated, inclusive, informed, coordinated and sustainable.

#### Programme implementers and designers focused on the Climate Crisis should:

- **Adopt a ‘hotspots’ approach** that focuses not just on a country or regional approach but on high climate-risk settings and supports the most vulnerable and at-risk children and families to prepare for displacement or migration.
- **Incorporate climate expertise and associated risks into child migration and displacement programming** (e.g. linking mobility with climate change) rather than addressing them in isolation, to ensure coherent decision-making and service provision for children founded on long-term scenario planning.
- **Design and deliver tailored, child-focused programmes** (e.g. access to different financial services, landscape regeneration) that meets the specific needs of girls, boys, children with disabilities, and children of different ages, ethnicities and religions, as well as children of diverse genders and sexual orientation, at all stages of climate-related displacement planning and action, particularly child-centred adaptation.



*“I would like to help. I could offer information [about migrating to the city], and also share my experiences [as a migrant], my challenges and how I overcame these.”*

**Boy, 17**  
Fiji



Sachia Myers / Save the Children

#### Programme implementers and designers focused on migration and displacement should:

- **Develop long-term, child focused durable solutions<sup>3</sup>** that can adapt to changing mobility patterns, growing numbers of protracted, permanent and repeated displacements, and an increasing number of government relocations.
- **Provide continued support throughout the migration journey** with a focus on high climate risk places of origins as well as destinations, notably urban and peri-urban areas in low-lying coastal areas, on steep slopes, or on river floodplains.
- **Prepare for proactive, planned and child-responsive movement** (e.g. timely relocation of communities downstream of glacial lakes) within national responses to climate-related migration and displacement, not just reactive support for unplanned displacement.
- **Prioritise holistic support before, during, and after climate-related migration and displacement**, which supports for a child’s protection, their continued education, and psychosocial support.

<sup>3</sup> Save the Children has developed the [Durable Solutions for Children Toolkit](#), as an important step in ensuring that children are at the heart of future responses and solutions to displacement.

## Research

### The humanitarian-development sector should:

- **Continue to amplify the voices of children** at risk of or affected by climate-related displacement.
- **Build on its predictive analytics expertise to carry out long-term scenario planning** for child migration and displacement in high-risk climate settings alongside responses for improved early or anticipatory action.
- **Establish partnerships with migration and displacement specialists and national governments** to advance the collection and sharing of disaggregated data on climate-related child migration and displacement.
- **Research the influence of technology on climate-related migration and displacement** through distribution of information such as cyclone warnings that shape decisions to move, and resources that can mitigate the impacts of moving.
- **Build a database of good practice responses** to climate-related child displacement in high-risk settings.



*“To stay in the community and face climate change head on, we need to be informed more about climate change and teach other adolescent children environmental education, to teach their parents. At school, they should teach us that trees should not be cut down – and yet trees are cut down and not replaced.”*

**Adolescent, 12–16**  
Peru

*“Response is very reactive with little planning and almost no investment in the implementation phase.”*

**Universidade Eduardo Mondlane (UEM)**  
Mozambique

<sup>4</sup> More detailed advocacy messages for governments, donors, the private sector and multilateral agencies can be found in our new climate advocacy report [Born into The Climate Crisis](#)

## Policy and Governance

### Governments should:

- **Protect the rights and needs of children affected by climate-related migration and displacement** by ensuring that legislation, policies, strategies, and plans holistically address climate change, mobility, humanitarian and development needs; promote migration and displacement as a positive adaptation strategy; and close the gap between policy and implementation.
- **Increase climate finance to mobilise at least \$100 billion annually**, including adaptation, resilience of communities to the slow-onset impacts of climate change and sudden shocks that specifically benefit the children most affected by inequalities and discrimination.
- **Create a new climate finance mechanism** to address loss and damage by 2023.
- **Scale up government social protection systems** (e.g. cash-plus approaches) to address the impacts of climate shocks on children and their families, with the ambition to move to universal child benefits to improve child well-being, reduce poverty and build resilience.

### The humanitarian-development sector should<sup>4</sup>:

- **Strengthen its technical and financial capacity** to deliver strategic, flexible, sustainable, integrated and holistic approaches to climate-related child migration and displacement in multiple high-risk settings.
- **Develop policies and governance processes that enable capacity development and access to flexible climate finance** to address the underlying root causes that lead children to be disproportionately impacted by climate-related migration and displacement in an uncertain context.
- **Strengthen coordination, collaboration and knowledge sharing across sectors and countries** to break down silos and address climate-related child migration and displacement holistically.
- **Leverage global, regional and national advocacy opportunities** including COP26, the 1.5°C campaign and national and regional forums, to champion the rights and support the political agency of children affected by climate-related displacement.
- **Advocate with donors and governments** to ensure that the needs and rights of children affected by climate-related displacement are addressed through policies, planning and programming, and that there is sustained and flexible funding for long-term, durable solutions.
- **Establish forums for children** to share their experiences of climate-related displacement, support each other, and contribute to decision-making and planning processes.
- **Support children to challenge existing narratives** around climate-related displacement.