

FIGHT FOR FUTURES

Four ways the UK can tackle the climate crisis now – and protect children’s futures



Children’s futures at risk

Introduction

For children in the world’s poorest places, the impact of the climate crisis is devastating. It is threatening progress on key development goals, like education and health coverage, and compounding the impact of humanitarian disasters. Children who have the least are often suffering the most.

In countries around the world, Save the Children is responding to the impacts of the climate crisis on children. But children are not passive victims. Instead they are pushing for change.

Children’s views, actions and demands on tackling the climate crisis and poverty are among the boldest and most tenacious. In recent years, children’s and young people’s movements have helped push the climate crisis up the political agenda. More than a third of children responding to our global survey were already campaigning or wanted to start doing so.¹

In 2022, in the largest global listening project of its kind, Save the Children asked more than

50,000 children from more than 40 countries, including more than 3,000 children and young people across the UK,² about their thoughts, feelings and hopes about the world and their future. They told us about their experience of the climate crisis and economic inequality, and about the changes they want world leaders to make.

This briefing outlines the findings of this listening project and the implications for the UK and its leaders. It sets out an ambitious but achievable agenda for the UK to build its standing as a compassionate and smart policy actor on the global stage and lay the foundations for global prosperity to benefit children both here in the UK and around the world. To achieve this, the government should:

- 1 Put children at the centre of the British climate response and diplomacy
- 2 Accelerate emissions reduction at home and abroad
- 3 Increase UK funding to target the climate crisis and inequality across lower income countries
- 4 Shift power and unlock international finance.



Save the Children

The climate crisis threatens children's futures

Over the last 30 years the world has made significant progress in increasing global prosperity. Developing economies have grown, health coverage for the world's poorest has improved, more children – especially girls – have been able to go to school, and child mortality has fallen.

But progress is stalling. The very process of carbon-intensive industrialisation, which enabled economies like the UK to grow and has supported progress on poverty reduction, is driving the climate crisis. And the climate crisis is making everyday life harder for the world's poorest children and compounding the impact of humanitarian disasters. All too often, it is children living in the poorest countries, which have contributed the least to global greenhouse emissions, who are suffering the most from the climate crisis.

Globally, children in our survey are not only seeing the impact of the climate crisis in their daily lives, but also have a strong sense that this has been getting worse over time. The data backs this up: without urgent action, a child born today is likely to experience twice as many wildfires over their lifetime as their grandparents and to have 2.8 times the exposure to crop failure, 2.6 times as many drought events, 2.8 times as many river floods, and 6.8 times more heatwaves.³

In 2022, following years of successive failed rains, children in the Horn of Africa are facing famine-like conditions. The scale of the resulting humanitarian disaster is staggering, with hundreds of thousands of children at risk of literally starving to death. We estimate that in the worst-hit areas, one person is dying every 48 seconds.⁴

In Pakistan, in August 2022, floods induced by the climate crisis covered around a third of the country. Homes, livelihoods and lives were destroyed. As in any emergency, it is children who are most at risk.

In countries around the world, children from the poorest and most disadvantaged communities are being hit hardest by climate disasters,⁵ entrenching inequalities both within countries and globally. Our

66 Poorest countries will be affected most by climate change – yet they are the least responsible. 99

Krishan, Member of Save the Children's Youth Advisory Board

66 People who are least able to combat climate change will be most affected by it. 99

Ellie, Member of Save the Children's Youth Advisory Board

research shows 774 million children globally are both living in poverty *and* exposed to high climate risk.⁶ With the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recently confirming that poverty increases vulnerability to climate disasters,⁷ the evidence is clear: the climate crisis and poverty are inextricably linked.

We can see that here in the UK too: 23% of children are both poor and affected by at least one extreme climate event per year.⁸ The climate crisis drove the UK's record-breaking temperatures of 2022 and has been linked to an increase in droughts, floods and wildfires. And the war in Ukraine has exposed our continued reliance on fossil fuels as a major vulnerability, which is contributing to soaring energy bills, fuelling inflation, and leaving millions of UK families struggling.

Children told us that governments should step up to protect their futures

When we spoke to children in the UK and around the world, the clear message was that they are deeply worried about the impact the climate crisis and poverty are having on their lives and the lives of children globally. They want governments to step up and take decisive, meaningful action to tackle both the climate crisis and poverty. The rich insights and understanding we gained of children's experiences and priorities have shaped the policy recommendations in this briefing.

In the UK, children spoke about their hopes for the future. But they are also worried about current domestic challenges like the ongoing cost of living crisis and the impact the climate crisis might have on them. They want to see bold action from the government and other actors, like businesses, who have the power to protect their futures. Children in the UK were deeply concerned about the impacts of poverty and the climate crisis on children in lower income countries.

