



# Discussion brief – a child rights lens to just transitions

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This discussion brief's key content and outcomes derive from materials and conversations from a Nordic Business Roundtable ("the roundtable") on the theme "A Child Rights Lens to Just Transitions" held in October 2022. Thirteen Nordic business actors from various industries attended the roundtable, which was organised by UNICEF Sweden and IKEA as part of the Nordic Business Roundtables for the [Children's Rights](#) and [Business Principles](#). The Institute for Human Rights and Business contributed as a key expert organisation on just transitions.

The objective of the roundtable was to **better understand how children's rights play a part in business' efforts to combat climate change and the just transitions agenda**. It also sought to identify the key knowledge gaps to be addressed, as well as risks, opportunities and business actions needed to embed children's rights in their plans, strategies and processes. This briefing summarises the key themes and outcomes that emerged during the conversations held under the Chatham House Rule.

*Disclaimer: The outcomes and emerging points highlighted in this discussion brief are recollections and reflections of the roundtable conversations. They do not necessarily represent the view or position of UNICEF or of the participating companies or organizations.*

## Just transitions that respect and advance children's rights: gaps and areas to be further addressed

These initial conversations have shed light on the increasing need to better integrate a children's rights lens into a business context in the climate change space. The conversations also identified a number of gaps and areas to be explored and defined. These areas should be further addressed to enable and support companies to further embed children's rights in climate change strategies and actions:

- **Generate evidence on how businesses' efforts in climate change mitigation and adaptation affect children.** This includes but is not limited to case studies or research that examines potential adverse impacts. It also encompasses further evidence on the opportunities for companies, i.e., how their efforts to address the climate crisis can improve the lives of children, their families and their communities.
- **Develop further guidance and support for companies that enable meaningful participation of children and communities** in climate action and transition processes. There is a need for tailored recommendations and practical support for businesses on creating meaningful opportunities for children's participation in business' climate agenda and actions.
- **Support collective action and advocacy efforts in prioritised areas related to human rights and environmental due diligence.** This includes relevant EU legislation on corporate sustainability due diligence (CSDDD), corporate sustainability reporting (CSRD) and public policy on access to education and critical services. There is a need to ensure that social impacts, including impacts on children, are embedded in current and future legislative initiatives, measures implemented and governments' climate action plans.

## 1. Background and context

Children are the least responsible for climate change and environmental degradation, yet most adversely affected by its impact. UNICEF estimates<sup>1</sup> that almost every child on earth is exposed to at least one climate threat, with approximately one billion children living in 33 countries at "extremely high risk" of climate shocks and hazards. The climate crisis poses an unprecedented threat to children's health, nutrition, education, development, survival and future potential. Today, one in four deaths in children under five is attributable to an unhealthy environment.<sup>2</sup> These hazards will increase in severity as the impacts of climate change accelerate.

Children are not only victims but also the most important actors for sustainable change. Across the globe, they are increasingly making their voices heard

and demanding the changes necessary for children and young people to have a planet that can support them.

Despite children being in vulnerable situations and critical agents of change, children's rights and perspectives are frequently missing from the conversations around government and business' efforts to tackle climate change.

**The purpose of this discussion brief is to report the conversations held around the need to place the focus on this critical yet often overlooked dimension of climate change responses.** It can be seen as a first step towards exploring and identifying the children's rights implications linked to businesses' efforts to tackle climate change and transition strategies.

1. UNICEF (2021), The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis: Introducing the Children's Climate Risk Index, at <https://www.unicef.org/reports/climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis>

2. Ibid.



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“Nature does not need us, we are the ones who need it and we are damaging it”

Nina, a 17 years old college student and an environmental activist. She founded Fridays for future in her country, Bolivia.

## 2. Climate change and just transitions

In October 2021, the [UN Human Rights Council](#) declared that access to a “clean, healthy and sustainable environment” is a universal human right. A [UN resolution](#) was passed in July 2022, calling on states to step up efforts to ensure their people have access to such rights.<sup>3</sup>

In light of the efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change through a transition into a zero-carbon economy, ‘just transition’ has become an increasingly visible framework for action taken by governments and business on climate change. Its vision is to make the transition from carbon-intensive production and consumption while contributing to social protection, decent work for all, poverty elimination and resilient communities.<sup>4</sup> Just transition is referenced in the 2015 Paris Agreement and addressed in the [Just Transition Guidelines](#) from the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

The concept of ‘just transitions’ essentially means that transitions must respect the fundamental rights of all involved, particularly those in the most vulnerable situations. It includes:<sup>5</sup>

- (i) impacts on jobs and livelihoods as industries transition from greenhouse gas emissions **(the transition out)** and
- (ii) measures to generate jobs and livelihoods with low or zero greenhouse gas emissions **(the transition in)**, as well as

- (iii) efforts to **build community resilience** and adaptation to the effects of climate change.

