



Thirsting for a Future

Water and children in a changing climate

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Foreword

Water is elemental. Without it, nothing can grow. And without safe water, children may not survive.

Children without access to safe water are more likely to die in infancy – and throughout childhood – from diseases caused by water-borne bacteria, to which their small bodies are more vulnerable.

When these diseases don't kill outright, they can contribute to the stunting of children's bodies and minds – and the blighting of their futures – by undermining their ability to absorb nutrients.

When a community's water supply dries up or becomes contaminated – because of drought, because of flooding, because of conflicts that undermine infrastructure and prevent people from reaching safe water sources – such diseases abound.

Thirst itself kills children and jeopardizes their futures.

And beyond health, a lack of safe water and sanitation exposes children to other threats to their wellbeing. Many children in drought-affected areas spend hours every day collecting water, missing out on a chance to go to school. Girls are especially vulnerable to attack during these times.

The effects of climate change intensify all these risks by reducing the quantity and quality of water. Rising temperatures

help bacteria and other pathogens to flourish. Rising sea levels salinate freshwater sources. Increased flooding washes away sanitation systems and contaminates drinking water supplies, bringing cholera and other killer diseases. Disappearing glaciers leave land dry and arid.

We see the terrible effects of water scarcity today all over the world – and nowhere more tragically than in parts of Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen, where drought conditions and conflict are producing deadly effects. Nearly 1.4 million children face imminent risk of death from severe acute malnutrition as famine grows in these areas. In Ethiopia alone, we anticipate that more than 9 million people will be without safe drinking water in 2017.

As industrialization and demographic shifts increase consumption needs, demand for water will continue to rise – while supplies diminish. By 2040, 1 in 4 children – 600 million children – will live in areas of extremely high water stress. It should come as no surprise that the poorest, most disadvantaged children will suffer the most.

But this crisis is not inevitable.

This report is the third in a series that explores different ways that climate change endangers the lives and futures of our children – and shows how we can and must take collective action to address these threats.

Governments need to start planning for changes in water availability and demand in the coming years. Climate risks should be integrated into all water and sanitation-related policies and services, and investments should be made to target high-risk populations. Businesses also play a role – supporting communities in preventing contamination and depletion of safe water sources. Communities themselves should explore ways to diversify water sources and to increase their capacity to store water safely.

Most important, children’s access to safe water for drinking should be made a priority.

In a changing climate, we must change the way we work to reach those who are most vulnerable. One of the most effective ways we can do that is safeguarding their access to safe water.

It’s elemental.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anthony Lake". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Anthony Lake
Executive Director, UNICEF

Executive summary

No one suffers more from a change in climate than a child. Their small bodies are vulnerable to the changes in the air they breathe, the water they drink and the food they eat. For many children, a change in climate is felt through a change in water. In times of drought or flood, in areas where the sea level has risen or ice and snow have unseasonably melted, children are at risk, as the quality and quantity of water available to them is under threat. When disasters strike, they destroy or disrupt the water and sanitation services that children rely on.

Climate change is contributing to a growing water crisis and putting the lives of millions of children at risk.

The changing climate is one of many forces contributing to an unfolding water crisis. In the coming years, demand for water will increase as populations grow and move, industries develop and consumption increases. This can lead to water stress, as increasing demand and use of water strains available supplies.

By 2040, almost 600 million children are projected to be

The world is on the brink of a crisis, as the combination of water stress and climate change is creating a deadly outlook for children. As water stress increases, the effects of climate change threaten to destroy, contaminate or dry up the water that remains.

For children, water is life.

Without water, children simply cannot survive. When forced to rely on unsafe water, they are at risk of deadly diseases and severe malnutrition. Every day, more than 800 children under 5 die from diarrhoea linked to inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene.¹ Unsafe water and sanitation are also linked to stunted growth. Around 156 million children under five years old suffer from stunting, which causes irreversible physical and cognitive damage and impacts children's performance in school.²

The deprivations caused by a lack of safe water and sanitation can compound and affect children's health, education and future prospects, creating a cycle of inequality that affects generations.

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