

# 20 In my view: We need to re-align development priorities putting child rights and views at the centre

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Imagine a world where children set the agenda for global development. It's a simple thought that illustrates a stark reality: those absent from decision making are the ones most affected by the climate crisis and inequality and yet the least responsible for the situation we are in. This is a clear example of intergenerational inequality. Children make up one-third of the world's population and one-third of them live at the intersection of poverty and the climate emergency (Wise, 2022<sup>[1]</sup>). Children are uniquely vulnerable to climate change. Experts have long noted that their still-developing physical and psychological systems leave them particularly susceptible to environmental stressors and diseases, water and food scarcity, and disrupted access to basic social services. Climate change is affecting children everywhere, and the world is not doing nearly enough to protect them.

We need to ensure that the rights and the views of children are at the centre of equitable development by realigning development priorities. International civil society organisations like Save the Children play a critical role in advocating for this change as well as responding to many of the challenging situations facing children. We do so by partnering with governments, local organisations, businesses, communities and children themselves.

Just and green transitions present a unique opportunity to advance climate action and sustainability by improving health, education, and gender and social inclusion and by creating decent jobs. But these transitions need to be managed through a human rights- and child rights-based approach so as not to risk worsening existing inequalities. Absent such an approach, these transitions can lead to harmful coping practices, such as gender-based violence, child labour and irregular migration (UNICEF, 2023<sup>[2]</sup>). I have just returned from Kenya, where I witnessed the impossible choices people are faced with when the impacts of climate change and extreme poverty collide. I met pastoral families who have lost everything in recent flooding. One father in Turkana County told me he used to have 70 goats but now he just has 5 and was struggling to feed his family. In fact, many in this community could no longer afford to send their children to school as they needed to prioritise feeding their families.

Some organisations such as the Green Climate Fund are taking steps to increase child-responsiveness. But a report published last year by Save the Children and partners found that only 2.4% of climate finance from four of the major multilateral climate funds supported child-responsive projects (Knaute, Pegram and Jenks, 2023<sup>[3]</sup>). Equally worrying is that 93% of climate finance reported by wealthy countries between 2011 and 2020 was taken directly from development aid (Hattle, 2023<sup>[4]</sup>). Consequently, essential programmes on health, education and child protection are inadequately resourced and don't reach scale, threatening progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. In low-income countries, the financing gap for universal social protection systems, including healthcare, stands at a staggering 52.3% of gross

domestic product annually (Cattaneo et al., 2024<sup>[5]</sup>). This underinvestment in children and their climate resilience must be addressed as a top priority.

To prevent the exacerbation of poverty and inequalities amid green transitions, decision makers must prioritise the rights of children and their families and communities. Protecting child development outcomes is both cost-effective and key for strengthening human capital and community resilience (Devercelli and Beaton-Day, 2020<sup>[6]</sup>). It is an investment in the future. Concrete steps to protect and empower children include investing in resilient social protection, education, and child protection and health systems that respond to the unique needs of children and engaging in cross-sectoral collaboration that promotes holistic and durable solutions for children and their families.

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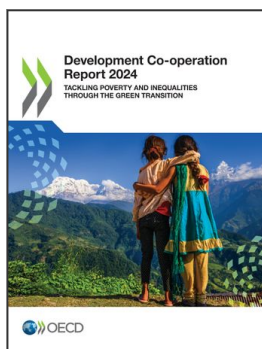
Critically, these actions should be informed by the perspectives of children themselves. [Generation Hope](#) is Save the Children's campaign working with and for children through action on the climate and economic inequality crisis. Children from across the globe are calling for leaders to provide spaces for them to contribute to decision-making processes. Bhumika, a 16-year-old campaigner from Nepal, appealed to us recently, saying, "I am small, but my ideas are big. I am asking [leaders] please provide space for me to speak freely and share all my ideas. When you listen to me, you are listening to all future generations." We need to see more governments and businesses listening to children's views to ensure that their perspectives inform the decisions that are being taken.

The climate crisis is not just changing the planet. It is changing children. Save the Children's founder, Eglantyne Jebb, has said, "Every generation of children offers mankind the possibility of rebuilding his ruin of a world." Her words not only remind us of our responsibilities but also offer hope despite the challenges. If we act decisively, we can ensure that future generations of children will be born into a world where sustainable development is not a distant goal but a tangible reality. By embedding child rights into the heart of our development strategies today, we are laying the groundwork for a future that is greener, fairer and more sustainable for every child.

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