



**END CHILD
POVERTY**
GLOBAL COALITION



A DISPROPORTIONATE BURDEN: CHILDREN IN POVERTY BEARING THE BRUNT OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Executive Summary¹

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1 The paper draws upon a range of global literature on the topic - please refer to the full report for a full list of sources.

2



The climate crisis is already threatening children's rights and well-being here and now, including jeopardizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of ending extreme child poverty and reducing multidimensional child poverty by at least half by 2030.

The nexus between climate change and child poverty is increasingly evident: it is impossible to tackle climate change without considering child poverty, and vice versa. Children are more vulnerable than adults to climate shocks, as even short periods of poverty and deprivation caused by climate shocks in childhood can have lifelong consequences.

How do we define child poverty?

For this analysis, child poverty is defined as multidimensional - capturing material deprivations in child rights to education, health, nutrition, housing, water, and sanitation. A child is considered multidimensionally poor if she/he is severely deprived in at least one of these dimensions.

Throughout, the term child poverty is used to capture the above.

In addition, the climate crisis is a social justice issue. Countries home to half of the population living in extreme poverty contribute only 3 per cent of global emissions.² Moreover, children are disproportionately affected by poverty: they are twice as likely as adults to be living in poverty, both extreme poverty and multidimensional poverty.³ Children born today also face much higher climate risks than previous generations. The

climate crisis is hence an intergenerational justice issue with extremely serious implications for *equity* between current and future generations.

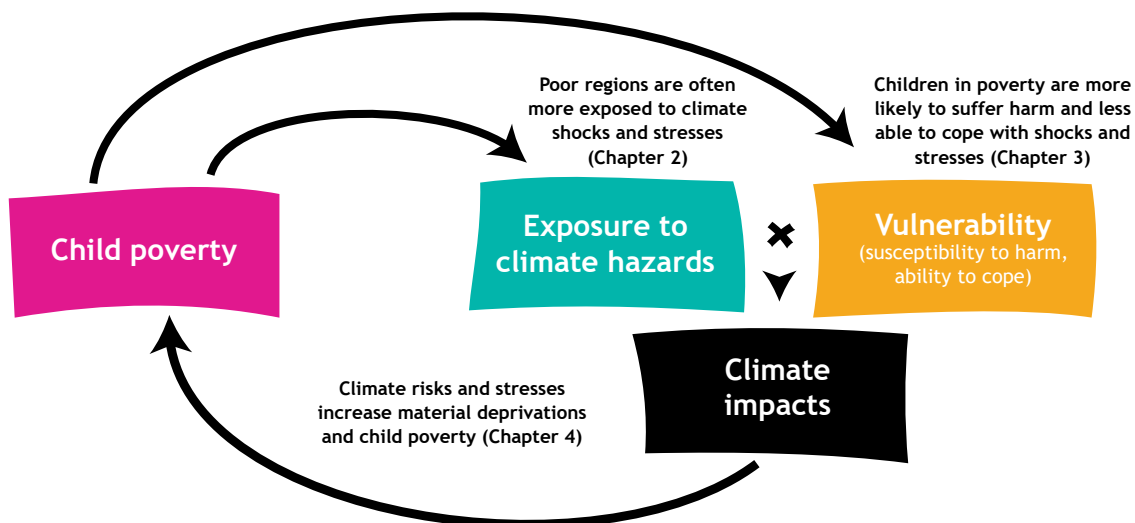
However, the relationship between climate and child poverty is complex and circular: climate shocks increase poverty, while poverty, in turn, heightens vulnerability to climate shocks (see Figure 1). Children and their families living in poverty are more likely to suffer harm once a climate shock hits and have fewer coping mechanisms. The impacts of climate shocks can be direct - for instance physical damage to homes, destruction of household livelihoods and disruption of water or energy supplies - or indirect, for instance causing households to reduce spending on education, healthcare and food. This inevitably affects long-term development outcomes and human capital. In addition, climate shocks can lead to massive displacement, where migrant children are more vulnerable to poverty and deprivation.

