

12 RESPONSIBLE  
CONSUMPTION  
AND PRODUCTION

# KEY ASKS

## 2023 • SDG National Reviews

## SDG 12: RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

The onset and ongoing crisis of the global COVID-19 pandemic threatens to roll back years of progress on the SDGs. Among the adverse consequences with likely long-term effects are increased poverty, worsening mental health, and reduced safety and security from all forms of violence. Children and youth need to be engaged in sustainability awareness and action. Unsustainable, and unsafe consumption and production patterns lead to **toxic waste and limited resources which disproportionately harm children's health, development, and environments**. Second, decades of evidence show that widespread changes in positive economic and societal behaviour often begin with children becoming aware of the problems they observe in their own communities. This applies to sustainable consumption patterns where for instance, reducing, recycling, reuse and repairing consumer goods, which has gained support due to the efforts and involvement of children in campaigns.



### KEY ASKS

1. **Reduce food waste and improve food production, consumption, and allocation to better preserve the planet and provide for people, including children who disproportionately suffer from hunger.** Current production and consumption patterns are not only polluting resources but are not sufficiently provided to children and families living in hunger. For instance, of the four billion metric tons of food produced each year, one third is wasted or lost<sup>i</sup> while 52 million children suffer from hunger and 3 million children die from wasting, the life-threatening result of hunger.<sup>ii</sup> Meanwhile, demand for already constrained natural resources will reach the need of three planets worth of resources by 2050.<sup>iii</sup> As the world's population currently uses about 50 per cent more resources than the Earth can support, consumption patterns must be altered to better preserve the planet and provide for people.
2. **Reduce the emissions of harmful pollutants to prevent and mitigate their effects on children.** Harmful pollutants are detrimental to child development and in turn, social and economic progress. Recent alarming evidence is beginning to highlight the deep seated direct physical and mental impact of chemicals, fossil fuels and waste on children. 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.<sup>iv</sup> 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, their potential intake of pollutants in the soil and dust increases. 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. To prevent exposure of children to pesticides in food, families should wash, and peel produce to minimize pesticide residues on foods and trim skin and fat from fish, meats, and poultry. Communities in proximity to industrial areas are reporting that children born healthy begin showing signs of mental and physical deterioration.<sup>v</sup> Over one-third of children globally - [815 million children](#) - are currently highly exposed to lead pollution due to exposures in contaminated air, water, soil, and food. This is likely to get worse without more responsible production, consumption, and recycling of lead-containing products. [Childhood lead poisoning requires an urgent international response](#).
3. **Recognize the role businesses have in protecting child rights and the role young people can have in holding businesses to account.** Given that business practices across industries will need to shift to meet SDG criteria, there is opportunity for smart growth in corporate economic, social, and environmental responsibility. As companies adapt, explicit guidance is available on what it means for business to comply with health and environmental laws and standards, thereby respecting and supporting children's rights. This includes eliminating or substituting the use of toxic chemicals in household and school products that are detrimental to children's health. Moreover, youth advocates and innovators of new technology can provide perspectives and ideas to ensure cleaner business operations.

4. **Address the escalating e-waste crisis.** The escalating consumption of newer electrical and electronic equipment every year has been likened to a tsunami of e-waste. In 2019, the world produced 53.6 million tonnes of e-waste, only 17.4 per cent of which was formally recycled. E-waste includes items such as refrigerators, washing machines, computers, cell phones, and other consumer electronics. Unmanaged and improperly managed e-waste 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.<sup>vi</sup> Additionally, children are exploited in the informal e-waste sector because of their small and dexterous hands, which helps them dismantle larger quantities of e-waste, exposing them to many toxicants. Action is urgently required by governments to ensure environmentally sound management of e-waste and elimination of child labour (*see also SDG 8*).
5. **The health sector should take a leadership role on sustainable consumption by practicing and advocating for sustainable lifestyles.** Ministries of Health should develop and expand children’s environmental health capacities in primary health care. Health workers should be trained on how to prevent, detect, and treat diseases from children’s exposure to environmental hazards brought about by unsustainable consumption and production. Efforts should also be made to conduct research and contribute to existing knowledge on the health impacts of children who are exposed to environmental hazards. (*See also SDG 3*)
6. **Scale-up quality environmental education.** Working closely with the Chamber of Commerce, UNICEF disseminated practical guidance on COVID-19 preparedness and response [across its network of 12,000 local chambers and millions of business](#), including a co-branded complement to the ‘Business Engagement Guide’ and UNICEF’s guidance for business on Family Friendly Policies and Other Good Workplace Practices in the Context of Covid-19. In addition, UNICEF led on the development of the Business Engagement Guide which outlines how **businesses can help reduce the impact of COVID-19 on children and families, identifying concrete actions they can take on the response, while also supporting efforts in the workplace, across supply chains and in communities.**
  - The Child Rights and Business team joined UNICEF Programme Group to develop recommendations on how to strengthen support for workers and their families in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. The technical note was co-published with the ILO and UN Women and launched with a global press release. The document builds on important work initiated by EAPRO and ESARO and supports businesses to mitigate the socio-economic consequences (job loss, school closures, and unavailability of childcare) of the crisis on working families and children. There has been such demand for this that several country offices, regional offices, and National Committees are currently developing national dissemination and business engagement plans.
  - The United Nations Global Compact, Save the Children and UNICEF worked together to develop a set of principles launched as Children’s Rights and Business Principles in March 2012. Of the ten principles, one specifically reads that **all businesses should ‘respect and support children’s rights in relation to the environment and to land acquisition and use.’** To aid the implementation of the principles, UNICEF has an accompanying set of tools including [Children are Everyone’s Business Workbook 2.0](#). In addition to industry business practices that affect the environment, **socially responsible practices must also be taken into corporate consideration to advance the SDGs.**
  - While businesses have a significant role to protect children’s rights and the environment, young people have also been on the forefront of holding businesses accountable for improved corporate social responsibility. As both current and future consumers, children and young people are increasingly shaping brands and the social and environmental roles that businesses thrive in. Thanks to younger generations entering the consumer market, over fifty-five percent of global online consumers across 60 countries are committed to positive social and environmental impact. According to a study by Nielsen, Millennials report interest to check consumer goods for sustainable labelling and willingness to pay extra for sustainable products. In developing regions, Millennial respondents in favour of sustainability actions are three times more agreeable, on average, to sustainability actions than Generation X (ages 35-49) respondents and 12 times more agreeable, on average, than Baby Boomer (ages 50-64) respondents. In summary, these trends will bend company practices as more young people both become leaders of companies and the majority of consumers.