- 70% of children in the UK said they were worried about the world they would inherit
- Almost 90% of them said they think these issues are affecting children globally
- Three-quarters of children want the government to take more action to tackle poverty and the climate crisis.

66 The responsibility of tackling climate change lies with decision-makers. 99

Child, aged 13, South-East of England

Three-quarters of British adults are also concerned about the impact of the climate crisis, with some expressing concern for the impact that this was going to have on future generations. When asked about a range of issues, climate change was the second biggest concern facing adults in Great Britain.⁹

Many children are experiencing the devastating impact of the climate crisis first-hand, such as extreme temperatures, flooding and drought. Some described feelings of anger at inaction and fear for the future, and spoke poignantly about the impact on their mental health.

In Africa and the Middle East, in particular, children drew links between the climate crisis and increased hunger, particularly its effects on agriculture. Children in countries that have been hit particularly hard by the current global food and nutrition crisis are seeing, hearing about or experiencing first-hand its extreme impact, including malnutrition-related sickness and death, suicides, child labour, and child marriage. Children in all regions referred to rising food and living costs, with some connecting this to the climate crisis.

Children didn't shy away from the reality of these challenges. Their message was straightforward: they want those with power, particularly governments, to take the difficult decisions and bold action required to protect their futures. As one child in the UK put it: **"Adults should make decisions so things happen and change quickly – hard decisions, so things change now."**



PHOTO: MICHAEL TSEGAYE/SAVE THE CHILDREN

66 We are seeing and living the climate crisis. 99

Amina*, 17, climate change activist in Somalia

* name changed



Juana, age five, in Guatemala's Quiché district. Droughts here are becoming more frequent and more severe. With child malnutrition rates among the highest in the world, children's futures are under threat.

PHOTO: LUISA DÓRR / SAVE THE CHILDREN

A critical moment for the UK to deliver for children

The huge challenges facing children must push the UK government to create a better world for them. Right now, there is the opportunity to change the way we do business, trade, provide aid and heat our homes – so that we help make sure our shared planet is safe and secure for current and future generations.

As one of the world's richest nations and, in the City of London, home to one of the largest global financial centres, the UK has a disproportionately big influence over global financial architecture and has the ability to help shape where and how money flows around the world. Britain can use that power to take the lead in mobilising money and pioneering green investment. In the wake of Brexit, the UK has greater autonomy in how it conducts its global trade and economic affairs

to deliver on the UK's ambition to be a force for good in the world.

The UK should harness this economic clout, capacity for innovation and the government's ambition to be a "force for good in the world", to tackle the root causes of poverty and create a stabler, greener and more secure planet for us all.

From our work in disadvantaged communities across the UK, we recognise the significant challenges facing children and families in this country. While this briefing touches on some of those issues, more comprehensive analysis and policy recommendations for the UK's specific domestic policy can be found in briefings and resources published by our partners – the Warm this Winter Campaign and The Climate Coalition.

Policy approaches to protect children's futures

There are many policy decisions – both domestic and international – that the UK government could implement to address the interlinked challenges of the climate crisis, poverty and inequality that are affecting children. The following list outlines several of the most important and impactful opportunities available to the UK government today.

1 Put children at the centre of the British climate response and diplomacy

To ensure children's rights are at the centre of its approach, the UK government should:

- 1. Strengthen the focus on children across all UK international climate and development policy decisions.** The UK government should focus its international investment in areas with a disproportionate impact on children – including education, health, nutrition and social protection. The commitment to put children's rights at the centre of international development policy should be matched with improved monitoring and evaluation systems that include child-sensitive metrics to transparently assess the quantity and impact of this funding.
- 2. Sign and implement the declaration on children, youth and climate action,¹⁰** adhering to all of the relevant commitments to accelerate the development and implementation of child-centred climate policies at the national level.
- 3. Provide opportunities and mechanisms for children to participate meaningfully in decision-making in a standardised and consistent way,** such as through dedicated children and youth advisory boards across government departments, and child-friendly online and in-person platforms during agenda-setting and idea formation stages of policy-making. Children offer a new perspective and unique understanding of how children are being affected by the climate and inequality crisis – giving them a say in the development of policies that will shape their future is therefore not only moral and just, but necessary for good policy design, as children contribute comments, ideas and perspectives that might otherwise be absent.