Further, the direct and indirect impacts of climate risks on children already living in poverty or vulnerable to poverty are various. For example, climate shocks can hinder children and their families already living in poverty from escaping it, may push those already in poverty further into the depths of poverty (including increasing their likelihood of being multidimensionally poor across multiple indicators of poverty), or cause non-poor children and their families to fall into poverty due to climate shocks.

2 Gerszon Mahler at al. (2023): <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/illustrating-gap-between-global-extreme-poor-and-global-emissions>

3 United Nations Development Programme (2023): <https://hdr.undp.org/content/2023-global-multidimensional-poverty-index-mpi>; World Bank Group (2023): <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099835007242399476/pdf/IDU0965118d1098b8048870ac0e0cb5aeb049f98.pdf>

Figure 1: Child poverty is both a driver of vulnerability as well as the result of overall climate risk



This report tries to answer the following questions:

1. Are children living in poverty **more exposed** to climate shocks?
2. Are children living in poverty **more vulnerable** to the impacts of climate shocks?
3. Do climate shocks **increase child poverty**?
4. What **policies and programmes** can address the impacts of climate shocks on children and their families living in poverty or those vulnerable to poverty?

How do we define sub-national administrative levels?

The analysis focuses on the link between child poverty and climate risks at the first administrative/sub-national level, one level below national level. There are various terms used for this level depending on country, for example region, province, county, parish, district, municipality, state, department etc.

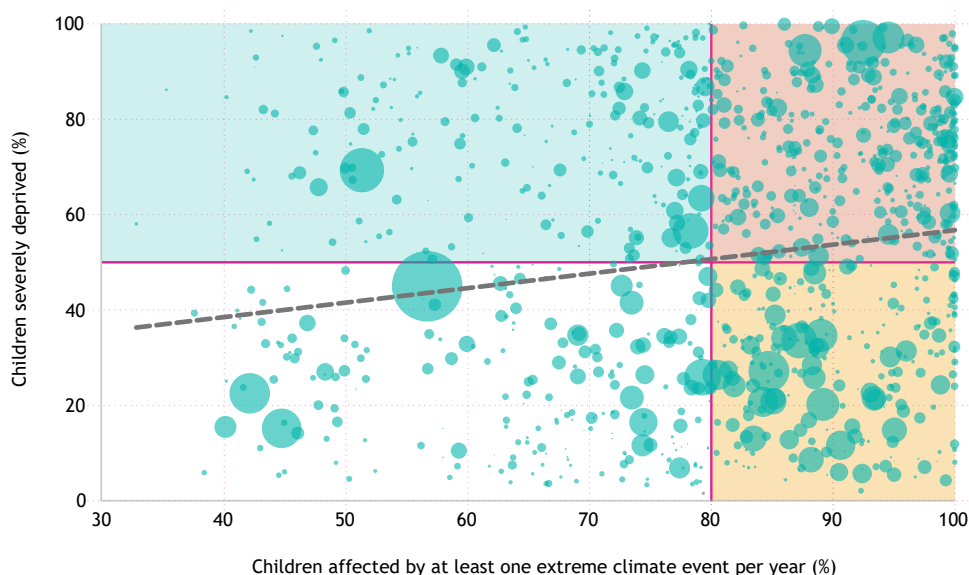
In this analysis, the term 'province' is used to cover the various terms for first administrative levels.

1. ARE CHILDREN LIVING IN MULTIDIMENSIONAL POVERTY MORE EXPOSED TO CLIMATE SHOCKS?

The analysis of consolidated data from 83 low- and middle-income countries⁴ shows that provinces with high concentration of children living in multidimensional poverty are slightly more exposed to higher climate risks, where 6 out of 10 children already

living in multidimensional poverty are expected to experience at least one climate risk a year, and 3 out of 10 children live in provinces with very high climate risks and a high concentration of children living in multidimensional poverty (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: 3 out of 10 children live in provinces with above-average child poverty and exposure to extreme climate events (red area)



