

Position statement on climate change and child health

As the South African Child Health Priorities Association, we commit to advocate for the prioritisation and protection of children's health in our efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

We note with concern, the latest findings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change as outlined in their [2023 Synthesis Report](#), that:

- Human-induced climate change is posing an existential threat to human and planetary health. Greenhouse gas emissions have continued to rise, driven by our relentless exploitation and over consumption of natural resources and fossil fuels, and the health system is itself a significant contributor to global warming.
- Climate change is disrupting weather and planetary support systems on a global scale, with rising temperatures and extreme weather events threatening food supplies and human health; deepening inequalities; and fuelling conflict, violence and displacement. With every small increment in global warming, these impacts will intensify, giving rise to cascading risks that will become increasingly difficult to manage.
- Those least responsible for causing climate change are likely to be disproportionately affected, which includes children who are marginalised and vulnerable given their age and stage of development. Africa is the region most vulnerable to climate change, and by 2050 will be home to 40% of all children. In the 2022 Global Adaptation Initiative index,¹ South Africa ranked 96 out of 182 countries with respect to climate change vulnerability.
- We have a limited and rapidly closing window of opportunity in which to take action. This will require strong leadership and the political will to advocate for deep, rapid, and immediate practices to mitigate the effects of greenhouse gas emissions and ensure a resilient and sustainable planet for current and future generations.

As paediatricians and members of the child health community, we already bear witness to the impact of climate change on children's physical and mental health. We are also uniquely positioned to work together with children and young people to raise awareness and take action to mitigate the impact of climate change on child and adolescent health and wellbeing.

We therefore commit to:

1. Advocate for global, national and local action to rapidly reduce carbon emissions to limit global temperature rise.
2. Advocate for a just and fair transition to renewable energy and a sustainable food system; *and for those countries and corporations most responsible for climate change to fund efforts to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change in those countries who are least responsible.*
3. Advocate for the protection of children and the most vulnerable members of our society from the inevitable impacts of climate change and adaptation measures that actively seek to uphold our constitutional rights, reduce socio-economic inequalities, and address the social determinants of health.

¹ Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative ([ND-GAIN](https://gain.nd.edu/our-work/country-index/rankings/)) index; available at <https://gain.nd.edu/our-work/country-index/rankings/>; accessed on 29 November 2023

4. Advocate for child-centred responses to climate change to ensure that the specific needs and vulnerabilities of children are explicitly and concretely addressed in climate policies, programmes and adaptation plans.
5. Advocate for the adaptation, upgrading and climate-proofing *children's homes, schools, ECD centres and communities* to protect children from the effects of extreme heat and weather events.
6. Advocate for a greener health system through efficient design and use of water, energy and other resources within the health care system to reduce both waste and our carbon footprint.
7. Foster awareness, empower and educate our colleagues and the broader child health community regarding the science of climate change, its underlying causes and impacts on child health and wellbeing, with an emphasis on social justice and strategies to reduce carbon emissions and to prevent and mitigate the impacts on children's physical and mental health.
8. Promote climate education of children and families in schools and communities on how best to protect and care for children's physical and mental health in the context of extreme heat and climate change.
9. Strengthen community-based services and the district health system to ensure that they are better equipped to manage the stresses and shocks of climate change, and to support the health of children and families close to their homes.
10. Adopt a proactive approach by developing clinical guidelines and providing anticipatory guidance on how to prevent and care for children affected by high temperatures, extreme weather events and climate change.
11. Partner with local government and colleagues in disaster management to build climate-resilient healthcare systems by enhancing emergency preparedness and incorporating the effects of climate change in health system planning, to ensure a child-centred response to extreme weather events.
12. Lead by example by reducing our own consumption and carbon footprints, including driving less, flying less and using more sustainable transport options, eating less meat and more plant-based diets, using energy efficient and water saving appliances, opting for eco-friendly, recycled and locally made products and supporting tree planting initiatives and maintaining green spaces in the community.
13. *Reduce the carbon footprint of our meetings and conferences, refuse sponsorship from the fossil fuel industry and advocate for divestment in the fossil fuel industry at an institutional and individual level.*
14. Partner with academic institutions, communities and children themselves to strengthen surveillance systems, support research and innovation in climate change, build an evidence base, and raise awareness of the impacts of climate change on child health.