



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CLIMATE MOBILITY AND CHILDHOOD

EXAMINING THE RISKS,
CLOSING THE DATA AND EVIDENCE GAPS
FOR **CHILDREN ON THE MOVE**

Data InSIGHT #2
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Growing up on a planet under threat

Although children are the least responsible for climate change, they are being profoundly shaped by the many ways it is changing life on our planet. As disasters hit communities around the globe – whether sudden, such as storms, floods or wildfires, or slow onset, like drought or sea level rise – children are increasingly learning to cope with the realities of a degraded environment. Not all of these mounting threats are climate-change related – but there is no doubt that human behaviour is influencing many of them.

For many children, the burden of these conditions will become so pronounced that life as they know it will become unsustainable. They may be forced or choose to leave home – in some cases, temporarily, and in others, never to return. Some children may wish to move as communities deteriorate or become unsafe, but may lack the resources to do so.

A new report by the International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (IDAC), *Climate Mobility and Childhood: Examining the risks, closing the data and evidence gaps for children on the move*, considers how the well-being of children may be affected when climate change and human mobility intersect in their lives – or, what can be described as experiences of **climate mobility**¹.

The report, which can be found [here](#), considers what

is known about children in this context today, asking questions including:

- What does the current evidence base tell us about the estimated number and location of children on the move for climate-related reasons?
- How far are children likely to go when they are on the move due to the impacts of climate change?
- How is climate mobility shaping children's deprivations, risks and vulnerabilities?

It also highlights the urgent need to address the many critical data gaps regarding children on the move as the climate action agenda advances, sharing relevant good practices of innovative child-related data work from IDAC's network to inspire stakeholders.

Concluding with a series of action points to ensure data and statistical systems are equipped to accommodate the needs of children who are on the move and navigating the impacts of climate change, the publication calls on decision-makers to commit to and invest in an evidence-based approach to climate-related migration and displacement that prioritizes the rights of children.

This Executive Summary provides the key messages and main findings of the report's four sections.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

>> FOUNDATIONS: Language and data concerns



Climate change can influence human mobility in ways that do not fit neatly into the terms, classifications and legal frameworks most commonly used today to count populations on the move. What's more, it is not always straightforward to directly identify the impacts of climate change as the primary reason for migration or displacement. These issues raise the importance – and challenges – of establishing standardized terminology, fortifying legal protections for children on the move for climate-related reasons, and strengthening data and statistical systems in this context.

Using accepted definitions – such as those put forth by official United Nations sources – is vital when it comes to producing quality data for children who are on the move under any circumstance. Policymakers and data producers and users must strive to use a common language when employing terms like 'children on the move', 'disaster displacement' or 'immobility', for instance.

As children have been recognized as a particularly vulnerable group when it comes to climate change, it is important that the necessary legal protections are in place to protect and secure their rights. While most children on the move for climate-related reasons will stay within their respective country, some may cross borders and trigger the need for international protection. States have an obligation

to uphold the rights of all individuals within their jurisdiction without discrimination, including children whose mobility has been affected by the impacts of climate change.

There are a number of existing legal instruments or principles that protect or might be used to protect children who cross borders for climate-related reasons, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement. Regional refugee laws – such as the Organisation of African Unity Refugee Convention and Latin America's Cartagena Declaration – may also provide protection. However, migration laws in most countries are not currently prepared to receive, protect or realize the specific rights of environmental migrants, including children.

Effective migration governance is closely tied to quality data that can be disaggregated, at minimum, by age, sex and migration or displacement status. To date, however, such data on children on the move for climate-related reasons remain limited. This is due to challenges including:

1. Mobility decisions related to the adverse impacts of climate change are often strongly linked with other drivers of movement (e.g., education, job opportunities or better access to services).
2. Attributing migration and displacement to climate change-related impacts alone is not a straightforward process.
3. Human mobility decisions related to climate change are complex and often do not fit neatly into the 'voluntary' or 'forced' migration classifications.
4. Collecting data on decision-making and immobility in the context of climate change can be challenging: 'Immobility' itself can be categorized on a spectrum of voluntary and forced.
5. There are already major data gaps when it comes to the age-disaggregated data necessary to identify children among populations who are on the move.