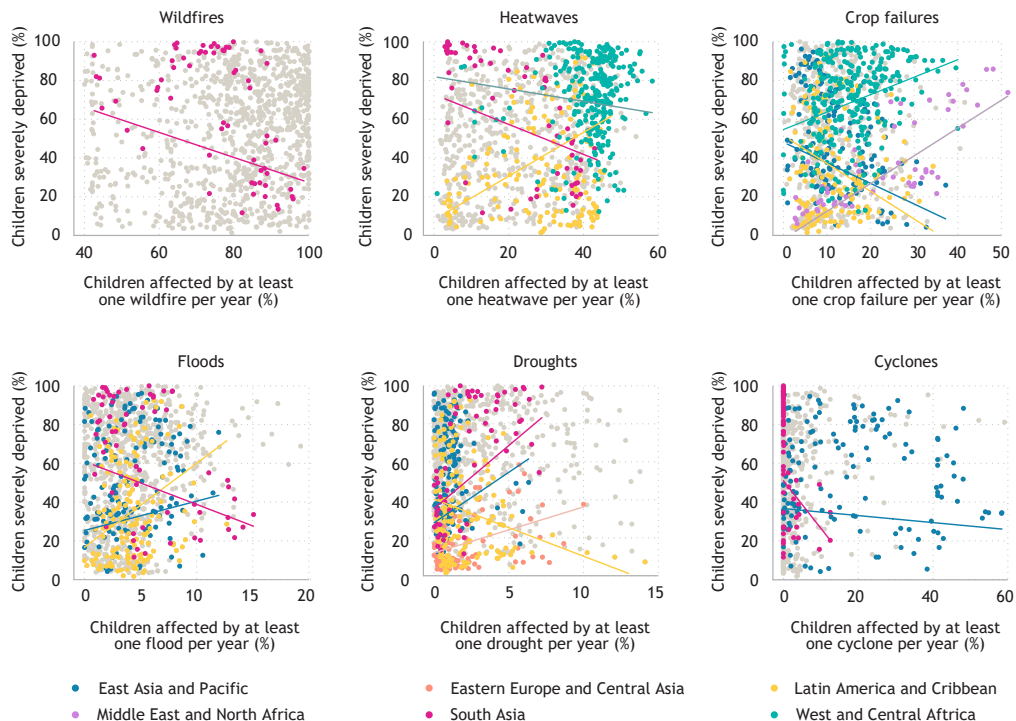
Pink lines show the approximate average for child poverty and exposure to extreme climate events. Each circle represents one subnational region (larger circles representing regions with a larger child population). Data for child poverty from UNICEF/Save the Children based on DHS and MICS household surveys for 2011 and later. Data on risks of extreme weather events based on Thiery et al. (2021) and Save the Children (2022).

4 For more information on the methodology, please refer to the full report.

The relationship between climate risks and child poverty varies greatly by **types of risks and regions**:

- **Wildfires:** This is the most common climate risk, affecting poor and better off provinces alike, although in South Asia, wildfires are more prevalent in less-poor provinces.
- **Heatwaves:** There is not a strong link between levels of multidimensional child poverty and heatwaves, however in Latin America and the Caribbean, provinces with a high concentration of multidimensional child poverty are more at risk of heatwaves, while the opposite is true in South Asia as well as West and Central Africa.
- **Crop failures:** In the Middle East and North Africa, as well as West and Central Africa, children in provinces with high levels of multidimensional child poverty are at significantly higher risk of crop failures compared to non-poor provinces.
- **Floods:** In both East Asia and the Pacific, as well as Latin America and the Caribbean, children in provinces with high levels of multidimensional child poverty are at significantly higher risks of floods than non-poor provinces.
- **Droughts:** While drought risk increases with the level of multidimensional child poverty in South Asia, East Asia and Pacific, as well as in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the opposite is found in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Figure 3: The link between climate exposure and poverty differs across contexts and climate risks



- **Cyclones:** As these are more geographically focused on certain regions in the world, most notably East Asia and Pacific, South Asia and South-East Africa. The analysis found that poorer provinces in both South Asia as well as East Asia and the Pacific are less exposed to higher risk of cyclones.

In short, the pathways between climate shocks and multidimensional child poverty vary significantly based on regional and climate risk contexts. Many provinces with high rates of multidimensional child poverty are particularly vulnerable to climate risks, but this is not always the case, and it is imperative to understand these nuances at national and sub-national levels.

