

The global climate crisis is a child nutrition crisis

UNICEF Agenda
for Child Nutrition
and Climate Action

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for every child



Nutritious diets and sustainable food systems have the potential to nourish children and nurture child and planetary wellbeing. Yet, in many parts of the world, poor diets and unsustainable food systems are driving child malnutrition, environmental degradation, and climate change. At the same time, the climate crisis is slowing, and at times reverting, global progress on ending child malnutrition.

Guided by the UNICEF Nutrition Strategy 2030, UNICEF commits to a five-point agenda to position child nutrition within climate action. This agenda and its actions will contribute to preventing child malnutrition in populations affected by the climate crisis and mitigating climate change by improving children's access to nutritious and sustainable diets, essential nutrition and care services, and healthy food environments and food and nutrition practices.

Further, UNICEF will engage children and youth as advocates for nutrition and climate justice in their communities, nationally and globally.

The climate crisis is a nutrition crisis

The UNICEF Children's Climate Risk Index reveals that 1 billion children are at 'extremely high risk' of the impacts of climate change, making climate change one of the greatest threats facing the world's children.

The world's food systems contribute to **one third of the greenhouse gas emissions globally**. This is partly because of agriculture, including industrial meat production, but also due to the carbon impacts of processing, packaging and transporting food.

Ultra-processed foods are linked to more biodiversity loss, greenhouse gasses and plastic pollution than other food groups. They often contain ingredients – such as meat, palm and soy oils – that have substantial negative environmental effects, including deforestation and the heavy use of fertilizers, pesticides and water.

Across the globe, the massive growth in the production and marketing of cheap, nutrient-poor, ultra-processed foods is becoming one of the greatest threats to child nutrition. These foods are low in essential nutrients and high in sugar, trans-fats and salt, and displace more nutritious foods from the diets of children.

Meanwhile, climate shocks (e.g., extreme heat, droughts and floods), loss of biodiversity, and damage to water, air and soil have dramatically lowered the quantity, diversity and quality of food available to children and families, increasing food insecurity and nutrition poverty among vulnerable children, household and populations. Climate change also negatively impacts child feeding and care practices, such as by diverting women's labour allocation away from child care. And rising global temperatures are disrupting access to clean and safe water, exposing children to life-threatening childhood diseases that impact nutrition, including diarrhoea and respiratory infections.

Currently, an estimated 200 million children under 5 are living in severe food poverty, 148 million suffer from stunted growth and development and 45 million suffer from wasting, the more life-threatening form of child malnutrition. A disproportionate number of these children live in countries at high risk of climate shocks.

The **bi-directional relationship between child nutrition and climate change** provides the opportunity to prevent child malnutrition while contributing to climate change mitigation through programming that enables children, adolescents and women to access nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable diets, essential nutrition and care services, and healthy food environments and food and nutrition practices.

UNICEF Agenda for Child Nutrition and Climate Action

UNICEF supports national governments and partners in over 130 countries to uphold the rights of children, adolescents and women to food and nutrition. UNICEF has a larger global nutrition workforce than any other international organization, including in settings that are most impacted by climate change.

Guided by the **UNICEF Nutrition Strategy 2030**, UNICEF works with national governments and partners to build climate resilience by improving children's access to nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable diets, essential nutrition and care services, and healthy food environments and food and nutrition practices. UNICEF also works to support children and young people to become nutrition and climate champions and to amplify their voices in national and global decision making.

In addition, UNICEF's global and regional emergency and supply teams – combined with its considerable in-country presence and organizational mechanisms to rapidly deploy staff, supplies and funds where needed – help to ensure an effective and swift response for children affected by climate-related disasters.

UNICEF commits to a five-point agenda to position child nutrition within climate action. This agenda and its actions leverages the policies, actors and resources of the systems relevant to the nutrition of children, adolescents and women, in development, fragile and humanitarian settings.

1. Response. Protect the nutrition rights of children affected by climate shocks

UNICEF supports national governments and partners to prevent all forms of malnutrition before, during and after extreme climate shocks, and to scale up the early detection and treatment of children with wasting when needed. UNICEF's actions are guided by UNICEF's **Core Commitments to Children in Humanitarian Action** and UNICEF's commitments as Cluster Lead Agency for Nutrition:

- Identify climate change risks, vulnerabilities and capacities to inform nutrition preparedness and response plans to climate shocks.
- Support the delivery of essential nutrition services for early prevention, detection and treatment of malnutrition, and act as the provider of last resort when systems fail or are insufficient
- Strengthen the coordination and monitoring of the nutrition response to climate shocks, within and across sectors, and among partners to ensure that no child is left behind.
- Build back better through the development of climate shock-responsive nutrition policies, programmes and systems, supported by lessons learned and knowledge.