66 [adults] need to listen to young people and value the voices of young people. 99

Girl, aged 18, Wales

66 If they changed their policies and made improvements for the better, then I think the government could have a big impact on eradicating or at the very least minimising economic inequality and climate change. 99

Young person, aged 18, East of England

- 4. Provide spaces for children to participate in international delegations and support them to engage meaningfully in international forums.** Children should be present in all spaces where decisions that impact them are being discussed. But simply being present is not enough - the UK government should use its resources and power to support children to participate actively and meaningfully and to shape global discussions and debates.
- 5. Strengthen the focus on children's rights in the private sector by improving reporting standards for the social component of environmental, social and governance (ESG) monitoring and evaluation, with a particular focus on children's rights.** Currently, there is a lack of consensus on what the S in ESG should include, ranging from human rights, including children's rights, to modern slavery, corporate security, diversity, employee relations, supply chain sustainability, consumer relations and personal data protection. The lack of consistent standards underpinning social measurement increases costs and makes S reporting more difficult to verify compared with E and G. Improved reporting standards, which include an explicit focus on children's rights, would help consumers and investors to make better informed decisions about where to put their money and create incentives for more responsible business that protects children's futures.

2 Accelerate emissions reduction at home and abroad

As a major carbon emitter, the UK bears a disproportionate responsibility both for the climate crisis and its resolution. Reducing our emissions at home is a crucial way for the UK government to step up for children impacted by the climate crisis overseas. And yet we are failing to reduce emissions at anywhere near the pace required.¹¹

Fortunately, investing in green energy, decarbonisation and energy efficiency remains a massive economic

opportunity that can create millions of jobs and reskilling opportunities both here in the UK and abroad – helping to achieve emissions reductions and to grow the economy and improve livelihoods.¹²

To accelerate the process of decarbonisation both at home and abroad, the UK government must:

- 1. Ensure UK decarbonisation efforts are accelerated across all sectors, fully planned and costed, and not undermined by contradictory policies entrenching our reliance on fossil fuels.** The UK has made some progress towards decarbonisation, but this has been slow, varies widely across sectors, and may be undermined by inconsistent policy decisions – for example, to increase oil and gas extraction in the North Sea. Although the UK has seen a 47% decrease in greenhouse gas emissions over the last 30 years, emissions from the transport sector have only declined by 5%.¹³ The difference in progress towards emission reduction across different sectors has impacts on children and their health – air pollution from the transport sector, for example, has a disproportionate adverse effect on children’s health.¹⁴
- 2. Implement the policy recommendations from The Climate Coalition (TCC)¹⁵ aimed at making the UK’s homes warmer, bills cheaper and air cleaner.** The TCC asks include committing an additional £9.75 billion over the remaining course of this parliament to improving home energy efficiency, tripling well-sited onshore wind and solar infrastructure by 2030, speeding up the transition to zero-emission vehicles with no loopholes for polluting hybrid vehicles, introducing a Frequent Flyer Levy to reduce aviation emissions, and investing in high-quality electrified public transport as well as walking and cycling paths.
- 3. Fund support for UK households and expand efforts to tackle the climate crisis, including through strengthened windfall taxes on the fossil fuel industry.** The fossil fuel industry has made record profits as a result of soaring energy prices throughout 2022 – with the world’s seven largest oil companies making a cumulative £150 billion in the first nine months of the year.¹⁶ The recent expansions of the windfall tax on energy companies are welcomed, but should be seen as a platform from which to take additional measures. Windfall taxes have the potential to raise billions to support the poorest households from rising bills as well as accelerate the UK’s transition away from fossil fuels if loopholes are closed and levies are implemented in a way that incentivises green energy expansion.

66 Stop fighting and work towards sharing resources and technologies for a healthier and safer planet. 99

Boy, aged 16, East of England

- 4. Ensure actual spending practices are in line with policy positions, particularly around funding fossil fuels abroad.** We welcome the UK government’s commitment to end taxpayer support for fossil fuels abroad.¹⁷ However, loopholes and exceptions remain that allow UK funding – for example, through British International Investment and UK Export Finance – to support fossil fuels and other heavy-emitting projects that continue to destroy the environment and contribute to the climate crisis.¹⁸ Both institutions should take urgent measures to phase out investments in fossil fuel projects and redirect finance towards supporting a green and just transition.

3 Increase UK funding to target the climate crisis and inequality across lower income countries

Tackling the climate crisis and growing global inequality will not be cheap – achieving net zero by 2050 is estimated to require \$3–5 trillion of additional spending per year globally,¹⁹ and the current estimated annual financing gap for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in lower income countries is \$4.2 trillion per year.²⁰ But raising this money is achievable. To put these figures in context, the combined GDP of OECD countries was over \$67 trillion in 2021.²¹ Higher income countries, like the UK, must do more to use their wealth and power to address the climate crisis and growing inequality across the world.

