



THE GLOBAL SOCIAL WORK ORGANISATION

CHILDHOOD AT RISK ON A HEATING PLANET

**Exploring the impact of Climate Change on
children without parental care**

Policy and practice brief

International Social Service



In partnership with



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Childhood at Risk on a Heating Planet: Exploring the impact of Climate Change on children without parental care- Policy and Practice Brief

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INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL SERVICE

The International Social Service (ISS) is an interconnected network of NGOs and partners that works to reunite families separated by international borders. Founded in 1924, the ISS is present in around 120 countries and strives to find solutions that enhance the protection of children and families in vulnerable situations. Our key priorities are protecting the best interests of children above all other considerations and providing socio-legal counselling and psychological support. Our main focus areas include advocacy, policy development, research, training and capacity building.

DEFINITIONS OF IMPORTANT TERMS USED IN THIS POLICY BRIEF

Children without parental care

This brief follows the definition established by the UN Guidelines on Alternative Care (UN 2010: art. 29a), which encompasses “all children who are not in the overnight care of at least one of their parents, for whatever reason and under whatever circumstances”. For the purposes of this brief, “children without parental care” refers to: (i) children in alternative care, i.e., children in kinship and foster family-based care or in institutional care; and (ii) unaccompanied children, i.e., children in street situations without adult care, supervision, or responsibility, or unaccompanied migrant children.

Unaccompanied children

“(also called unaccompanied minors) are children, who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.” This brief follows the definition established by the Inter-agency guiding principles on unaccompanied and separated children, (2004).

Alternative Care

Alternative care options are protection measures for children without parental care. The term ‘alternative care’ covers a wide range of care options (both formal and informal): kinship and foster care, other forms of family-based or family like care placements, small group homes, residential care and supervised independent living arrangements.

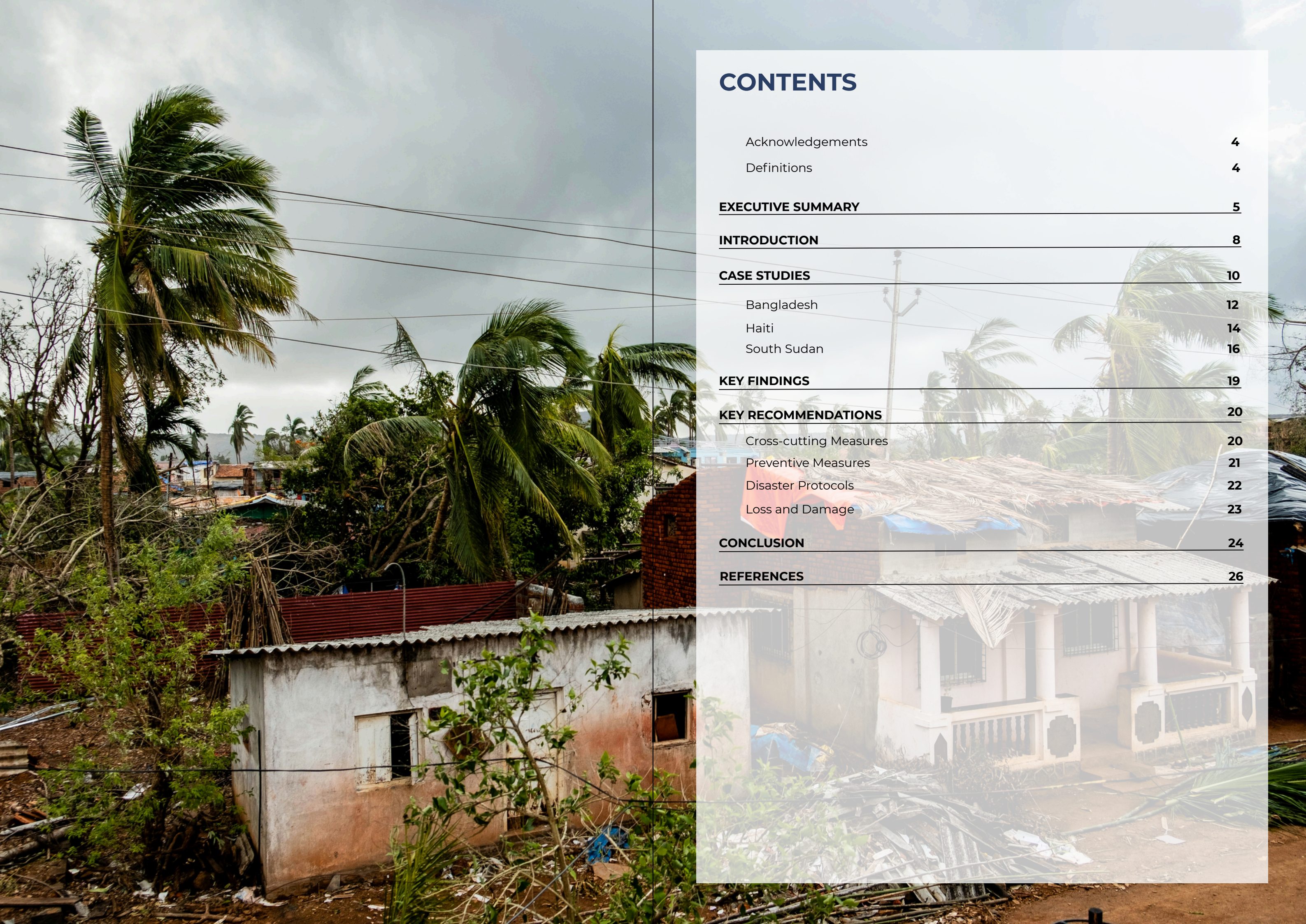
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the last decades, climate change has slowly emerged as yet another powerful driver of suffering for millions of children across the globe, recently prompting UNICEF (2021) to warn that *the climate crisis is a child rights crisis*. However, children do not form a unique or homogeneous group – nor are they equally vulnerable or impacted in the context of climate change. This brief addresses the distinct case of **children without parental care** who, at the heart of the ISS’s actions and advocacy for over 100 years, are of particular concern to this organisation. Drawing on three illustrative comparative case studies conducted through expert consultations, this brief assesses (i) how climate change exacerbates the risk of children losing parental care and (ii) the impacts of climate change on children without parental care.