Business responsibility to address potential direct or indirect human rights impacts is established and supported through the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs). This responsibility includes plans and measures to address climate change, and it relates to all potentially affected stakeholders.<sup>6</sup>

The just transitions agenda was pioneered over many decades by the trade union movement and focused on workplace transitions, advocating for more substantial social dialogue and upholding workers’ rights in climate action. The energy and finance sectors have been the primary focal points for operationalising the concept at the sectoral level. But with growing concerns in relation to climate justice, decent work and the need to transition to fair and inclusive societies, just transition is gaining wider recognition. It is being increasingly applied across a broader range of sectors and countries, as well as through the lenses of other types of potentially affected groups beyond the direct workforce, including indigenous peoples, communities, consumers, and in the case of this roundtable, children.<sup>7</sup>

3. UN Environmental Programme (UNEP), <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/historic-move-un-declares-healthy-environment-human-right>

4. Haley St Dennis, Institute of Human Rights and Business, presentation at the Nordic Business Roundtable on October 11th, 2022

5. IHRB, “Just Transitions for All: Business, Human Rights, and Climate Action” (November 2020), at <https://www.ihrb.org/other/climate-change/report-just-transitions-for-all>

6. United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner, Human Rights, Climate Change and Business, at <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/ClimateChange/materials/KMBusiness.pdf>

7. IHRB, “Just Transitions for All: Business, Human Rights, and Climate Action” (November 2020), at <https://www.ihrb.org/other/climate-change/report-just-transitions-for-all>



### 3. Role of business

Businesses' ability to ensure swift and successful transitions is essential to today and tomorrow's children being able to inherit a habitable planet. However, businesses must carry out these transitions in a just and inclusive way or they might lead to **unintended consequences** and adverse impacts on children's rights:

- The disappearance of industries and jobs will profoundly impact workers, communities and children who depend on them. If workers in such industries are not supported adequately, there is a risk that the loss of income will push more children and households into poverty.
- The materials and activities needed for the green transition can also carry risks for children. For example, the extraction of critical minerals, e.g., cobalt and lithium, needed for the green transition is linked to severe children's rights risks, including child labour and exposure to environmental degradation.<sup>8</sup>
- Moreover, climate change is a multiplier of existing inequalities. One example is the impact of climate-induced migration on children. In Bangladesh, children have been found to be involved in child labour, including in garment factories, to support their families who have lost everything and migrated due to climate-related shocks.<sup>9</sup>

To meet their responsibilities under the UNGPs, businesses need to respect the rights of all affected stakeholders, including those of children, who are in a particularly vulnerable situation. Human rights and environmental due diligence that integrates children's rights considerations should be the basis of companies' efforts to address climate change.

There are also **numerous opportunities** for businesses to build resilience and reduce inequality through their just transitions agendas. Companies can play a crucial role alongside governments by:

- Investing in and supporting climate adaptation in local communities to build resilience of eco-systems, societies and livelihoods. This includes collaborating for strengthening critical systems and services and resilient protection systems for children.
- Taking action to prepare today's younger generation for a climate-changed world. This includes investing in and supporting the development of green skills and education in schools as well as creating green jobs.



6-year-old boy plays with a tyre near his flooded school in Pakistan.

8. UN News: UN highlights urgent need to tackle impact of likely electric car battery production boom (2020), at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/06/1067272>

9. UNICEF, "A Gathering Storm: Climate change clouds the future of children in Bangladesh" (March 2019), at <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/3001/file/Report%20ClimateChange-Embargoed%20-%20UNICEF.pdf>

## 4. KEY OUTCOMES: What do businesses need to do to ensure just transitions that respect and advance children's rights?

### A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO JUST TRANSITIONS

The dialogues during the roundtable revealed the following overarching themes when applying the child rights lens to just transitions:

- **The need to break the silos of companies' social and environmental agendas**

Many companies face challenges in integrating their social and environmental sustainability agendas. There is awareness among businesses that they need to address the social consequences linked to the transformative changes and roadmaps to address and mitigate climate change and transform into a net-zero and circular economy. The area of just transitions requires an integrated approach and a mix of expertise from businesses for implementation to be successful. As such, it has the potential to bridge the gap between the social and the environmental focus of businesses' sustainability agendas, wherein the UNGPs can be leveraged as the tool to bring the areas closer together.