2. Adaptation. Prevent child malnutrition amidst a worsening climate crisis

Climate-adaptive nutrition programmes can build the resilience of systems, communities and families to deliver nutritious and safe diets, essential nutrition services and optimal nutrition practices for children. UNICEF will minimize the impact of climate change on child nutrition through four key actions:

- Protect children's diets through actions in public policy, standards and food supply chains – including therapeutic foods, fortified foods, food supplements, healthy and safe food environments and nutrition-responsive social protection programmes.
- Support essential nutrition services to prevent malnutrition, including support for breastfeeding, complementary feeding, micronutrient supplementation and maternal nutrition during pregnancy and breastfeeding.
- Improve children's nutrition and care practices through programmes that promote positive individual behaviours, caregiver practices and social and gender norms.
- Integrate systematically the early detection and treatment of children with wasting into routine programmes and services and humanitarian preparedness and response plans.

3. Mitigation. Ensure food environments protect children's right to nutrition and a liveable planet

Dietary practices established in early life persist, and so it is crucial that children follow diet trajectories that support human and planetary health. Food environments can promote nutrition and mitigate climate change by making sustainable, low-carbon, nutritious diets available and affordable in places where children eat, learn and meet. UNICEF's mitigation actions are to:

- Protect, promote and support breastfeeding to safeguard child nutrition and reduce greenhouse gas emissions caused by the production of commercial milk formula.
- Strengthen public sector policies, fiscal measures and programmes that improve children's access to sustainable, low-carbon diets that are nutritious, safe and affordable.
- Develop standards and services that improve the availability of sustainable, low-carbon diets that are nutritious, safe, and affordable in and around schools, including fortified foods.
- Enact policies that protect children from harmful marketing and misleading labeling of ultra-processed foods that are harmful for child nutrition and human and planetary health.

4. Transformation. Build a global generation of youth champions for nutrition and climate justice

Food poverty and nutrition justice are central to the narrative of young climate champions. These advocates understand the impact of unsustainable food production and consumption on human nutrition, environmental degradation and the climate crisis, and are witnessing how droughts and floods impact children's right to food and nutrition in many parts of the planet. UNICEF intends to build the agency of children and young people and support them to call for the following actions:

- Invest to improve access to nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable foods for every child – especially for the most marginalized.
- Regulate misleading marketing and nutrition and well-being claims on "junk" ultra-processed foods and beverages that are harmful for child nutrition and human and planetary health.
- Educate children and young people about food, climate change, food poverty, food justice and nutrition.
- Engage children and youth, providing them with opportunities to advocate for climate justice, participate in developing solutions, and take action in their communities, nationally and globally.

5. Measurement. Measure and track child nutrition, programme results and climate expenditure

Data and information on the nutritional status of children and children's access to diets, services and practices to prevent and treat malnutrition is vital to inform nutrition actions before, during and after climate shocks. In the context of a worsening global climate crisis, it is crucial to track the extent to which financing and expenditures on child nutrition are responsive to climate shocks, and the impact of climate financing on protecting and improving child nutrition. UNICEF will:

- Strengthen global, regional and national information systems for evidence-based and timely decisions on climate responsive actions for maternal and child nutrition, in development, fragile and humanitarian contexts.
- Develop methods to assess the number of children, adolescents and women reached with climate-smart nutrition services to prevent and treat malnutrition.
- Establish monitoring systems to measure climate expenditures, both within UNICEF and in support of governments, to tag financing related to climate and nutrition.
- Use data and information on child nutrition and programme results in the context of climate shocks and climate expenditures to inform policies, strategies, programmes and advocacy.

This Agenda for Child Nutrition and Climate Action will contribute to preventing child malnutrition in populations affected by the climate crisis and mitigating climate change by improving children's access to nutritious and sustainable diets, essential nutrition and care services, and healthy food environments and food and nutrition practices.



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December 2023

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Published by:
UNICEF
Nutrition and Child Development Section, Programme Group
3 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017, USA

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Website: www.unicef.org/nutrition

Photography: Cover: © UNICEF/UN0184747/Tremeau; page 5: © UNICEF/UN0311097/Verweij