This brief’s findings highlight **three key linkages between climate change and children without parental care**:

1. Climate change *increases the risk of children losing parental care* through disaster-related mortality and displacement, and by undermining biological families’ resilience, prompting harmful coping mechanisms such as early marriage, child labour, or relinquishment and abandonment.
2. Climate change *increases the risk of children becoming unaccompanied, lacking any form of care*, by driving unaccompanied migration; and by straining alternative care systems and reducing their capacity to accommodate additional children.
3. Climate change has a *distinct, often greater, impact on children without parental care*, disrupting placements and hindering family reintegration efforts for children in alternative care; intensifying deprivation and heightening the risk of physical harm, abuse or trafficking for unaccompanied children.

Based on these findings, and leveraging the ISS’ long-standing expertise in child protection, this brief puts forward a set of **recommendations** designed to (i) *prevent children from losing parental care* in the context of climate change and (ii) *address the specific protection needs of children without parental care* in this context. These recommendations are directed at policy-makers in the fields of climate action and child protection, as well as social workers and other frontline practitioners working with these children locally.



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INTRODUCTION

Globally, children are among those most vulnerable to the disruptive impacts of climate change.¹ Indeed, recent years have witnessed a growing concern over the close links between children's rights and the environment, with the issue becoming increasingly present within official institutional climate processes such as COP meetings. In its General Comment No. 26, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2023) recently emphasised the urgent need to address the adverse effects of environmental degradation, particularly climate change, on children's rights; while UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell has warned that "[t]he global failure to confront the climate crisis (...) has created a child rights crisis" (UNICEF 2023a: 4).

The impacts of climate change on children have already reached alarming levels, and projections are grim: while greenhouse gases already locked in the atmosphere make future impacts unavoidable, current emissions trends continue to increase and climate negotiations leave little room for optimism. Today, approximately 1 billion children live in countries classified as being at extremely high risk to the impacts of climate change (UNICEF 2021: 6), and more than 99 per cent are currently exposed to at least one climate or environmental shock (UNICEF 2023b: 21). *Save the Children* (2023: 6) calculates that children born in 2020 will experience on average twice as many wildfires, 2.6 times as many droughts, 2.8 times as many river floods and crop failures, and 6.8 times more heatwaves, as compared to their grandparents' generation born in 1960. In its latest Assessment Report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2022: 1097) warned that climate change is projected to increase under- and malnutrition and related childhood mortality; by 2030, it is expected to cause between 570,000 and 1 million cases of moderate and severe stunting in children less than five years old, depending on emissions scenarios.

Yet children do not form a unique or homogeneous group – nor are they equally vulnerable to or impacted by climate change. Admittedly, many climatic hazards affect all children more acutely due to a number of shared, baseline child-specific vulnerabilities. Thus, for instance, children are generally less able to regulate their body temperature and more prone to dehydration, making them more vulnerable during heatwaves; they are on average less able than adults to process post-traumatic stress or trauma after extreme events; their developing bodies are weaker than adults' in the face of many diseases, which can have long-term implications for their health (IPCC 2022: 1053; UNICEF 2023a: 7). However, certain groups of children experience particular vulnerabilities or impacts on account of their unique needs and circumstances.