For the UK government, this means raising funding across a number of important areas:

- 1. Restore Official Development Assistance (ODA) to 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) and count in-country refugee costs, climate finance and debt relief as new and additional to 0.7%.** Between 2020/21 and 2021/22, the UK government cut its

66 Richer [countries] should pay back poorer [countries] since it’s their fault the disparity is so large in the first place. 99

Girl, aged 18, East of England

ODA for health by 25%, humanitarian assistance by 40%, and education, gender and equality by 50%. Counting other spending, such as growing in-country refugee costs, climate finance or debt relief, within the slashed aid budget – which is already fully allocated – will result in further deep cuts for programmes that benefit the most marginalised children across the world. We welcome the government’s recent decision to remove the strict cap on the aid budget to accommodate some of these rising costs, but this is no replacement for a return to 0.7%.

2. Ramp up International Climate Finance (ICF) spending to the UK government’s “fair share” and lead efforts to form a new international ICF pledge in the scale of trillions. Even the lowest estimates of the UK government’s “fair share” of the broken pledge to provide developing countries \$100 billion per year in climate financing are above the UK government’s current ICF commitments. The UK must ramp up its ICF, continue to deliver its committed £11.6 billion of ICF as ODA,²² allocate at least 50% to adaptation funding, and continue to invest in growing global and local anticipatory action and preparedness efforts. The UK government must also exercise leadership to help build international consensus around a new science-based target

66 [the government should] create funding that is then given to poorer countries to help solve the problems. **99**

Boy, aged 18, London

to replace the \$100 billion pledge with a New Collective Quantified Goal post-2025 that responds to the needs and priorities of lower income countries, includes loss and damage finance, and appropriately reflects the scale of the challenge.

3. Influence the development of the newly agreed Loss and Damage Fund to ensure children’s rights are embedded in its development and implementation. We welcome the decision at COP27 to create a Loss and Damage Fund by the end of 2023. The UK government must now use its power and influence to ensure meaningful child participation throughout the Fund’s development. The Fund’s guiding principles and policies must be centred in children’s rights. The UK government should also show leadership, while working together with other countries, to put forward ambitious new, additional, grants-based financing for the Fund and ensure it is fully operationalised with money flowing to countries in need by 2024.



Save the Children UK’s Youth Advisory Board. Ayesha, 16, says that they may be young but “we still have valid opinions and ideas on how we can make this world a better place”.

4. **Reallocate more Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) to countries that need them, including through the African Development Bank (AfDB), which are counted as additional to existing ODA commitments.** The UK government's commitment to recycling 20% of its £20 billion SDR allocation²³ does not go far enough. The UK and other advanced economies should recycle more of their recent SDR allocations – at least matching France's commitment to recycle 30% of their allocation – to countries in need and pioneer recycling SDRs through the AfDB, who have put forward concrete proposals for how they could use recycled SDRs.²⁴

4 Shift power and unlock international finance

Higher income countries like the UK must share power more equally in the governance of the global financial system so that lower income countries have a stronger voice and benefit more from decisions that are made. Pursuing bold systemic changes to the global financial architecture has the potential to unlock the necessary funding to build green and just economies for all.

The UK government must:

1. **Play a leading role in reforming the global debt architecture.** The mounting debt crisis is undermining the ability of governments in many lower income countries to make the investments needed to spur green and just development. Lower income countries spend an estimated five times more on external debt payments than on projects to protect people from the climate crisis²⁵ and currently, more than half of low-income countries are either in or at high risk of debt distress.²⁶ There are several areas of debt reform where the UK can make a difference, including on improving transparency, pushing for IMF surcharge reform and replenishment of the Catastrophe Containment and Relief Trust (CCRT) which provides grants for debt relief for lower income countries affected by disasters. Two of the most important and immediate ways the UK government can help tackle the debt crisis are:
 - a. **Champion reforms of the G20 Common Framework,** including improving transparency and certainty about the process to encourage countries to apply, and compelling private creditors to participate on comparable terms.
 - b. **Assess legislative options under English Law** to prevent creditors from suing for more than they would have received if they'd taken part

66 [some people] are more powerful and rich and therefore they and their countries need to take responsibility for sharing resources and thoughts. 99

Girl, aged 17, South-West of England

in a Common Framework or other Paris Club debt treatment. Fear of getting sued by private creditors is a legitimate fear among many countries seeking to suspend debt repayment during debt relief initiatives. UK leadership in this area is critical, along with other key jurisdictions where debt is held, such as New York.