Additionally, although it is a major step forward to go beyond national levels to analyse the association between climate risks and child poverty, sub-national levels may not be granular enough in many country contexts. For example, our analysis explored the relationship between climate risks and child poverty at a micro-level in Sub-Saharan Africa and found a significant and strong link between children experiencing at least one extreme climate event and living in multidimensional poverty. This was particularly true for crop failures and droughts. Hence, where possible, going to the lowest possible sub-national level to understand the associations between child poverty and climate risks may be necessary to inform policies and programmes.

2. ARE CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY MORE VULNERABLE TO THE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE SHOCKS?

According to global literature, children living in poverty are particularly vulnerable to climate shocks, including children living in monetary poor households. They are less able to cope with shocks, for example with the impact of rising food prices in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. They may also live in households with limited access to social protection which reduces their capacities to respond to and recover from shocks.

Analyzing sub-national data from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) from 30 low- and middle-income countries, findings showed that 4 out of 10 children in those countries live in a household that received social transfers in the last three months. However, children living in high climate risk environments do not have higher social protection coverage (i.e. receive more social

transfers) than children less likely to face extreme climate risks.

Additionally, children living in poverty are more likely to reside in households which are dependent on income from agriculture, which renders them vulnerable to climate shocks. They may also live in lower quality housing, in food-insecure households, have access lower quality public services, and rely on fragile infrastructure more prone to disruptions, for example sub-par water and sanitation systems, again rendering them more vulnerable to the impacts of climate shocks.

Focusing on health deprivations and using data for eight countries, our analysis demonstrated that, in 6 out of 8 countries, provinces facing higher risks of extreme weather events averaged lower service

readiness scores for child health, i.e. they are less able to provide quality health services for children living in those provinces.

Further, exploring vulnerability to climate risks by focusing on household specific characteristics for two countries, Ghana and South Africa, revealed that more than 80 per cent of children in both countries live in a household with at least one child under the age of 10 years, which is considered an indicator of climate vulnerability. Other

significant indicators for both Ghana and South Africa were access to unimproved sanitation facilities (61 per cent and 31 per cent, respectively) and food insecurity (43 per cent and 37 per cent, respectively), all which have been shown to be indicators of vulnerability to the impacts of climate shocks.

In short, although there are nuances, **living in poverty in childhood increases children's exposure and vulnerability to extreme weather events.**

3. DO CLIMATE SHOCKS INCREASE CHILD POVERTY?

Individual dimensions of deprivation

Climate shocks impact, directly and indirectly, deprivations across individual child rights dimensions, including in education, health, nutrition, housing, water and sanitation. By reviewing the global literature, our analysis found that climate risks impact on children across all these dimensions:

- **Education:** Climate-related shocks impact children's learning and access to education, resulting in lower test scores, less learning time at home, reduced investments in education, and children temporarily or permanently dropping out of school.
- **Health:** Extreme weather shocks cause injuries, increase the risk of respiratory and infectious diseases, affect children's mental health, and reduce access to health services once a child gets sick.
- **Nutrition:** Extreme events such as floods and droughts have been found to increase child malnutrition, most notably stunting, through impacts on food production,

household incomes, and food prices, which can have long-lasting effects on a child's cognitive development.

- **Housing, water and sanitation:** The physical damage caused by extreme weather shocks, especially in low- and middle-income countries where infrastructure may be poor, has direct ramifications for children's access to shelter as well as clean water and sanitation.

Multidimensional child poverty

It is clear that climate shocks increase the risks of being deprived in various individual dimensions of child rights. However, to inform multisectoral responses, the analysis also explored how climate risks impact on multidimensional child poverty by evaluating levels of child poverty immediately following three major flood events in Africa. By focusing on three countries at sub-national levels - Nigeria, Uganda and Malawi - individual-level analysis found that children living



inside a 5 km buffer zone of flooded areas were, on average, 48 per cent more likely to experience multidimensional child poverty compared to children living outside this buffer zone, even after adjusting for other possible determinants of child poverty. These impacts varied between countries: children affected by floods in Malawi were 36 per cent more likely to be poor, in Nigeria they were 94 per cent more likely to be poor, and in Uganda the risk was significantly higher, at 93 per cent. The results point to a strong

relationship between children's residence being near to flooding and multidimensional child poverty. However, an important caveat to note is that, without longitudinal data, it is challenging to establish whether the association may be driven by pre-existing deprivations.