Working across sectors to close these data gaps is vital to an approach to climate mobility that is child-centred, rights-based and informed by evidence.

>> THE ISSUE: 11 questions, 11 insights

Today, the available data and evidence on the intersection of childhood and climate mobility are limited. There is, however, much to learn from the current data landscape on this population of children.

The analysis in *Climate Mobility and Childhood* identifies 11 essential questions and insights that can help decision-makers understand how climate mobility is likely to shape childhood in communities around the world, while also noting the areas where more data and research are needed. These themes are explored in greater detail throughout the publication.

#1. | While we know climate change can be directly and indirectly linked to patterns of human mobility and displacement, do we have the data to estimate to what extent child mobility has been or will be affected?

Climate change is difficult to isolate as a driver of human mobility; this, coupled with a lack of child-specific data and research on the links between migration, displacement and climate change, means the number of children who are and will be on the move as climate change intensifies remains unclear.

There is much ambiguity when it comes to predicting the number of children who will be on the move due to climate-change induced threats and the specific scale, timing and location of this movement is impossible to predict. Current estimates vary widely:

- Slow-onset climate impacts (e.g., water stress, failing crops, sea level rise and storm surges) could result in the (internal) displacement of 44 to 113 million people by 2050; but in a starker scenario, this range could be as high as 125 to 216 million.²
- Some models suggest climate change will only marginally affect international migration in the 21st century, yet higher numbers have been



predicted regionally, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.³

- The number of asylum applications to the European Union has been forecast to increase as global temperatures rise; estimates range from an additional 98,000 applications to 660,000 applications per year by 2100, varying by climate change scenario.⁴

#2. | How does climate change interact with other common drivers of child migration and displacement?

Climate change is exacerbating many of the factors that trigger migration and displacement among children, such as food insecurity, poverty and conflict.

Climate change is considered a threat multiplier in children's lives, often intensifying threats and sources of instability tied to human mobility. For instance, hazards can reduce or eliminate families' sources of income and lead to disputes over critical resources like land and water. Children in humanitarian and fragile contexts are likely to be at greater risk of climate-related displacement.^{5, 6, 7}

#3. | When it comes to specific climate change-related hazards associated with migration and displacement, how many children are at risk?

Children growing up today are more exposed to a number of climate and environmental hazards than previous generations.

Nearly one in two children – approximately 1 billion children – are at “extremely high risk” to the impacts of climate change.⁸ One in six are exposed to threats brought on by cyclones, 1 in 7 are at risk of experiencing riverine flooding, 1 in 10 live in areas highly vulnerable to coastal flooding and storm surges, and one in three are at risk of water scarcity.⁹

#4. | How might climate mobility introduce or exacerbate vulnerabilities among children?

Acute deprivations and heightened risks are likely to be common among children affected by climate-related migration and displacement.

Children on the move for any reason commonly face steep barriers to accessing their basic rights, regardless of why they have migrated or been displaced: They face high levels of poverty, poor access to WASH facilities and health care, increased levels of malnutrition and are at risk of being out of school. These deprivations are likely to be seen among children on the move for climate-related reasons as well.



#5. | Where and which children are most likely to be on the move because of the impacts of climate change?

Children in particular regions, fragile settings and the poorest countries face disproportionate risks to the impacts of climate change, which may compel them to move.

Children in sub-Saharan Africa are concerningly exposed to weather- and climate-related threats; for instance, from 2016–2023, 9 in 10 children internally displaced by droughts lived in the region. Meanwhile, children in East Asia and the Pacific bore the brunt of one in two (59 per cent) internal child displacements by dangerous storms over that time period.¹⁰ By 2090, almost half of the 2.8 billion people that could be affected by heatwaves are projected to live in Southern Asia.¹¹ Nearly 90 per cent of countries defined as “extremely high risk” by the Children's Climate Risk Index are considered fragile contexts.