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

UNICEF encourages the following SDG 12 Targets and Indicators to be monitored and disaggregated wherever possible, as they address priority areas for children as outlined by the key messages above.

- **12.3** By 2030, halve per capita **global food waste** at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses

For more information, visit: <https://www.unicef.org/sdgs>

- **12.4** By 2020, achieve the **environmentally sound management of chemicals and all wastes** throughout their life cycle, in accordance with agreed international frameworks, and significantly reduce their release to air, water and soil in order to minimize their adverse impacts on human health and the environment
- **12.5** By 2030, substantially **reduce waste generation** through prevention, reduction, recycling, and reuse
- **12.6** Encourage **companies**, especially large and transnational companies, **to adopt sustainable practices** and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle
- **12.8** By 2030, ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and **awareness for sustainable development** and lifestyles in harmony with nature
- **12.8.1** Extent to which (i) global citizenship education and (ii) **education for sustainable development** (including climate change education) are mainstreamed in (a) national education policies; (b) curricula; (c) teacher education; and (d) student assessment



## ACTIVATE -- AWARENESS BUILDING AND MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS AND YOUTH

Through education and empowerment, raise the awareness of children and young people to inspire positive action and sustainable lifestyles. SDG 12 specifically calls for national governments to mainstream global citizenship education and sustainable development education in its education policies, curricula, teacher education and student assessment. UNICEF encourages governments to implement SDG-focused learning throughout schools in their countries and consult children and youth on their perceptions as to how to make systems and societies more sustainable:

- **The process for preparing the 2023 national review should directly involve children and adolescent girls and boys, especially the most marginalized or excluded.** For example, through consultations (on and/or offline), surveys or polls, focus group discussions, etc. UNICEF together with civil society, child-focused organizations and other partners can support the government in this process. The results of these efforts as well as the methods employed should be described in the VNR report, including the number of young people involved in the process.
- **Provide spaces for children, adolescents, and youth to learn about, discuss and take action on the SDGs, including Responsible Consumption and Production and the Circular Economy<sup>vii</sup>.** UNICEF and partners should engage relevant ministries especially those responsible for education, industry, and environment, to ensure they are integrating opportunities for children to learn and take action on the environment. UNICEF can support this effort through our existing work in this space and creating child-friendly education and entertainment materials through our foundational partnerships on the [World's Largest Lesson](#). Specific lesson plans pertaining to SDG 12 include a full 'Exploring the Circular Economy' set produced in partnership with the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and a set about food production, consumption and waste called 'Every Plate Tells a Story.' [UNICEF's Youth Activate Talk Methodology](#) is also a platform for children to express their ideas on the SDGs through a variety of mediums while the forthcoming Learning to Improve Climate Action resource hub will provide children with a range of self-administered courses on climate and the environment. [UNICEF's Healthy Environments for Healthy Children Global Framework](#) has a host of valuable information on how the youth can advocate for the reduction of toxic and hazardous substances in products and processes such as by reducing, reusing, and recycling electrical and electronic products.
- Awareness-raising and participation should be seen as part of a continuum to engage children, adolescents, and young people regularly, meaningfully, and consistently as knowledge **producers and agents of change to influence decision-making processes and outcomes as well as behaviours and social norms amongst themselves, their households, schools, and their communities.** This goes beyond engagement just for the purposes of reporting periods, but rather creating standing mechanisms and spaces for young people to engage and have their perspectives heard in decision and policy-making processes. Child and youth participation should also be extended to media and communications channels for the purpose of solidifying long-term positive changes in behaviours and social norms. Children, adolescents, and youth should also be involved in framing sustainability education and research approaches and contribute to the content as the theories and practices of sustainability and responsible action continues.

<sup>i</sup> UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> UNICEF, WHO, World Bank Group. Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates, May 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> World Wildlife Fund, 2012.

<sup>iv</sup> UNICEF, WHO, UNEP. Children in the new millennium: Environmental impact on health, 2002.

<sup>v</sup> Changing Markets, June 2017.

<sup>vi</sup> 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)

<sup>vii</sup> [Circularity | UNEP - UN Environment Programme](#)