In short, climate shocks heighten the probability of children living in multidimensional poverty.

4. WHAT POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES CAN ADDRESS THE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE SHOCKS ON CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES LIVING IN POVERTY OR THOSE VULNERABLE TO POVERTY?

As demonstrated in the original analysis conducted for this research, as well as in the global literature, climate shocks have devastating impacts of on all children, especially children living in poverty or those who are vulnerable to poverty. Therefore, the Global Coalition to End Child Poverty calls on governments to:

- **Meet commitments of the Paris Agreement** and take ambitious and urgent action now to limit warming to a maximum of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.
- **Rapidly phase out the use and subsidy of fossil fuels and other activities that harm the environment**, transitioning promptly towards sustainable and eco-friendly energy sources, and implementing measures to ensure equitable access of the most disadvantaged families.
- All governments, whether in low-, middle- or high-income contexts, need to **integrate child priorities into ongoing green finance reforms** and prioritize investments to strengthen the climate resilience of social protection and disaster risk reduction.
- High-income countries should **increase climate financing** and support lower- and middle- income countries transition to clean development and manage unavoidable impacts, using specified metrics to ensure child-sensitive investment, and to provide funding for losses and damages through new and additional climate finance.

Further, the Global Coalition to End Child Poverty has outlined a core agenda for addressing and ending child poverty, which is more pertinent than ever in the face of the climate crisis:

1. Make child poverty reduction a national priority

Any (child) poverty reduction plans or strategies should work in tandem with climate change action plans, promoting a cross-governmental response. To build shock-responsive systems that protect children and their families facing the highest risks to climate shocks, including children living in poverty, governments need to invest in child-focused quality data systems that help to understand the interplay between child poverty and climate risks.

2. Expanding child-sensitive and shock-responsive social protection

Cash transfers help families survive climate disasters. In the face of recurrent extreme weather events, resilient social protection systems are among the most robust policy tools to address child poverty before and after climate shocks and protect the non-poor from being pushed into poverty. Climate shocks impact a wide range of dimensions, and cash transfer programmes with strong links to nutrition, health and education services can support coping mechanisms and adaptation of children and their families living in poverty to climate shocks.

Yet, despite the overwhelming evidence of the positive impacts of social protection programmes, only 1 in 4 children (aged 0-14 years) globally receives a child or family benefit. At present, public investments are insufficient - with some countries spending as little as 0.1 per cent of GDP on social protection for children.

To withstand climate shocks, preparedness and resilience building are essential, as well as investment in social protection policy frameworks and operational systems that

allow for rapid scale up to reach populations, especially children living in poverty. This includes promoting:

- **(Universal) child benefits**, which can be quickly scaled up or adjusted in times of emergency, given their wide coverage.
- **Anticipatory cash transfers** for children and their families, both those in poverty and those vulnerable to falling into poverty (a practice which is increasingly being implemented in countries with recurring extreme weather events).
- **Disability benefits/unemployment benefits/pensions**, which can protect from income loss due to climate shocks. When designing shock-responsive social protection programmes, it is important not only to consider children living in poverty but also women and girls, and children with disabilities, as they face additional challenges due to gendered norms, roles and responsibilities - and due to discrimination or limited mobility.
- **Other risk management tools, such as insurance**. When crops, livestock, properties etc. are uninsured the impacts of climate shocks can be disastrous. Public and private insurance can play an important role in protecting households with children in poverty/ vulnerable to poverty from the effects of sudden climate shocks, complementing social protection responses.

3. Improving access and prioritising funding for climate resilient quality public services

Climate disasters can significantly impact children's access to key services, such as education, health, water and sanitation. For



example, climate and environmental threats, including disasters and disease outbreaks, are responsible for disruptions in the education of over 37 million children each year. This is especially true for children and their families living in poverty, who have poorer access to services - even prior to climate crisis. It is therefore central to ensure that services and systems central to children operate in the aftermath of climate shocks, with particular emphasis on more risk-prone areas.