#6. | When children move because of climate-related threats, how far will they go?

Most children on the move in a changing climate will not cross borders.

Most projections suggest that when they do leave home to adapt to the threats of climate change, children will move within their own countries. This is supported by multiple studies and meta-analyses, as well as the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.^{12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17}

#7. | How many children in high-risk climate areas will not leave home?

The majority of children who live in places highly vulnerable to climate change are unlikely to move.

Of the 1 billion children living in places at extremely high risk of climate threats, most will stay in place. Some may lack the resources to move, leaving them immobile or trapped.^{18, 19} This large group of children will come with a distinct set of needs and vulnerabilities that must be considered in the climate response.

#8. | How might the experiences, aspirations and intentions of children and youth differ when it comes to climate mobility?

Research in this area is limited – but age and life stage can play an important role in patterns of climate mobility.

Children, adolescents and youth will experience human mobility in the context of climate change differently. In households in high-risk areas, for instance, younger children may stay behind while adolescents and youth may be more likely to leave home.²⁰

#9. | How does gender influence climate mobility among children?

Women and girls may be more likely to stay behind when disasters hit – which can expose them to serious harm.

Gender inequalities and gender norms can influence women and girls' freedom of movement and access to information, assets and safe shelters in disaster and post-disaster settings, which can introduce serious risks and harms into their lives and impact their chances of survival.^{21, 22, 23}

#10. | How does the number of new internal displacements that are weather related compare to those caused by conflict and violence?

From 2016–2023, data show that in most years, the number of new internal child displacements related to disasters was equal to or higher than those related to conflict and violence. In 2023, however, conflict and violence drove more new internal displacements than disasters.

Over this eight-year period, new internal displacements of children due to weather events outpaced those due to conflict and violence at a rate of nearly 5 to 4. However, it is important to remember that these proportions shift year to year, depending on the world and weather events that occur. For instance, in 2023, as conflict escalated in places like Sudan and Palestine, conflict and violence led to more internal child displacements than disasters.²⁴ Whether a conflict or disaster, crisis is consistently tied to high numbers of children on the move.

#11. | How serious are the data gaps on climate mobility among children and how can we address them?

Data gaps are widespread, thereby limiting our preparedness for a child-centred, rights-based approach to climate mobility.

In many countries at the forefront of the climate crisis – such as those that are low-income – child-specific migration data and statistics are largely unavailable. And across economic settings, disaggregated data on the socioeconomic circumstances of migrant and displaced persons are not collected. Until these data are produced at country and regional levels, the expected scale and impact of climate-related migration and displacement among children will remain unknown. These data gaps must be addressed in order to ensure the rights of children on the move in the context of climate change are upheld.

III >> IMPACTS: Deprivations, risks and vulnerabilities



Like most children on the move, those who have migrated or been displaced for climate-related reasons are expected to be exposed to a range of rights violations. *Climate Mobility and Childhood* focuses on six sectors tied to a child's well-being – poverty; food security and nutrition; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); health; education and child protection – and examines how they may interact with climate mobility. Urbanization and conflict also play an important role in children's experiences when they intersect with climate-related migration and displacement.

- Children from the poorest families, communities and countries will be hit with disproportionate force by the impacts of climate change. **Poverty undermines resilience to the impacts of climate change and reduces choices around mobility decisions.** This dynamic may lead to increased displacement and involuntary immobility for the poorest children and households at the forefront of the crisis in developing countries.
- **The impacts of climate change are expected to exacerbate the already alarming levels of food insecurity and poor nutrition around the globe, both of which can drive migration and displacement or become a consequence of it.**

Lack of food and malnutrition are especially devastating for young children and for adolescent girls, many of whom already struggle to access nutritious diets, especially in fragile contexts.

