

# Climate and Health Strategy: Accelerating Action on Climate with Health Benefits

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

March 2024

### Climate, Health, and Equity: The Challenge

While rapid economic growth over the last five decades has led to notable health and development gains in many countries, it has also significantly contributed to the climate crisis that now threatens to reverse much of this progress. Climate change is already negatively impacting children's survival, ability to learn, and protection, something that is expected to continue throughout their lives (see box). Children and families living in low- and middle-income countries are disproportionately affected. For some groups – such as those most severely impacted by COVID-19, living through conflict, or experiencing discrimination on the basis of gender, disability, displacement, or other factors – climate change can exacerbate inequities by increasing their exposure and susceptibility to adverse events while decreasing their abilities to cope and recover.

Climate change impacts on health are complex and non-linear. They can be direct (e.g., arising from heatwaves, droughts, floods, and other extreme events), indirect (e.g., arising from vector-, food- and water-borne disease, undernutrition, and poor air quality) or socially-mediated (e.g., occurring because of climate-induced conflict and displacement). Actions taken in other sectors, such as the agriculture or energy sectors, can also positively or negatively influence the relationship between climate and health. Equity factors such as age, gender, health status, income, access to health services, and geographic location are determinants of vulnerability and affect how different groups of people experience climate change effects and associated health impacts.

The climate crisis will undeniably shape the future health of all people, especially children. However, through actions taken now to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (mitigation) and manage climate change risks and hazards (adaptation), it is still possible to avoid the worst expected impacts. Doing so successfully will require increasing understanding that climate actions can achieve health co-benefits; promoting knowledge of the interdependent drivers of climate change, equity, and health; engaging children, adolescents, and women as leaders and

### Climate Change Impacts on Children's Survival, Learning and Protection



#### Healthy start in life

More than 99% of deaths attributable to climate-related changes occur in low- and middle-income countries, and over 80% of these are children.



#### Learning

In Africa, school enrollment rates have declined 20% in regions affected by drought.



#### Protection

By the end of 2020, approximately 7 million people in 104 countries and territories were living in displacement due to disasters that happened during and before that year.



Data suggests 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 in their lifetimes compared to a person born in 1960.

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equal stakeholders in climate, health, and equity activities; and increasing the human and financial resources available for impactful mitigation and adaptation interventions.

## Save the Children's Climate, Health, and Equity Vision, Objectives, and Guiding Principles

Save the Children envisions a future where all children learn, survive, and are protected and can grow up to reach their full potential. To achieve this vision, we must tackle the mutually reinforcing issues of climate change, health, and inequity by taking actions to: 1) improve understanding of the multi-sectoral impacts of, and interconnections between, human activities, climate change, and health; 2) foster community action to test, evaluate, and scale up interventions with climate, health, and equity benefits; and 3) support systematic and meaningful inclusion of children, adolescents, women, and other relevant groups in climate action for health. Our decades of experience working with and for children across more than 115 countries; established relationships with communities, civil society, governments, academia, and the private sector; and expansive multi-sectoral technical expertise mean we are well-positioned to achieve these objectives. Five guiding principles, rooted in Save the Children's history and values, will guide our efforts (see box).

### Save the Children's Climate, Health, and Equity Guiding Principles

- 1 Valuing children's voices:** We will support all children and adolescents – especially those most impacted by inequity – to influence change
- 2 Making the climate crisis a child rights crisis:** Linked to the Sustainable Development Goals and pledge to leave no one behind, we will emphasize putting intergenerational social justice on political agendas, including in the biggest emitter countries
- 3 Bringing climate adaptation to scale:** We will take child-centered adaptation to scale, with an emphasis on reaching the children and adolescents most impacted by inequality
- 4 Holding states to account:** We will use international accountability mechanisms and strategic litigation to foster accountability
- 5 Sharing our vast experience:** We will anchor our climate crisis advocacy in our breakthrough ambitions and on evidence from our development and humanitarian work