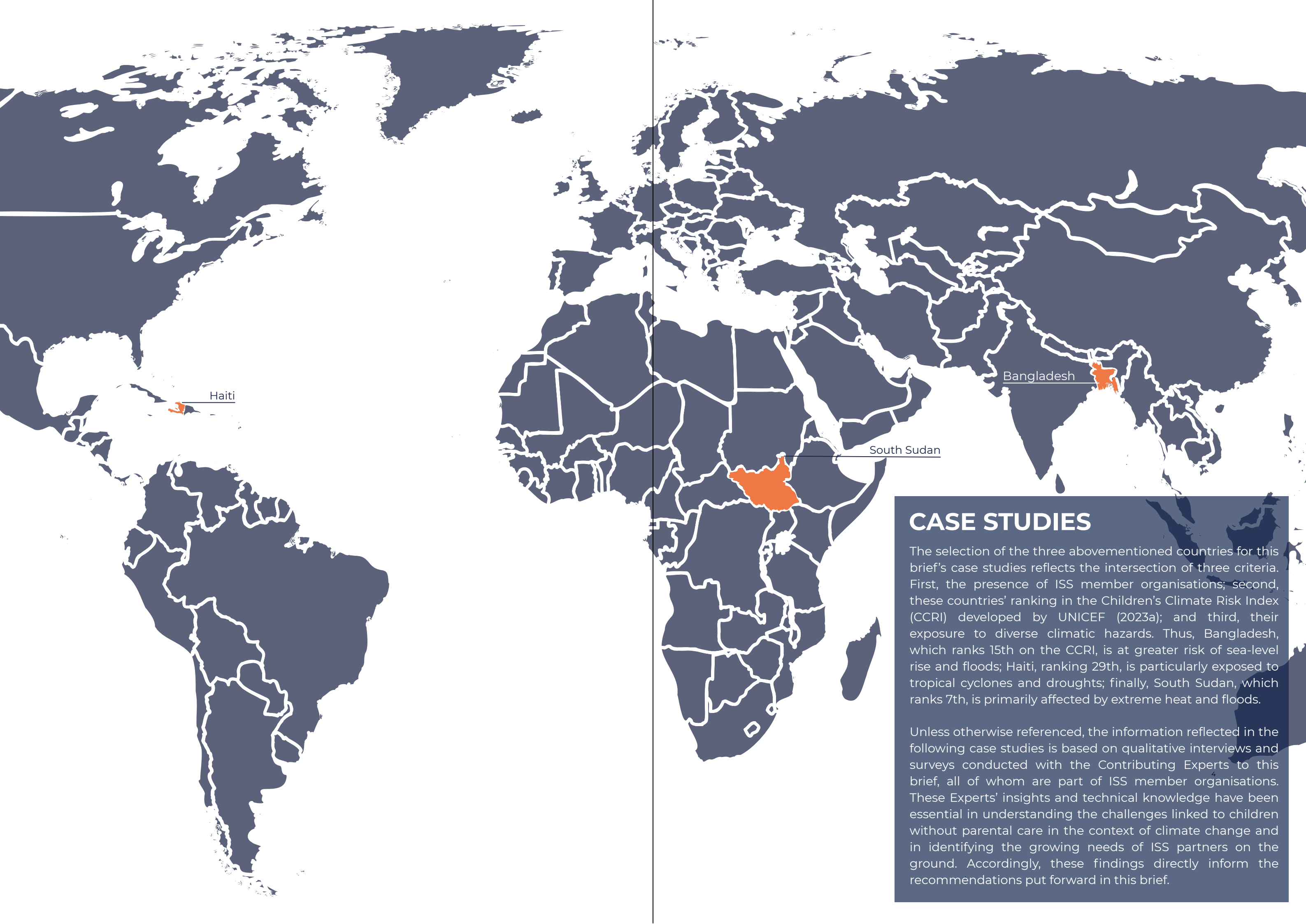
¹ While this brief focuses on children, ISS acknowledges that many other groups, such as Indigenous Peoples, the elderly, and women, among others, are also particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, with some also being of concern to this organization.

One such group is that of *children without parental care* (see [Definitions](#)) who, at the heart of the ISS's actions and advocacy for over 100 years, are of particular concern to this organisation. Lacking the support of their primary caregivers, these children are often at greater – or distinct – risk compared to other children. However, surprisingly little attention has been paid to them in the context of climate change. While a number of reports observe that climatic hazards increase the risk of family separation and unaccompanied migration,² a critical knowledge gap remains regarding the impacts of climate change on alternative care systems and the specific protection needs of children without parental care in the face of climatic hazards.

This brief thus addresses the case of children without parental care in the context of climate change, with two aims. The first is to understand how climate change exacerbates the risk of children losing parental care and to assess its impacts on children without parental care. Given the diversity of climatic and protection contexts, this brief focuses on three illustrative comparative case studies, based on expert consultations: Bangladesh, Haiti, and South Sudan. Drawing on these findings, and leveraging the ISS' long-standing expertise in child protection, the brief's second aim is to advance a number of protection recommendations, designed to prevent children from losing parental care and to address the protection needs of children without parental care in the context of climate change. These recommendations are directed at policy-makers in the fields of climate action and child protection, as well as social workers and other frontline practitioners working with these children locally.³

² See, for instance, IOM et al (2022); Traore Chazalnoël et al. (2020); UNICEF (2025a); Willi & Arisi (2024). However, note that, as recently highlighted by Ronnkvist et al. (2023), mobility among children remains an underexplored issue, and child-specific data is scarce (IDAC 2024).

³ Other frontline practitioners include humanitarian workers, lawyers/jurists, or psychologists, among others.



Haiti

Bangladesh

South Sudan

CASE STUDIES

The selection of the three abovementioned countries for this brief's case studies reflects the intersection of three criteria. First, the presence of ISS member organisations; second, these countries' ranking in the Children's Climate Risk Index (CCRI) developed by UNICEF (2023a); and third, their exposure to diverse climatic hazards. Thus, Bangladesh, which ranks 15th on the CCRI, is at greater risk of sea-level rise and floods; Haiti, ranking 29th, is particularly exposed to tropical cyclones and droughts; finally, South Sudan, which ranks 7th, is primarily affected by extreme heat and floods.

Unless otherwise referenced, the information reflected in the following case studies is based on qualitative interviews and surveys conducted with the Contributing Experts to this brief, all of whom are part of ISS member organisations. These Experts' insights and technical knowledge have been essential in understanding the challenges linked to children without parental care in the context of climate change and in identifying the growing needs of ISS partners on the ground. Accordingly, these findings directly inform the recommendations put forward in this brief.

BANGLADESH

In Bangladesh, where a significant land area lies merely one to three meters above sea level, global sea-level rise – compounded by ongoing local land subsidence – is creating an existential threat for its densely populated coastal belt. Saltwater intrusion, which is compromising water security and rendering land unsuitable for cultivation, is slowly making large areas such as the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest, entirely uninhabitable. Compounding this situation, sudden-onset cyclones, riverine floods, and coastal inundations are also escalating. Together, these pressures are severely increasing threats for children: already in 2019, UNICEF (2019: 7) estimated that around 19.4 million Bangladeshi children were exposed to the most harmful impacts of climate change. And indeed, children are being increasingly exposed to water stress, malnutrition, diseases such as diarrhoea, malaria or typhoid fever, psychological distress, or disruptions in education.

In this scenario, climate pressures are also acting key drivers of family separation. Increasing livelihood challenges for families are further pushing the out-migration of parents abroad in search of opportunity – a common destination being the UK, where many find employment in (sometimes exploitative) domestic work. When this happens, parents are often compelled to leave their children behind in informal kinship care with extended family or community members. However, this practice is being further undermined by climate change: while previous displacements may have already disrupted family or community support networks, fewer households are taking in foster children due to increasing economic stress. In this context, early marriage is increasing, as it is viewed as a key survival strategy by families, or by young girls themselves who might fall prey to older men and migrate to cities to join them. In 2023, 50% of women aged 20-24 were married before the age of 18 (NIPORT and ICF 2023: 18).

Moreover, during disasters – which, in 2024, induced 2,402,000 internal displacements in the country (IDCM 2025: 112) – children sometimes lose their parents to injury or death; amid the ensuing displacements, which often occur in a chaotic manner, many are cut off from their families and find themselves totally alone. Increasing hardship is also pushing more children, especially those from fishing and farming families in coastal and river-island areas, to migrate unaccompanied to cities such as Dhaka and Chittagong, where they end up living in overcrowded and marginalised urban slum and are pushed into child labour in the garment industry or as domestic workers. Indeed, climate challenges are further increasing child labour, in a country where it already impacts around 1.78 million children (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics & ILO, 2023: 17).

For children in alternative care, climate change poses a unique set of challenges. During disasters, the *ad hoc* evacuations that often take place in residential care institutions fail to ensure these children continue to receive care from familiar caregivers during the emergency. Climate challenges are also contributing to overcrowding and resource shortages in such institutions, while simultaneously undermining the prospects of family reintegration as households contend with mounting difficulties. Increased economic stress placed on caregivers, in turn, is also raising the risk of neglect, child labour, and early marriage for children in kinship and foster care – more so than for other children, as they may be more vulnerable to being viewed as 'second class members' within these households.