- WASH systems around the world are already being stressed by climate change. **As breakdowns in access to safe drinking water, proper sanitation and adequate hygiene become more frequent and longer-lasting due to the impacts of climate change, the consequences for children's health and well-being may be potentially devastating.** Weakened or failing WASH systems can both drive children and families to be on the move or become the reality once they have migrated or been displaced.
- The negative effects of climate change on human health are of great concern when it comes to children: In the midst of their growth and development, children are more vulnerable to these health risks than adults. **Climate-related migration and displacement may complicate health outcomes for children, who often face barriers to accessing health services when they are on the move.**
- **Major disruptions to their education and learning may be common for children on the move for climate-related reasons.** This may be the result of immediate interruptions caused by disasters or emergencies and longer-term barriers introduced by climate mobility.
- The root causes of many serious child protection issues may be heightened when the impacts of climate change intersect with human mobility. **Children migrating or displaced for climate-related reasons may face higher risks of being exposed to violence, abuse and neglect, child marriage, child labour, and child trafficking and smuggling.**

It is important to note that these outcomes will be mitigated by many individual factors – including, for instance, a child's age and life stage, gender, socioeconomic group, disability status, race and ethnicity, as well as whether or not a child's migration is well managed. This reiterates the need for quality data that can be disaggregated by various characteristics to pinpoint the children exposed to the greatest deprivations, risks and vulnerabilities.

IV >> ACTIONS: Better data and evidence to protect children on the move in a changing climate

Regardless of why they are on the move, children who have migrated or been displaced are among the most vulnerable on the planet. They are in many cases denied their most basic rights in places of origin, transit and host communities. Therefore, as the global community advances the climate action agenda, it must not only recognize the implications of the climate crisis on migration and displacement, but also that children on the move in this context must be prioritized.

Governments, United Nations bodies, donors, civil society, the private sector and children and youth themselves must work together to protect the well-being of children whose lives are and will be shaped by climate mobility. These actions must include improvements to data and statistical systems, whose outputs underpin the policies and programmes needed to ensure that society's most vulnerable and marginalized children – such as those who are on the move – are not left behind.



Data, evidence and climate action for children on the move: IDAC's key recommendations



Engage, educate and empower children and youth on the move due to the impacts of climate change to meaningfully participate in data collection efforts that capture their lived experiences



Invest in data and statistical systems; improve data availability, quality and analysis; and close data gaps on climate-related migration and displacement



Design and invest in strategic data collection efforts and research that examine climate mobility and child well-being, including in conflict, humanitarian and fragile settings, and bring stakeholders

and partners to the table to discuss and act on these findings



Enable sharing of data and methodologies, including innovative approaches, within and between countries, organizations and regions



Improve collaboration between key stakeholders to minimize the risks children on the move are likely to face due to the impacts of climate change



Advocate for child-responsive and mobility-sensitive climate finance that supports evidence-based interventions

Around the world, many stakeholders and IDAC members – including countries like Colombia, Nepal and Tonga; organizations including Save the Children, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and the Mixed Migration Centre; and youth themselves – have recognized the urgent need to consider children on the move in the context of climate

change and taken action in data-related work. These good practices, which are described in detail in *Climate Mobility and Childhood*, should serve as the inspiration needed to inspire better data for children on the move and pave the way to a brighter future for all children, no matter what the future holds.



About IDAC

The International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (IDAC) is a cross-sectoral global coalition that aims to improve data and statistics and support evidence-based policymaking for migrant and displaced children. Co-funded by the European Union and jointly led by Eurostat, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, Secretariat Chair), IDAC brings together governments (including experts from national statistical offices and migration- and displacement-related ministries), international and regional organizations, NGOs, think tanks, academics, civil society and youth. At the end of 2023, IDAC's membership had surpassed 50, including 25 Member States.

Write us at IDAC@unicef.org to support our work!
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IDAC PLEDGES TO...



STRENGTHEN
data systems
and capacities



PROMOTE
and establish
collaboration
and innovation



IMPROVE
data visibility,
availability,
accessibility
and usability

**FOR BETTER LIVES FOR
CHILDREN ON THE MOVE**

SECRETARIAT:



MEMBERS:

