

Unless we act now



The impact of climate change on children

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This report, additional online content and corrigenda are available at www.unicef.org/environment

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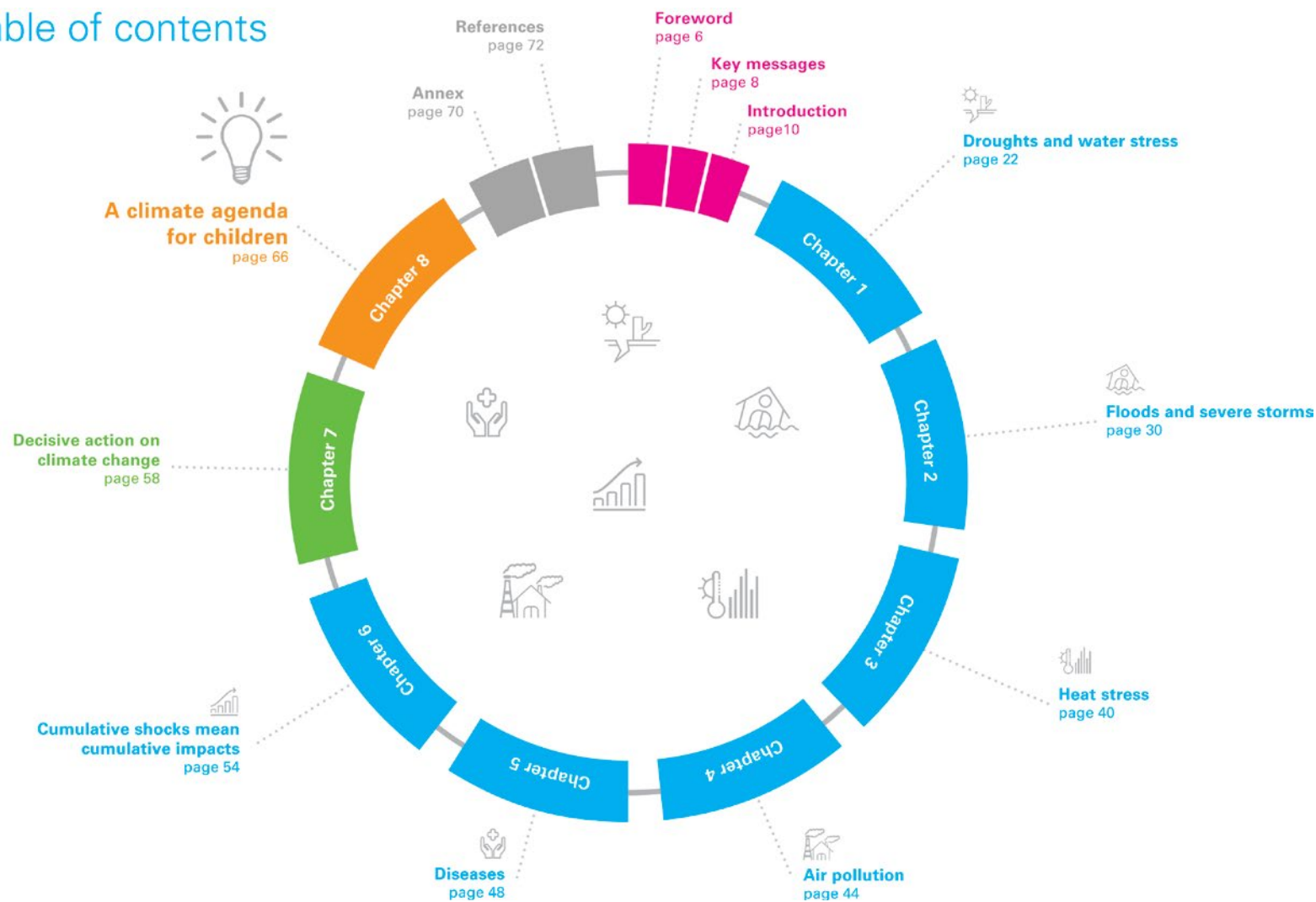
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Foreword

There may be no greater, growing threat facing the world's children – and their children – than climate change. This mounting global crisis has the potential to undermine many of the gains we have made in child survival and development – and poses even greater dangers ahead.

In every crisis, children are the most vulnerable. Climate change is no exception. As escalating droughts and flooding degrade food production, children will bear the greatest burden of hunger and malnutrition. As temperatures increase, together with water scarcity and air pollution, children will feel the deadliest impact of water-borne diseases and dangerous respiratory conditions. As more extreme weather events expand the number of emergencies and humanitarian crises, children will pay the highest price. As the world experiences a steady rise in climate-driven migration, children's lives and futures will be the most disrupted.

These are the threats that children face today. Unless we act forcefully to stem the climate crisis now, the danger will only escalate. It is a prospect so painful to imagine that many people would rather not think about it.

But action must begin with knowledge and understanding of the costs of inaction. By combining state-of-the-art demographic data on the world's child population with scientific projections on the likely impacts of climate change in the decades ahead, this report offers a unique look at the climate-related risks that children face. It also outlines the likely scenarios for children if the world continues on its current course.

We have an opportunity to tackle this crisis before it's too late. That means taking decisive action to cut greenhouse gas emissions in order to slow, and ultimately stop, the advance of climate change. It means protecting children whose families are displaced as a result of climate change, and giving children's needs the highest priority in our efforts to mitigate environmental impacts. It means educating children to adapt to the immediate challenges of climate change – and to understand the role that they will be called on to play. Finally, it means listening to the voices of children and young people who, for better or worse, will inherit the planet we share.

No human responsibility runs deeper than the charge of every generation to care for the generation that follows it. For current and future generations of children, and for us all, the stakes could not be higher.



Anthony Lake
UNICEF Executive Director

There may be no greater, growing threat facing the world's children – and their children – than climate change.

Key Messages

Children will bear the brunt of climate change

Today, over half a billion children live in extremely high flood occurrence zones; nearly 160 million live in high or extremely high drought severity zones. While climate change will ultimately impact every child, these children are already in harm's way and face some of the most immediate risks.

There is a clear scientific consensus that climate change will increase the frequency of droughts, floods and severe weather events. These threats will pose grave risks for children over the coming decades. Severe weather events can destroy or disrupt infrastructure critical to children's well-being, including schools, health facilities and transport. Droughts and flooding can destroy crops, disrupt water systems and contaminate water reserves.

Although not as abrupt, slow-onset climate change impacts can also undermine development gains and livelihood options. Climate change will contribute to rising temperatures and changing rainfall patterns which, in turn, are likely to exacerbate the spread of vector-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue. Over time,

diseases than adults. They face greater dangers from undernutrition and diarrhoeal diseases. The physical dangers of extreme weather events – flooding, building collapse, and more – pose unique threats to young bodies and minds. If, as expected, climate change worsens each of these risks, it is children who will suffer most. Children will also feel these effects longer than adults, making them vital in today's decisions about climate change responses.

Climate change will make existing inequities even worse

Climate change will not affect all equally. Because of the risk associated with them, flood and drought zones often overlap with areas of high poverty and low access to essential services such as water and sanitation. This means that children and families who are already disadvantaged by poverty – those with the fewest resources for coping – are likely to face some of the most immediate dangers of climate change.

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