For the millions of children in street situation in Bangladesh – 3.4 million being a lower range estimate (UNICEF 2024c: 13) – climate change poses a critical threat. Climate adversities exacerbate their struggle and place them at an even greater risk of illness, trauma, or hazardous child labour. Moreover, during disasters, emergency shelters, which are often inaccessible to children with physical disabilities and where transgender adolescents face social exclusion, provide no specific support to unaccompanied children. In the absence of supervision or protection in such critical contexts, these children face an elevated risk of abuse, exploitation or trafficking. Lacking separate rooms, these shelters particularly expose young girls to gender-based violence. Cases of digital abuse and rape are registered every year, and instances of women dying in their homes during disasters after declining to use shelters for fear of such violence have been documented.

⁴For a list of all Contributing Experts by country and organisation, please see [page 2](#) above.



HAITI

Situated directly on the Atlantic hurricane belt, Haiti is one of the world's countries most exposed to tropical cyclones, which are mounting in frequency and intensity with climate change. With the country's mountainous terrain naturally enhancing water runoff, torrential rains such as those triggered by Hurricane Melissa in October this year frequently lead to massive flooding and landslides. Simultaneously, Haiti – whose insularity already naturally limits its freshwater resources – is also increasingly affected by climate change-fuelled droughts, which are slowly eroding the population's agricultural capacity. In a country where armed violence has already driven acute food insecurity for 50% of its population (OCHA 2025a: 8) and where persistent road blockages by armed groups obstruct emergency aid delivery, these climate pressures severely exacerbate children's exposure to malnutrition, famine, water-borne diseases such as cholera, familial neglect, and educational disruptions. As of mid-2025, 3,3 million Haitian children were in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, more than 600,000 were internally displaced, and over 1 million faced high levels of food insecurity (UNICEF 2025b: 2).

In addition, climate challenges are also increasing family separation and leaving growing numbers of children without care. During sudden-onset floods, children sometimes lose their parents, who either perish or disappear amidst the disaster. With residential care institutions, known as *maisons d'enfants* in Haiti, already saturated, many of these children ultimately find themselves alone. In the long-run, climate adversities are increasing economic hardship and compromising parents' ability to meet their children's basic needs. In this context, some children – particularly boys, whom cultural norms grant a greater freedom of movement – migrate alone in search of better opportunities, often heading toward the Dominican Republic, perhaps only to be deported back. Indeed, in 2024 alone, 200,000 Haitians were deported *en masse* from the Dominican Republic (OCHA 2025a). Conversely, when parents themselves are pushed to migrate in search of employment, they are sometimes compelled to leave their children behind without any support.

In other cases, faced with mounting pressures, parents are increasingly sending their children to the city with another family in the hopes of giving them a better life. This culturally rooted practice, often viewed as an act of sacrifice, only fuels the notorious *restavèk* system, whereby children from impoverished families are sent into wealthier households with the expectation that they will receive food, shelter, and education in exchange for performing light domestic chores. In practice, however, *restavèk* – which is widely known as a form of modern-day slavery – exposes children to severe abuse and exploitation, including sexual exploitation. Confronted with this reality, these children often chose to run away alone. Although precise numbers are unavailable, some sources have estimated that, in 2021, between 150,000 and 300,000 children worked in domestic servitude in the country (US Department of State 2024).

Moreover, children in alternative care face unique vulnerabilities in the face of growing climate-related challenges. As climate change slowly exacerbates pressures on residential care institutions, children's living conditions in them also further deteriorate. Sudden disasters often damage the infrastructure, at times disrupting the continuity of care altogether when buildings are no longer safe. Likewise, climate change is increasing financial difficulties for already fragile kinship or foster families, at times resulting in placement breakdown and the abandonment of these children altogether – consequences which can lead to long-term emotional problems and social withdrawal.

In turn, climate adversities are intensifying the suffering of unaccompanied children. Already on the margins of society, these children are often invisible to social services and unable to access humanitarian support after disasters. Moreover, early warning systems are not designed for children to understand and respond to independently, placing these children at a much higher risk than those who are under adult supervision during disasters. Critically, the protection deficits inherent to emergency situations leave these children at an acute risk of abuse, sexual exploitation, trafficking, forced labour, or forced recruitment, in a country in which up to 50% of all armed group members are children (OCHA 2025a: 8).