2. **Play a leading role in creating fairer global tax systems.** Unjust financial systems anywhere threaten economic progress everywhere because they provide havens for tax evasion and illicit financial flows, driving up inequality, enabling crime and kleptocracy, and preventing countries from raising the domestic resources they are entitled to, which could otherwise fund their public services and progress economic development. Over \$483 billion is estimated to be lost to multinational corporations and wealthy individuals using tax havens to underpay tax.²⁷ This enormous loss of revenue undermines progress on development goals. Among other activities, such as supporting efforts to strengthen domestic revenue mobilisation, the UK government must:
 - a. **Crack down on the UK's own role in enabling tax evasion and illicit financial flows by improving transparency around company ownership and activities, and properly funding enforcement agencies.** A lack of transparency in the UK financial systems allows money to flow with anonymity between shell companies and offshore tax havens – including in the UK crown dependencies and overseas territories.²⁸ The UK government must champion transparency – for example, through improvements to country-by-country reporting following the example of Australia;²⁹ Companies House reform to reduce the anonymity of corporate entities; and ensuring that public registers of beneficial ownership in the crown dependencies and overseas territories are implemented quickly. Any attempts to crack down on the UK's role in enabling unjust global tax systems must be matched with sufficient investment in enforcement agencies.

b. **Support calls from lower income countries to introduce a UN Tax Convention.** Following the recent adoption of a resolution on international tax cooperation at the UN, the UK government should support efforts to introduce a UN Tax Convention, which – among other benefits – has the potential to create an inclusive global tax body with all countries able to participate on equal footing, strengthen the fight against illicit financial flows, and reduce complexity in the global tax system.³⁰

3. **Advance global trade justice to ensure trade supports green and fair economic development both in the UK and across the world.** Trade has the power to support inclusive and thriving economies while supporting development objectives and poverty alleviation if designed and implemented with these priorities in mind. If not, it risks exploitation of both people and the environment and can trap lower income countries in poverty cycles through a reliance on primary goods exports. There are many ways that the government can ensure UK trade is used to advance progress towards global climate targets and development objectives. Some important and immediate steps include:

a. **Publish a holistic trade strategy that aligns trade, development and climate objectives.** The UK, unlike the EU and many others,³¹ has not published a trade strategy outlining how trade can support and align with other priorities. A published trade strategy would support a more coherent and consistent approach to the UK government’s international policy – ensuring all trade deals with individual countries or trade blocks are aligned with a central trade strategy as well as with wider international policy objectives, including on climate, poverty alleviation, human rights, and more.

b. **Improve the scrutiny process for trade deals through consistent public consultations.** The UK government must introduce stricter transparency procedures throughout the development and implementation of trade deals and ensure experts and interested parties from across all sectors can meaningfully engage and influence these processes.

c. **Ensure emissions are not offshored, by ensuring UK imports meet fair environmental standards.** The UK government must ensure that greenhouse gas emissions and other environmental harms are not simply shifted from the UK to other countries with more lax regulations. According to the Fairtrade Foundation, almost half of the



greenhouse gases linked to UK consumption are produced overseas.³² Environmental standards must be designed in a way that is flexible and can take into account different contexts across countries, ensuring that lower income countries are not penalised for not being able to afford a faster transition to decarbonisation.³³

The climate crisis is a child’s rights issue because it impacts every aspect of children’s lives, from access to education, to their health, to the likelihood of experiencing violence and conflict. And ultimately, children will have to live with the consequences of the climate crisis on the world they inherit. As 15-year-old Arunima, a member of our Youth Advisory Board, told us: **“Climate change is a children’s issue. The world will be left in our hands and it will be up to us to decide what we can do with it.”**

Despite this, there is hope for a better future, and children all over the world are already stepping up and fighting for it. An 18-year-old boy in London summed up a sentiment we heard from children across the globe when he told us: **“My generation is willing to work hard for the future and fight to save the world.”**

But the burden shouldn’t fall on the smallest shoulders. It is time for rich and powerful countries, like the UK, to do their part. The UK government has both the responsibility and the means to step up and protect children’s futures. A green and fair future is possible if we act now.

Endnotes

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Cover photo: Families living on Cambodia's vast Tonle Sap lake are being hit hard by a dramatic fall in fish stocks, caused partly by the climate crisis. (Photo: Linh Pham/Save the Children)
Design: GrasshopperDesign.net

Published by
Save the Children
1 St John's Lane
London EC1M 4AR
UK
+44 (0)20 7012 6400
savethechildren.org.uk
First published 2022
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The Save the Children Fund is a charity registered in England and Wales (213890), Scotland (SC039570) and the Isle of Man (199). Registered Company No. 178159.