COP31 Policy Briefing

Save the Children

Context and Rationale: The case for child-centred climate action

At its core, the climate crisis is a child rights crisis. Parties to the Paris Agreement have agreed that they should respect, promote and consider the rights of children, as well as intergenerational equity. Climate change profoundly and disproportionately impacts children due to their unique physiological and developmental characteristics that set them apart from adults. Effects on their development, health, and education can be lifelong and irreversible.

Children constitute one-third of the world's population. Recent years have seen growing recognition of their rights, vulnerabilities and capacity in UNFCCC processes. The expert dialogue to discuss the disproportionate impacts of climate change on children and relevant policy solutions (Decision 1/CMA.5, para. 182: outcome of the first Global Stocktake—GST) was a landmark step. Recommendations emanating from the Expert Dialogue included the need for greater attention to children in national climate policies and finance, as well as in the work of the COP/CMA and Constituted Bodies. Important but incremental progress has also been made on including children in specific UNFCCC workstreams including adaptation, loss & damage, and just transition. At the national level too, there has been progress with greater attention to children's consideration in climate policies and plans: 70% of submitted national climate goals (NDCs 3.0) now address children and child-critical services.

Alongside developments within the UNFCCC, General Comment No. 26 on children's rights and the environment provides authoritative guidance on States' obligations on children's rights in the context of climate change, offering an important framework for integrating child rights and participation across climate policy, planning and finance. The International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion on Climate Change also emphasises that states' obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, alongside other international legal obligations, should inform climate action and responses to climate impacts.

COP31: A Critical Opportunity to deliver for Children

Modelling developed by Vrije Universiteit Brussel released by Save the Children shows that 38 million children could be spared unprecedented exposure to heatwaves (as just one example of many climate-related hazards) if warming is limited to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Ambitious emission cuts and a just transition to renewable energy rooted in the urgent and equitable phase-out of fossil fuels is necessary to secure children's rights and uphold States' obligations under international law to protect the planet and its peoples. High-income countries and historical emitters have a moral and legal responsibility to support lower-income countries in their efforts to tackle the climate crisis and achieve the SDGs.

At COP31, governments must build on the growing political momentum on transitioning away from fossil fuels to advance progress on this critical agenda. High-income countries must also commit to provide ambitious, high-quality funding to accelerate climate action in lower-income countries, grounded in the principles of climate justice, child rights and locally-led adaptation.

This brief identifies further entry points for Parties to integrate responses to children's specific needs in key outcomes at COP31.

1. Standalone decision establishing a child-specific mandate

Despite the growing recognition of children's considerations in the UNFCCC processes, and NDCs, progress remains uneven and fragmented. Children continue to be referenced alongside broader vulnerable groups rather than addressed as a distinct cohort experiencing disproportionate impacts, limiting the visibility of children's specific needs, and constraining the development of targeted policy responses.

A standalone decision establishing a child-specific mandate would fill this gap by translating the growing recognition of children in the UNFCCC process into clear guidance for the systematic integration of children's rights, needs, capacities and vulnerabilities into the work of Parties, constituted bodies and relevant work programmes under the COP and CMA. Without creating a new work programme or additional reporting burden for Parties, such a standalone decision would:

- Welcome the UNFCCC informal summary report on the expert dialogue on children and climate change;
- Urge Parties and invite non-Party stakeholders to strengthen action and support to respond to the disproportionate impacts of climate change on children through relevant national, regional, and global planning and implementation processes;
- Invite relevant work programmes and constituted bodies under the Convention and Paris Agreement to integrate consideration of the disproportionate impacts of climate change on children and relevant policy solutions in their existing mandates, activities and reporting processes, as appropriate;
- Invite the Presidency Youth Climate Champion to support follow-up to the Expert Dialogue, including by facilitating the meaningful, safe, and inclusive engagement of children and young people in identifying and communicating the disproportionate impacts of climate change on children and relevant policy solutions

2. Operationalization of the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA)

As implementation of the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) advances, it is essential that the Baku Adaptation Roadmap (BAR) and the Belém-Addis Vision place children and young people at their core. Children's wellbeing and future resilience depend on the effective delivery of the UAE Framework targets, particularly those relating to climate-resilient social services such as health, water and sanitation, nutrition, and social protection. COP31 should therefore focus on translating these targets into concrete action and measurable outcomes.

In this regard, Parties should:

- Ensure indicators support the collection and use of disaggregated data, including by age, sex, disability, location, socio-economic status, and ethnicity, to better address children's specific vulnerabilities and capacities.
- Develop child-focused indicators across key GGA themes, particularly health, nutrition, water and sanitation, social protection, infrastructure, and education, in line with Decision 3/CMA.6 para. 21(d) and (f).
- Consistently integrate children across all GGA dimensional targets, including through age-disaggregated indicators where relevant, in line with Decision 2/CMA.5 para. 10.

3. Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE)

Education is currently under-recognised and under-prioritised in climate change policies, plans and financing. This is increasingly urgent: climate change is already disrupting children's access to education. In 2024, at least 242 million students across 85 countries or territories had their schooling disrupted by extreme weather. It is critical to ensure that education is strengthened to withstand increasing climate change-related disruption to protect both children and learning.

The midterm review of the Action Plan under the Glasgow Work Programme on Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE) presents a timely opportunity to strengthen the resilience of education systems, the role of education in climate action, improve coordination across education and climate ministries, policies, and processes, and increase financial and technical support to education. The informal note on ACE drafted by the co-facilitators at SB64 reflects important progress but must go further to reflect a comprehensive approach to education and a child rights-based, gender-responsive and inclusive approach to ACE implementation.

At COP31, Parties can support to:

- Adopt a comprehensive approach to education: Curricula and climate information are important pieces of climate education but delivering them at scale, and keeping education systems functioning as climate impacts intensify, requires a broad systems approach. The updated ACE action plan should recognize this, including through organizing an inclusive and accessible in-session high-level event on a comprehensive approach to strengthening the climate resilience of education systems, resulting in a summary report for consideration by the COP and CMA.
- Reinforce alignment between ACE and the rest of the UNFCCC: Education and ACE remain under-recognised across the UNFCCC, limiting the effectives of these approaches. The updated ACE Action Plan should strengthen alignment and coordination, including by naming constituted bodies and workstreams in key actions, and ensuring these actions result in tangible outcomes.
- Reinforce national coordination on ACE implementation: It is vital to ensure ACE is embedded within existing national policies and systems and not seen as a separate agenda. The ACE action plan should mandate providing technical and substantive guidance to national ACE focal points for engaging in relevant national processes and policies, linked to relevant ministries, and support for how to include targets, indicators, and budget allocation for ACE in national climate policy.
- Resource ACE Action Plan: ACE must be well-resourced, and its Action Plan should include explicit references to age-, gender- and disability-responsive targets and indicators, alongside adequate and transparent budget allocations, to ensure that ACE elements are meaningfully prioritised, implemented and resourced in Nationally Determined Contributions and National Adaptation Plans, and that progress for different groups, including children and young people, can be tracked. Improved access to resources for Parties and non-Party stakeholders, such as guidance and support for accessing climate finance, should also be included.