- **The need to understand transitions more holistically**

Another theme that emerged was the need for businesses to recognise their roles in the transition more holistically, as most business

actions currently focus on mitigation, i.e., decarbonisation, and on reducing emissions to net zero.

Outcomes from the roundtable show an aligned understanding that businesses can play a more significant role in supporting adaptation measures, emphasising the interconnectedness of these measures with mitigation measures. For example, many migrant workers in companies' value chains are currently bearing the costs of climate adaptation and repair of climate-induced loss and damage in their home countries because investments in adaptation are so underfunded globally. As the workers use their wages to rebuild homes and properties affected by climate shocks, it also affects their abilities to provide for their families, including the needs of their children.

Recognising their place and taking an active role in adaptation through just transitions, businesses could be key players, not only when it comes to saving the planet but also to improving lives along the way. By reassessing their role and the scope of their transition plans and agenda, businesses could be crucial players in countries where government action and resources are limited.



Children playing in the schoolyard in Côte d'Ivoire.

## APPLYING THE CHILD RIGHTS LENS TO CLIMATE STRATEGY AND TRANSITIONS IN THE BUSINESS CONTEXT

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The conversations also highlighted some key children's rights implications relevant to businesses' climate change efforts and transition agendas.

- **Children's rights in human rights due diligence as a foundation for climate and circular business strategies**

The integration of children's rights as part of companies' human rights and environmental due diligence approaches was among the most frequently mentioned topics. From sourcing raw materials such as minerals, cotton and sugar cane to recycling and waste management ecosystems, the conversations touched on the potential impacts on children, households and communities and how business should address them, in both their upstream and downstream activities.

A fundamental challenge for companies integrating children's rights in their own climate change efforts is translating children's rights terminology into business vocabulary. It emerged that it is challenging for many companies to translate children's rights into language and indicators that fit with companies' transition strategies and measures. Some companies also shared that generating more evidence on the impacts of the just transitions on children could be an effective enabler to gain senior management buy-in to prioritise in this area.

Lastly, effective regulations and policies are seen as important means of driving implementation at scale. Efficient and more coherent public policies that explicitly

acknowledge children as critical rights-holders and stakeholders are essential for driving responsible business conduct and for creating more explicit obligations, standards and expectations that integrate children's rights considerations.

- **Children as the future workforce**

Children and young people are critical to businesses as future workforce. Activities to support upskilling and to facilitate access to critical services such as learning and connectivity have been identified by the participants as areas that could be integrated in their agenda to support children in gaining the necessary skillsets to access the future job market.

Participants also identified the importance of supporting local communities of companies' suppliers to strengthen resilience and secure the next generation of producers of critical raw materials.

- **Children as agents of change and the future of society**

Most companies involved in the roundtable acknowledged the need to involve children as stakeholders – because children not only are their future employees and suppliers but also their future customers, as well as future leaders and holders of values. And because it takes time for our society and norms to change, businesses and other decision-makers need to engage with children and young people early to foster the next generation of empowered leaders and citizens.



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“When we take action and inspire someone the world changes.”

Kyara, 16 years old student and Champion of the Escazú Agreement, from Costa Rica, fighting to preserve nature.

## ENABLING THE MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN

Although many companies saw the value in engaging directly with children as stakeholders, they found it challenging to ensure that participation was meaningful both for the children and the business representatives. The following **key concerns** emerged from the roundtable conversations:

- Climate professionals in business do not always see the relevance of interacting with children directly. It can be challenging to translate the direct input from children into business measures.
- Companies often need more expertise to understand when to engage with children and how to make the exchange mutually meaningful. For instance, children may have expectations of the outcome of such

consultations that are unrealistic for companies to meet, which could lead to disappointment. Interacting with children directly also entails various risks concerning their safeguarding.

- Some companies find it challenging to engage with children and young people in a way that seems credible externally without the activity being perceived as marketing or greenwashing.

Almost unanimously, companies expressed that this is where children’s rights representatives and proxy organisations can play a key role: by providing guidance and support or by acting as a facilitator/mediator in companies’ efforts to enable the meaningful participation of children in matters important to them.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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