SOUTH SUDAN

A landlocked country straddling the equator, South Sudan's natural exposure to high temperatures makes it critically sensitive to extreme heatwaves, whose frequency and intensity are increasing with climate change. At the same time, climate change-powered heavy rains are repeatedly unleashing devastating floods, with catastrophic consequences for the large numbers living along the flood-prone banks of the River Nile. Combined with advancing desertification, these converging hazards are devastating for a country with nearly two million internally displaced persons (IDCM 2025: 113), where persistent armed conflict and economic hardship have already left the population with virtually no reserves to draw upon. Consequently, the suffering of South Sudanese children is escalating, as they face mounting malnutrition, famine, water stress, trauma, all leading to developmental setbacks. In 2024, 2.3 million children under five were malnourished (OCHA 2025b) and nearly 5 million were in need of urgent humanitarian assistance (UNICEF 2024a: 1). Moreover, floods interrupted school for 184,178 children, further aggravating a chronic educational crisis in one of the world's few countries where the percentage of out-of-school children (70%) outnumbers the percentage of those in school (UNICEF 2025c: 20; South Sudan Education Cluster 2025: 2).

Against this backdrop, climate change is also fuelling family separation and leaving growing numbers of children without parental care. Climate shocks are increasingly forcing mass displacement: between 2017 and 2023, nearly 1 million child displacements were recorded in the country, floods being the dominant driver, especially in the vast Sudd wetlands and the Nile River basin (UNICEF 2025c: 18). In the chaos of these upheavals, many children end up separated from their families, more so as approximately 50% of displaced persons in South Sudan lack identity documents altogether (UNICEF 2025c: 20). When this happens, many children have no safe place to turn to. Indeed, while informal kinship care has traditionally been a common practice, increasing hardship is straining kinship networks beyond capacity, with children sometimes finding that even their own relatives cannot provide care. Institutional care facilities, in turn, are already overpopulated, and some are even being forced to close or send children away due to mounting pressures, coupled with recent USAID funding cuts. Many of these children are thus left to fend for themselves, with many having no choice but to resort to child labour or child marriage for survival – though the lack of available data makes it difficult to quantify the scale of this phenomenon.

In the long run, the destruction of livelihoods is further eroding families' resilience and, thereby, their parental capacity. Faced with desperation, families are increasingly forced to resort to critical and abusive coping mechanisms. Girls as young as twelve years old are increasingly pushed into early marriages with older men in the hopes that these unions will provide economic security. By contrast, based on the belief among Nilotic tribes that early male migration signals maturity, boys are encouraged to migrate alone to seek food and work. These children often move from rural areas – especially conflict-affected ones where they simultaneously fear trafficking or forced recruitment – to nearby towns in search of opportunity, where they end up alone in street situations.

Yet, unaccompanied children are evidently even more vulnerable in the face of increasing climate change. Unaccompanied minors in South Sudan – some of whom are barely five years old – often congregate in the major towns, where they are forced to beg, collect and resell water bottles or, tragically, in the case of young girls, engage in survival sex. While climate change exacerbates their misery, chronic underfunding in the country means that children in street situations have access to virtually no support from the government or NGOs. Thus, for instance, during periods of prolonged extreme temperatures – which, in 2025, affected 68% of South Sudanese children (UNICEF 2024b: 1) –, they lack any adequate shelter from the burning heat; in the context of famines, many simply die of starvation or dehydration. Moreover, climate-related challenges are increasingly leading these children to cycles of prolonged and repeated displacement, with the trauma and insecurity that led to their initial separation becoming permanent features of their lives. Unaccompanied children in South Sudan thus remain locked into climate-intensified cycles of poverty, abuse, and trauma.





KEY FINDINGS

While the findings of the previous case studies are necessarily non-exhaustive and context-specific, they illustrate some of the myriad links between climate change and children without parental care. In particular, they highlight three main interconnections in this area:

- 1** Climate change *increases the risk of family separation and children losing parental care*. While climate-related disasters increase caregiver mortality and child loss during ensuing displacements, in the long-run increasing hardship undermines the resilience of biological families. This results in family breakdown as parents migrate, leaving their children behind, or as they resort to harmful coping mechanisms such as early marriage, child labour or relinquishment and abandonment.
- 2** Climate change *increases the risk of becoming unaccompanied children, lacking any form of care*. Climate stressors not only increasingly push children to migrate alone in search of opportunity, but also strain alternative care systems, limiting their capacity to accommodate additional children. While climate pressures overburden or fragment (as a result of migration) the family and community networks that have traditionally provided protection, they also fuel capacity shortages in residential care institutions.
- 3** Climate change *has a distinct, often greater, impact on children without parental care*. For children in alternative care, climate pressures further deteriorate living conditions, raise the likelihood of placement disruption, and undermine the possibility of family reintegration. For unaccompanied children, climate pressures critically deepen deprivation and, especially in the absence of adult guidance, place them at a heightened risk of physical harm, abuse, or trafficking, both in the aftermath of sudden disasters and over the long term.

