

Index shows impact of climate change on children

The extreme weather impacting America this summer has been frightening. From the forest fires and water shortages in the West, to the intensified hurricanes and catastrophic flooding the East, the whole country is suffering. According to the *Washington Post*, nearly one in three Americans experienced a weather disaster during the summer of 2021, up from one in 10 during the same period five years ago. These extreme weather events are precisely what the world's scientists monitoring global warming have warned us about for decades. No one should be surprised by the ferocity and damage climate change has created. We were all warned. Globally, the last six years have been the hottest on record. If current trends continue, what environment will our children and grandchildren inherit?

Over this last year, United Nations researchers dove into the science of both global warming and children's social vulnerability to develop a Children's Climate Risk Index (CCRI). Published this summer, this new scientific tool provides the first comprehensive view of children's exposure and vulnerability to the impacts of climate change. The results of the CCRI led the leading UN agency on children to declare: "Climate change is the greatest threat facing the world's children and young people."

What is the CCRI? For the first time, scientists document exactly how many children live in areas that experience multiple, overlapping climate and environmental emergencies, including extreme weather, such as catastrophic drought, fires and storms. This information is then combined with data on the availability and quality of essential services such as health care, education, water and sanitation. The CCRI thus documents the children that face a deadly combination of exposure to multiple environmental shocks combined with high vulnerability resulting from a lack of essential services. These are the children most at risk from climate change.

The CCRI reports that approximately one-third of all children — 850 million — are exposed to four or more environmental stresses as a result of climate change, including intensified heatwaves, cyclones/hurricanes, air pollution, flooding and water scarcity. Yet, factoring in those children who lack essential services, the number of children at "high risk" and vulnerable to climate change rises to approximately 1 billion. This means that unless we act now nearly half of the world's children will face a future filled with floods, water shortages, fires, and intense storms with no "safety net" of social services to protect them.

To prevent this outcome and protect our children's futures, the global scientific community argues for a rapid transition from fossil fuels to wind, solar and other renewable energy. Arguably the most important component of President Joe Biden's current budget before Congress is the proposed \$800 billion in new spending and tax breaks over the next decade to accelerate the launching of clean-energy technologies aimed at fighting climate change.

The Biden plan is a drastically needed first step toward decarbonized electricity generation. If these proposals become law, through fines and subsidies, power companies would have strong incentives to stop burning fossil fuels, and would receive tax credits for various forms of clean energy. While these actions are clearly only a beginning, they could stimulate movement toward large reductions in fossil fuel emissions and toward electrification in vehicles, buildings and industry overall.

Human rights scholar Edith Brown Weiss has developed a persuasive framework of intergenerational justice. Weiss argues that each generation receives a "natural and cultural legacy in trust from previous generations and holds it in trust for future generations." This imposes on all of us obligations to conserve the natural resource base for future generations. She calls for a "doctrine of intergenerational equity, or justice between generations."

What "natural and cultural legacy" will we leave for our grandchildren?

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