



KEY ASKS

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SDGs 14 & 15: CHILD RIGHTS AND THE NATURAL WORLD

Protecting life below water (SDG 14) and life on land (SDG 15) matters greatly for the health and wellbeing of children now, as well as future generations. Children need a safe and clean environment to grow, develop and reach their full potential. Children rely on land and marine resources for access to safe water, food, and air - even temporary deprivations in any of which can contribute to a range of health risks that are life threatening, for example:

- **Food:** Undernutrition is responsible for nearly half of all under-five deaths (~2.5 million/annually as of 2021). It can also lead to stunting, which is irreversible and affects children for the rest of their lives. 24 million children are projected to be undernourished by 2050
- **Water:** 785 million people still lack a basic water service and among them 144 million people still collected drinking water directly from rivers, lakes, and other surface water sources. Furthermore, ocean pollutants can lead to humans ingesting harmful substances such as mercury to which children are particularly vulnerable.
- **Air:** Forests absorb harmful pollutants in the air that children would otherwise be breathing. As oceans produce most of the planet's oxygen, the protection of life below water protects the air children — and all of us — breathe. Oceans also absorb about 30 percent of carbon dioxide produced by humans, buffering the impacts of global warming.

Moreover, it matters for livelihoods. When fish stocks become depleted or forests destroyed, family's incomes are threatened. An estimated 1.6 billion people rely on forests for their livelihoods; and an estimated 2.6 billion rely on agriculture. More than 3 billion people depend on marine and coastal biodiversity for their livelihoods. Families, many of whom might already struggle to survive, are at risk of being pushed into further poverty if these critical resources are eroded. This loss of livelihoods has direct implications for the health and wellbeing of children, as well as prospects for their future.

SDG 14 and SDG 15 are inextricably interlinked. Life on land relies on a healthy marine ecosystem, and vice versa. For example, a healthy forest has higher levels of nutrients that flow into freshwater systems and eventually into the ocean, providing critical resource for marine ecosystems, including phytoplankton, which serves as an essential food for thousands of species. In fact, when we damage the links between land and sea, both ecosystems suffer considerably. A healthy marine and land environment also means a biodiverse one.

Addressing SDGs 14 and 15 is crucial to achieving child rights as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children are explicitly recognized as stakeholders in the [Paris Accord](#) and thus climate change adaptation and mitigation plans should be child inclusive. Children are also explicitly recognized in the [Sendai Framework](#) and thus plans for reducing the risk from natural disasters and increasing the resilience of communities should specifically consider the needs of children.



KEY ASKS

1. Protect life under water and life on land, to provide children with a safe and clean environment to live. UNICEF calls for a paradigm shift in our economic development model to provide opportunities for future generations without destroying our natural environment. This will require drastic changes in individual behaviours, regulations, and business practices. UNICEF calls for governments to ensure that environmental policies are child-sensitive and that businesses ensure their practices are protective of the natural environment upon which children depend.

2. Urgently address climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change is posing major risks to both life under water (SDG 14) and life on land (SDG 15), which in turn affects children's survival and development. High levels of CO2 emissions lower the pH levels in water, causing intense ocean acidification which kills ocean life. Climate change is also contributing to droughts and floods, which threaten life on land and life below water. Even a slight imbalance to ecosystems as a result can create ripple effects which affects millions of species. Climate change is also contributing to slow-onset changes in temperature, which is changing the ecology of life on land and life below water. *See also SDG 13.*

3. Reduce harmful pollution and waste that could affect both children as well as life on land and life below water. Harmful pollutants are detrimental to child development and in turn, social and economic progress. Children are far more vulnerable to health risks from pollution and toxic substances due to the small size of their bodies, unique physiology, and the developmental stage of their internal organ systems and detoxification mechanisms.ⁱ As children breathe, they take in more air per unit of body weight than adults, resulting in greater exposure to pathogens and pollutants. When children play on polluted ground, they can take in pollutants through the soil and dust. They are more exposed to dietary sources of pollution because, compared to adults, they drink more water and eat more food in proportion to their body weight. If water contains residues of pesticides, lead, mercury, cadmium, arsenic or other chemicals [infants will receive more than double the dose taken in by an adult drinking the same water](#). Pesticides are often used to enhance food production but expose children to additional toxicants. The tsunami of e-waste (44.3 million tonnes of global e-waste were not recycled in 2019) is polluting soil, water, and air, harming the health of communities, especially children. Adverse health impacts on children exposed to e-waste include impaired neurodevelopment and behaviour issues, changes to respiratory, thyroid, and immune system function, and DNA damage. The risk of chronic illnesses later in life, including cancers and cardiovascular disease, also increases.ⁱⁱ *See also SDG 12.*

4. Create opportunities for young people to become engaged in helping to protect life on land and life under water. Children and young people can play a key role in addressing risks to life on land and life below water by exercising their views, opinions, and concerns, identifying, and working on solutions, and promoting environmentally sustainable lifestyles – setting an example for their communities. The participation of young people is a necessity and part of their fundamental rights (Article 12, CRC). UNICEF works with young people to elevate their voices on climate change through creative platforms, advocacy, and participation in policy processes. The “new normal” must ensure recognition of children as the drivers of tomorrow’s solutions - their concerns and ideas need to be heard, and political space as well as economic opportunities linked to environmental sustainability created.



MONITOR -- THE IMPORTANCE OF DISAGGREGATED DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS AND USE

- **Identify the children most vulnerable to land and marine environmental degradation.** Children and families living in poverty are often also living in areas most susceptible to natural disasters including earthquakes, floods, wildfires, and droughts – and are less equipped to recover from the aftermath of these disasters. Disaggregated data including by wealth quintile and location can help to identify the most vulnerable children and their families on the frontlines of risk due to land and marine degradation.
- **Identify areas where land and marine degradation will worsen due to climate change and environmental pollution by investing in real-time monitoring systems and big data.** A deepened understanding of those areas that are or will be most dramatically affected by land and marine environmental degradation is essential to targeting programmes and plans that can mitigate their effects on children and their families. [According to the International Telecommunications Union \(ITU\)](#), satellite-based monitoring can deliver timely and accurate data on a global basis, while local sensors can deliver on the spot updates in real-time. “Big data” and other information, communications and technologies can also be used to analyse short- and long-term trends in terms of biodiversity, pollution, weather patterns and ecosystem evolution, and to plan mitigation activities.



INVEST -- SOCIAL SPENDING AND PROGRESS ON RESULTS FOR CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS AND YOUTH

- **Provide children with the skills and capabilities to contribute and take part in the growing green economy.** From renewable energy, to plastic product alternatives, to the rapidly expanding [circular economy](#) -- the successful companies and jobs of the future are increasingly oriented towards products and processes that keep existing products and materials in use, can “design out” waste and pollution, and regenerate natural systems that protect and preserve our bodies of water and our lands. Governments should invest more in education and training programmes for children and youth that equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to actively participate and succeed in this environment as employees, entrepreneurs and/or consumers.
- **Invest in climate mitigation and adaptation, to provide children with a safe and clean environment.** Plans for climate mitigation and adaptation are essential, and the rights and well-being of children must be considered in such plans as well as in the financing to operationalize these plans. This may include, for example, climate-smart water, sanitation and hygiene services and sustainable energy and disaster risk response in schools and health centres.

ⁱ UNICEF, WHO, UNEP. Children in the new millennium: Environmental impact on health, 2002.

ⁱⁱ Parvez, Sarker M., et al., Health consequences of exposure to e-waste: an updated systematic review. Lancet Planet Health, December 2021, 5: e905-20. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(21\)00263-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(21)00263-1/fulltext)