Drawing on these key findings, and leveraging the ISS' long-standing expertise in child protection, the remainder of this section develops a set of protection recommendations designed to (i) *prevent children from losing parental care in the context of climate change* and (ii) *address the specific protection needs of children without parental care in this context*.

These recommendations are directed both at policy-makers in the fields of climate action and child protection as well as social workers and other frontline practitioners, bridging policy frameworks with on-the-ground action.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

This section outlines the key recommendations, organised into four components:

1) Cross-cutting measures, 2) Preventive measures, 3) Disaster protocols, and 4) Loss and damage.

Before outlining these recommendations, however, three notes of caution are in order. First, while the following recommendations draw on insights provided by the case studies, it should be noted that they are not designed as country-specific measures. Instead, the case studies serve as illustrative examples from which broader recommendations are extrapolated – which also implies that not all may be generalisable to every context. Second, these recommendations are not intended as an exhaustive list, but rather as preliminary guidance. Third, although these represent aspirational protection measures, the ISS acknowledges that their implementation will depend on differing national capacities.

CROSS-CUTTING MEASURES

- Develop **specialised capacity-building for social workers on climate-related child protection**, including training on: how climate change increases the risk of family separation and prevention strategies; the specific vulnerabilities and needs of children without parental care in climate contexts; and emergency child protection case management.
- Implement **data collection** to understand when climate change leads to separation and its impacts on children without parental care in specific local contexts, and design **prevention and protection monitoring indicators**.
- Ensure **child participation** in climate action plans, including that of children without parental care, through workshops, youth councils, or other locally adapted engagement mechanisms.
- Foster **cross-sector collaboration and coordination**, engaging local NGOs to leverage their complementary expertise, enhancing public-private (NGOs, humanitarian programs) partnerships, and strengthening referral pathways.
- Promote **awareness-raising and climate literacy**, integrating education on climate change and disaster prevention in school programs, community centres, or other relevant setting.
- Harness **community participation**, training local volunteers and community networks to engage in awareness-raising, emergency kinship and foster care, child identification and family tracing, or outreach programs for children in street situations, among others.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

Recommendations for policy-makers

- Develop/strengthen **infrastructure adaptation programs** through cross-sector collaboration and coordination, to ensure access to relocation (from high-risk to low-risk areas) and climate-resilient upgrades for housing of vulnerable families, residential care institutions, medical centres, and schools, among others.
- Develop/strengthen **livelihood adaptation or transition programs**, including through economic assistance programs such as microcredits or grants.
- Maintain **updated databases of all children in alternative care** to facilitate monitoring during disasters and their return to care once feasible, especially children in residential care who might lack caregivers during emergencies.

Recommendations for social workers and other frontline practitioners

- **Identify and refer** vulnerable biological, kinship or foster families in high-risk areas to infrastructure and livelihood adaptation or transition programs.
- Implement **locally relevant livelihood adaptation or transition programs** aimed at vulnerable biological, kinship or foster families in high-risk areas, and identify and strengthen **community-based mechanisms** that might support such programs.
- **Incorporate high-risk area data into needs assessment** grids when determining the best interests of the child, mitigating risks through the relocation of vulnerable biological, kinship or foster families in high-risk areas when possible; prioritising options in low-risk areas when placement is needed.
- Develop **contingency/emergency care plans** with vulnerable biological, kinship and foster families in high-risk areas, identifying trusted relatives or neighbours responsible for the temporary care of children if family separation occurs.
- Support residential care institutions in developing **continuity of care protocols**, maintaining child-caregiver linkages during disasters through pre-assigned emergency caregivers.

DISASTER PROTOCOLS

Recommendations for policy-makers

- Strengthen **early warning systems** and design them in a **child-adapted manner**, using simple pictograms and child-friendly distribution channels, to ensure children without adult presence receive and comprehend messages.
- Establish **safe evacuation protocols**, including child-safe transportation corridors such as priority buses or boats.
- Design **child-safe emergency shelters** by:
 - Ensuring **accessibility and inclusiveness** for all children, including those with physical disabilities and transgender adolescents, among others.
 - Assigning **children without care** responsible guardians, exclusive accommodation zones, and supervised child-friendly spaces during their stay.
 - Preventing **gender-based violence, child abuse and trafficking**, providing separated and well-lit accommodation and sanitation spaces for boys and girls, requiring all shelter staff to receive child protection training, and ensuring the presence of specialised child protection personnel.
 - Setting up **complaint mechanisms** all children can easily access and use.
 - Guaranteeing **identification, family tracing and reunification mechanisms** are in place.
- Establish safe and accessible **humanitarian migration pathways**⁵ providing temporary protection to biological, kinship and foster families and unaccompanied children, and reinforce the presence of **social workers trained in child-sensitive screening and case management at border points** to ensure identification and monitoring of unaccompanied children.