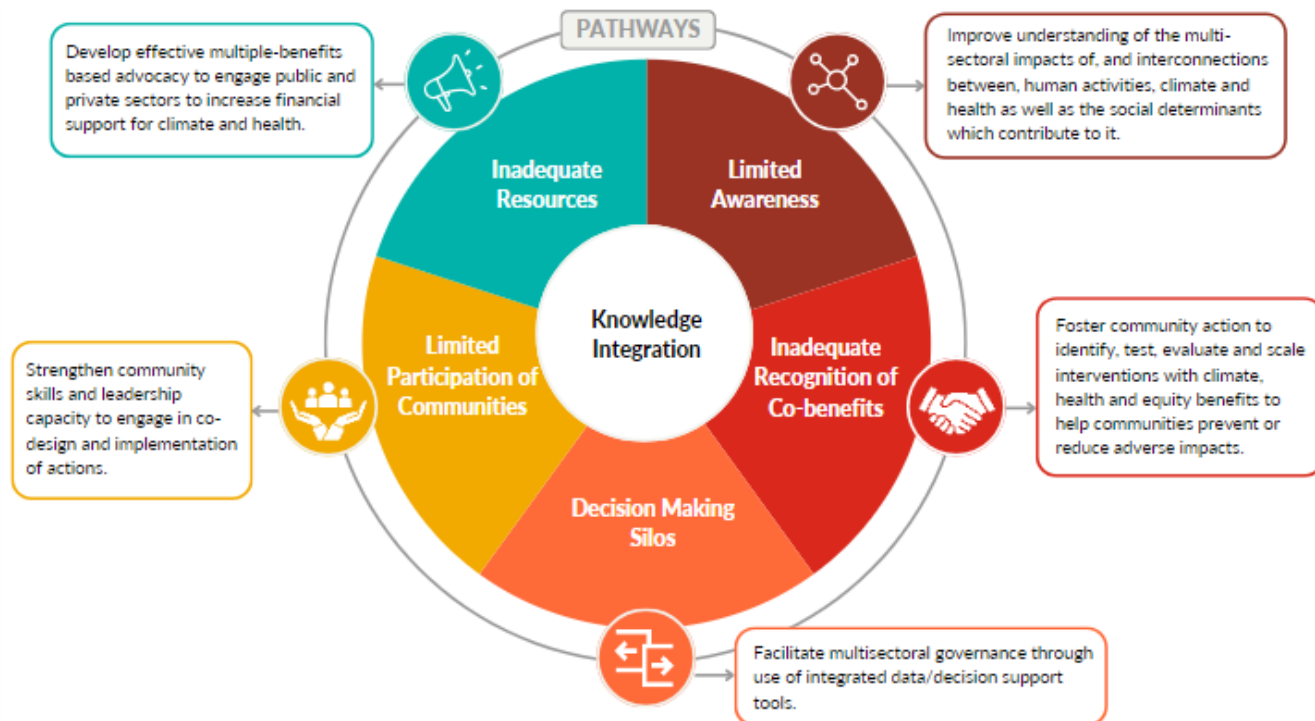
## Save the Children's Approach for Action on Climate, Health, and Equity

Save the Children recognizes climate, health, and equity must be addressed as one systems-based challenge in order to achieve transformative, sustainable changes (see Figure 1). By taking a systems approach, we will be able to see the big picture, understand how the drivers of climate change are interconnected, and identify the reasons why certain groups disproportionately experience climate-sensitive health impacts. A systems approach will also allow us to build a shared understanding of the problem with decision-makers and other key stakeholders, and co-design solutions that are context appropriate, effective, and locally-led and owned. Because of the complex relationship between climate change and health and the influence other sectors can have on the dynamics of this relationship, it is essential to apply a multi-sectoral lens to these efforts. Convening stakeholders from multiple technical sectors as well as from community-based civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government ministries, academia, and the private sector, will enhance the effectiveness of our activities and minimize the unintended consequences that could ultimately undermine health.

Using this multi-sectoral systems approach, Save the Children will engage with partners from the countries where we work and international partners to generate and apply evidence and knowledge, design effective and scalable tools and approaches, and support the governance conditions necessary to achieve and sustain results. Illustrative examples of how we may translate our climate, health, and equity strategy into action follow.

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Figure 1. A systems approach to understanding and taking action on climate, health, and equity



**Develop and pilot systems-based tools that communities can use to map climate, health, and equity interconnections and identify priority actions.** In partnership with community stakeholders (e.g., women, children and adolescents, and other groups experiencing inequity; CSO representatives; community leaders and influencers), Save the Children would first develop and introduce tools to map climate change threats to health, their root causes, and most vulnerable groups, and then work with communities to agree on priority adaptation actions. We would pilot these tools in several country contexts (e.g., Colombia, Nepal, Indonesia, Mali) and use findings from these efforts to refine the tools before scaling them up in additional contexts.

**Link early warnings to actions on nutrition and food insecurity.** Combining health, nutrition, and hunger and livelihoods efforts in West and Central Africa, Save the Children would develop an early warning system that integrates data from a range of sources (e.g., Cost of the Diet, Household Economy Analysis, malnutrition, and climate data) to provide evidence for decision-makers on how climate change impacts household food and nutrition security and identify at-risk households. This would contribute to increasing global understanding of the relationship between drought and health and nutrition outcomes, and could inform cash transfer or other programs to improve nutrition for children and families.

**Quantify the health benefits of action and the costs of inaction.** While it is widely accepted that climate change poses risks to health and prosperity, decision-makers lack concrete cost and benefit information (e.g., related to illness, death, and associated healthcare costs; lost gross domestic product; foregone productivity) to guide policy making and identify priority interventions. Working in partnership with economists and climate and health modelers, Save the Children would create a multi-country systems model (e.g., across Indonesia, India, Colombia, Ethiopia, and Burkina Faso) that quantifies the health impacts of action/inaction on poor air quality, extreme heat, and other climate, health, and equity risks. We would use global and regional climate forecasts to raise awareness of the need to consider health explicitly in development planning and then use country-specific results to inform climate interventions and their cost-effectiveness. In tandem, Save the Children would work with communities to co-produce and apply localized advocacy tools designed to create awareness of health costs and benefits, and work to reduce risks at individual, household, and community levels.