Climate-smart education systems are one way to ensure that education is resilient and inclusive in the face of shocks. This includes ensuring that school buildings are physically able to withstand climate impacts. However, schools and education services may need to be delivered remotely in the aftermath of a climate shock, and with only 16 per cent of children from the poorest households having access to internet at home, compared to 58 per cent of those from the richest households, this is a clear barrier that needs to be addressed. Health systems strengthening to withstand climate shocks is also key, through quality universal healthcare coverage with a focus on climate risk prone areas.

4. Promote decent work and an inclusive growth agenda as part of the green economy agenda

Parental employment is a key determinant of child poverty, shaping various outcomes

linked to poverty such as level of earnings, access to social security, and the amount of time parents can spend with their children. The climate crisis will require larger economic shifts towards green growth and a more sustainable economic system. It is projected that around 24 million new jobs could be created in the green economy globally by 2030. Accordingly, efforts need to be made to ensure that households in poverty are considered in the green economy, including through training and skills building, particularly among youth. In addition, many children living in extreme poverty reside in households dependent on agriculture, rendering them vulnerable to climate shocks. For these households, livelihood programmes can support small-scale farmers adapt to climate change.

All four areas of action are crucial to reduce child poverty. To support the success of any interventions, three cross-cutting enablers are recommended: first, **children should take the lead** in demanding bold action and change; second, **any plans should consider gender, disability, indigeneity and other forms of inequality**, to ensure that all groups can access relevant services; and third, **child-focused, resilient and quality data systems** should be developed to understand climate threats and social vulnerabilities.

5. CONCLUSION

Children living in poverty are bearing the brunt of the climate crisis, despite contributing the least to it. They are the most likely to be affected by climate shocks, while having the least resources to respond to the negative effects or adapt to a changing climate. Furthermore, child poverty is both a driver of vulnerability as well as a result of overall climate risk, creating a cycle from which it is hard to escape.

The pathways between child poverty and the climate crisis are nuanced and require different policy responses according to the types of climate risks and how these affect child poverty in different contexts. The analysis revealed, for example, that the risk of crop failures is particularly strong in provinces with high rates of child poverty in the Middle East and Northern Africa, as well as in West and Central Africa. This was similarly the case for the drought in South Asia, East Asia and Pacific, and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Therefore, countries in those regions may want to focus particularly on ensuring that livelihoods are resilient to changing climate patterns and that families have access to cash transfers if food prices increase in the aftermath of such shocks. Meanwhile in Latin America and the Caribbean and East Asia and the Pacific, higher flood risk was associated with poorer provinces. Such sudden shocks can lead to the destruction of property and significant disruptions of public services, and consequently, countries in those regions may want to place particular focus on strengthening shock-responsive social protection systems and the resilience

of public services. Crop failures, droughts and floods might also be especially relevant for anticipatory action or broader insurance schemes.

Climate risk for children is critically influenced by the extent to which children and their families can access social protection and basic services such as health and education. Therefore, to reach the SDGs of ending extreme child poverty and halving multidimensional child poverty by 2030, it is vital to finance comprehensive and integrated policy approaches. This includes implementing data systems and government response plans, including strengthening shock-responsive social protection systems, that can effectively identify vulnerabilities and enhance resilience for the most disadvantaged children and their families, as well as enable their recovery after a climate shock.

Governments around the world need to be able to determine the specific climate risks children and their families living in poverty or those vulnerable to poverty face in order to implement focused, effective policies and programmes. This can be achieved through quality data systems and policy analysis, alongside the consideration of gender and intersecting inequalities and the involvement of children as agents of change. Action is urgently needed now so that the climate crisis doesn't plunge the most vulnerable further into the depths of poverty, but rather protects children living in poverty and their





About the Global Coalition to End Child Poverty

The Coalition is a network of like-minded organizations concerned at the devastating effects of poverty in childhood on children and societies. The Coalition promotes the need for countries and development actors to explicitly focus on child poverty and the solutions to it in national, subnational, regional and global policies, budgets and monitoring systems.

Coalition participants share a vision of a world where all children grow up free from poverty, deprivation and exclusion. Working together through the Coalition, as well as independently, Coalition participants aim to support the recognition of child poverty and the practical actions to alleviate it.



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