Recommendations for social workers and other frontline practitioners

- Conduct **community-level awareness-raising** on early warning systems and evacuation protocols, in collaboration with community and religious leaders.
- Ensure the **formulation and distribution of early warning messages** are tailored to unaccompanied children.
- Deliver **evacuation training** for vulnerable biological, kinship and foster families in high-risk areas; to staff in residential care institutions in high-risk areas; and to staff in IPD/refugee camps and day/drop-in centres in high-risk areas, including adapted plans for unaccompanied children.
- Locate **unaccompanied children in street situations** and designate social workers responsible for reaching out to them during emergencies to ensure early timely warning and evacuation.
- Deliver **child protection training** to emergency shelter staff in advance, ensuring effective implementation during disasters.
- Establish and supervise **child-friendly spaces** in emergency shelters.

⁵ In line with the Child Protection Minimum Standards (CPWG, 2012) and the Guiding Principles for Children on the Move in the Context of Climate Change (UNICEF et al., 2022).

- Identify **unaccompanied children arriving in emergency shelters** through immediate registration and initial assessment of all children, and **ensure continuous monitoring** through an assigned guardian during stay.
- Conduct **family tracing for temporarily separated children** arriving in emergency shelters, leveraging local networks and community-based mechanisms.

LOSS AND DAMAGE

Recommendations for policy-makers

- Implement **rapid civil registration recovery mechanisms** to replace birth certificates and guardianship documents lost during disasters, displacements, or evacuations, when they exist, to decrease risk of trafficking and guarantee access to existing services.⁶
- Provide **targeted recovery support for vulnerable biological, kinship and foster families** to strengthen resilience and prevent separation or placement disruption, through cash transfers, nutrition programmes, health care, psychosocial services, and innovative education initiatives.
- Support the **reconstruction and recovery of pre-existing residential care institutions** to ensure placement continuity for children previously in institutional care.
- Provide **targeted recovery support for unaccompanied children** in IDP/refugee camps or street situations, through cash transfers, nutrition programmes, health care, psychosocial services, and innovative education initiatives.
- **Prioritise family reintegration and family-based care**⁷ when separation has occurred, **strictly regulating and supervising the use of residential care**, especially in the aftermath of disasters, and **refrain from investing in new residential care institutions** in response to increasing demand for alternative care.
- Set up **monitoring mechanisms** to protect children and to detect the use of abusive coping mechanisms in biological, kinship, or foster families.
- Establish **child-friendly reporting channels**.

Recommendations for social workers and other frontline practitioners

- Provide **reinforced and specialised psycho-social support** for affected children and families.
- Facilitate **inter-sectoral coordination** to ensure effective case management support across the health, education, social protection, and justice sectors.
- Design **practical tools to track climate-related impacts** affecting children, including children without parental care.
- Develop **monitoring mechanisms** to protect affected children.

⁶ In line with the Child Protection Minimum Standards (CPWG, 2012).

⁷ *Ibid.*

CONCLUSION

Combined with other local, regional, and global forces that imperil children's rights and well-being, climate change is acting as yet another powerful driver of suffering for millions of children across the globe. As the case studies above have evidenced, not only does climate change constitute an independent source of hardship compounding the many other burdens children face – such as deprivation, abuse, or violence –, but its impacts are also often magnified by those same dynamics. More specifically, this brief's findings highlight three key linkages between climate change and children without parental care. Climate change **increases the risk of family separation and of children losing parental care**; it **increases the risk of children ending up without any form of care**, pushing them into street situations or to migrate unaccompanied; and it **has a distinct, often greater, impact on children without parental care**, both for those in alternative care and for those unaccompanied.

Regrettably, major protection gaps continue to leave these children ever more vulnerable in this context. While developments to include children in the climate agenda are slowly underway, it is essential that minors without parental care be considered within these processes too.

One notable example is the introduction of child-centred approaches to climate adaptation monitoring under the UAE-Belém Work Programme, an initiative within the Paris Agreement framework aimed at developing standardised adaptation indicators. Following calls at the programme's launch during COP29 to integrate these child-sensitive climate indicators, discussions were held at this year's recent COP30. Although promising – broader COP shortcomings aside –, this initiative still largely overlooks the specific case of children without parental care.

Yet, if thus far children have generally remained under the radar of climate policies and finance, it comes as no surprise that the plight of minors without parental care in particular continues to linger in the background. This brief has addressed such gaps, aiming to advance progress in this area. Undoubtedly, its case studies have provided a non-exhaustive overview of some of the relevant linkages, and the recommendations put forward provide only preliminary guidance. Nevertheless, its constitute a powerful starting point for reflection, and underscore the urgency of addressing the issue in the fields of climate action and child protection, both at the level of normative frameworks and field implementation.



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