**Support climate adaptation through health systems strengthening.** Together with communities and health facilities, Save the Children would develop and introduce tools and approaches for facility- and community-based health workers to prepare for, manage, and respond to disruptions in supply chain, transport, electricity, clean water, and access to services during and after climate-related extreme events. We would focus on the challenges their communities are already experiencing and

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those that climate change is likely to exacerbate over time, and work with local health authorities to integrate actions to address these priorities into the minimum, essential health services coverage (e.g., by integrating climate data into health information systems to enable early warnings, training health workers on health-climate linkages, promoting healthy behaviors for risk reduction at individual and community levels, and conducting vulnerability and adaptation assessments).

**Promote community-led, sustainable urban health design.** Climate change will worsen the non-communicable disease burden in cities due to increased heat, extreme weather events, and air pollutants generated by fossil fuel combustion. Save the Children would work with communities, urban planning practitioners, and decision-makers to promote sustainable, healthy urban design that features improved land-use, access to green and blue public spaces (e.g., public parks and ponds) and options for walking, cycling, and public transport. This would include applying tools such as the Health Impact Assessment to help communities and decision-makers to plan for reducing climate-related health risks while *maximizing* the health benefits of taking action (e.g., reduced urban heat island effect, reduced flooding/water runoff, increased physical activity). We would initially focus on cities in Southeast Asia and disseminate knowledge via the [Cities4Children Global Alliance](#), of which Save the Children is a member.

**Implement nature-based solutions for climate mitigation/adaptation, reducing malnutrition and diarrheal disease risks and improving access to clean water.** Forest conservation mitigates climate change by storing carbon while also supplying nutrient-rich foods, supporting diverse diets and clean water, and reducing the risk of diarrheal disease in young children who live downstream from forested watersheds. Forests are also important sources of income for rural communities. Integrating nutrition and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) interventions with nature-based strategies such as forest conservation offers a unique opportunity to deliver multiple benefits to human health, nutrition, livelihoods, the environment, and the climate. To improve access to clean water, reduce diarrheal disease risk, and conserve forests, Save the Children would work with rural communities in selected countries to effectively integrate WASH goals and community-based forest management activities. We would also support communities to identify and address the social and behavioral barriers to conserving forests, while taking into account local community values.

**Manage vector-borne diseases.** Climate change increases vector-borne disease risk, including among populations previously not at risk. Save the Children would work with communities to introduce monitoring, detection, prevention, diagnosis, and treatment tools for climate-sensitive, vector-borne diseases (e.g., dengue, Zika virus, and malaria) into primary health systems and services, and strengthen provider capacity to use these tools effectively.

**Strengthen capacity for youth and gender engagement in co-designed climate actions for health.** In tandem with Save the Children's larger youth-led and gender-based advocacy efforts, we would advocate for climate and health risks and needs to be included in the co-design and implementation of interventions. We would do this by focusing on two complementary efforts: 1) strengthening the capacity of youth and women to produce targeted advocacy (e.g., to reduce risks at individual and community levels); and 2) producing guidance for decision-makers at community and national levels to enable the systematic inclusion and meaningful participation of youth and women in decision-making processes.

## Impact

Save the Children anticipates our systems-based approach to action will reduce the impact of the climate crisis on children's health and survival, and help communities, countries, and health systems become more resilient to climate change. We expect to achieve the following impacts (see boxes below):

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**Stronger, more resilient health systems** with the capacity to track, plan for and manage climate risks to health (child nutrition, maternal and newborn health, sexual and reproductive health, communicable, noncommunicable diseases, and mental health).



**Communities with the capacity and resources** to prioritize climate-related health risks, reduce risks and adapt.



**National and sub-national plans** which reflect an understanding of climate and health relationships for guiding action.



**Voices of children, women and disadvantaged groups elevated and amplified** in advocacy and policy discussions at sub-national, national, regional and global levels.

## Strategic Partnering

Operationalizing our climate, health, and equity efforts will require Save the Children to work in new ways and build new strategic partnerships, both inside and outside of our organization. New external partnerships will need to span the public and private sectors, donor and NGO communities, and academia and applied research organizations. These relationships must also extend beyond the health sector to enable the multi-sectoral cooperation necessary to address context-specific climate-health challenges. In line with our systems-based approach, we will emphasize engaging and collaborating with partners from the countries where we work and leverage our rich experience in community engagement and multi-sectoral implementation to identify community-based and national CSO, NGO, and private sector partners with complementary expertise, for whom partnership would offer mutual benefits.

*For further information or to discuss partnership, please contact Montira Pongsiri - Senior Advisor, Climate Change and Health at [mpongsiri@savechildren.org](mailto:mpongsiri@savechildren.org).*