# Sightsavers submission to the HRC report on how climate change can impact the realization of the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl

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## **About Sightsavers**

Sightsavers is an international development organisation which works with partners in over 30 countries to promote the rights of people with disabilities and to empower them to participate equally in society. We create effective and innovative solutions to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion in health, education, employment and governance programmes. We work with schools, communities, governments and organisations of people with disabilities around the world to ensure children with disabilities can learn and play alongside their peers, from early childhood to tertiary education.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the report on how climate change can impact the realisation of the right to education by every girl, in line with HRC resolution 54/19. Our submission will focus on the intersection of gender and disability and how the right to education for girls with disabilities is particularly impacted by environmental degradation and climate change.

## Key questions

#### The most important barriers for girls to their equal enjoyment of the right to education, in relation to potentially harmful impacts of climate change; root causes of their unequal enjoyment of the right, exacerbated by climate change and how these barriers affect the four elements of the right to education (Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability and Adaptability).

### Increased vulnerability of learners with disabilities

Children with disabilities are less likely to be in education and even if they are in school they face additional barriers to learning. Children with disabilities 49% more likely to never have attended school and 42% less likely to have foundational learning skills than their peers without disabilities[[1]](#footnote-1). Following the pandemic and the closure of schools the barriers they faced have only increased, with many at risk of never returning to school.

Poverty, minority status, gender, age, disability and other factors also make some people less resilient to climate change than others. This is widely recognised, including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Changes’ Fifth Assessment Report[[2]](#footnote-2) .

Children with disabilities face increased exposure to risk due to the overall societal context, inaccessibility and discrimination. Climate and environmental change amplify inequalities and discrimination, exacerbating the barriers learners with disabilities face in accessing healthcare, education, transport and information[[3]](#footnote-3).

During emergencies, children with disabilities are at higher risk of experiencing violence, abuse or abandonment and are less likely to be able to leave an emergency situation without assistance and assistive devices. Girls with disabilities, in particular, are often targeted with violence, exploitation and sexual abuse which is common at shelters and in the community.

The impacts of weather-related events can also affect children's physical and mental health, as shocks can cause anxiety or trauma, affecting their concentration and ability to learn.[[4]](#footnote-4) Schools should be prepared to provide psychological support to children, their parents and communities and to implement measures to provide effective and preventive actions to protect the most vulnerable children from the impacts of climate change.

Understanding how different factors intersect to create barriers to education is crucial for the development of more resilient, accessible and inclusive education systems. We therefore recommend **the report should look at intersecting forms of discrimination and the disproportionate impacts of climate change on the right to education of the most marginalised children, such as girls with disabilities.**

### Access to information and education

All learners need to have access to relevant information, skills and knowledge to deal with the adverse impacts of climate change. There is general agreement that education reduces vulnerability and increases adaptive capacity, and that it can help shape people’s risk perception and problem-solving skills[[5]](#footnote-5) . The reality, however, is that the 240 million children with a disability around the world are much less likely to attend school and have an education than their peers without disabilities.

Therefore, removing barriers to education and increasing access to inclusive, equitable quality education for all children, particularly for girls and learners with disabilities, can help build resilience and adaptability in a broader sense, including through encouraging greener behaviours and giving learners agency in the face of climate impacts.

At the same time, more resilient, inclusive and climate smart education systems must consider the needs of all learners. In reality, emergency information, education and services are often also not accessible to learners with disabilities. Climate-related information, emergency warnings and education materials must be available in various formats, such as braille and easy to read language to cater to diverse populations.

Climate change, as well as slow onset environmental degradation, will increasingly interrupt education systems around the world, leading to further barriers for the most marginalised learners to realise their right to education. Extreme weather and climate induced disasters can damage school infrastructure and cause injury to parents, students and teachers. In addition, temporary shelters or schools might not be accessible for boys and girls with disabilities and teachers might not be trained on how best to include them in the classroom.

Moreover, as we have seen from the COVID-19 pandemic, school closures increased exclusion and led to a disproportionate impact on the most marginalised. The Special Rapporteur’s [**report on the impacts of COVID in the right to education**](https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc4439-right-education-impact-coronavirus-disease-crisis-right) showed that, during school closures, many governments did not provide support for children with disabilities and remote learning was frequently not tailored to, or appropriate for, diverse educational needs. In at least half of the 147 countries surveyed by [UNICEF](https://data.unicef.org/resources/children-with-disabilities-ensuring-inclusion-in-covid-19-response/) in 2020, governments had failed to adopt measures to facilitate distance learning for children with disabilities, such as providing accessible instruction, devices, and materials.

It is critical that education systems are prepared to ensure continued inclusive education and support all children under different climate scenarios. Given people with disabilities are best placed to identify their needs, learners with disabilities must be explicitly considered and included in the design, implementation and monitoring of inclusive education and climate policies and programmes, from school evacuation plans, to developing inclusive alternative education modalities and disaster response. Organisations of people with disabilities should be actively sought out and engaged in policy and action.

**The report should recognise the challenge some learners, particularly children with disabilities, face in accessing climate and environmental education, as well as accessible information about climate change and related emergencies. It should include express recommendations about including learners with disabilities in education and climate response planning and implementation. This would go a long way ensuring accessibility of infrastructure and learning materials, as well as of diverse means of communications and accessible information, so the right to education of all children can be realised.**

#### 3. The most important existing gaps and challenges in education to empower all girls to contribute to the climate change agenda

##### Lack of disaggregated data

There is a lack of evidence and data about the impact of climate change on the education of learners with disabilities. There are also huge gaps in the data used to plan, mitigate, respond and adapt to climate and environmental harm. The result is often inaccessible interventions that unable children with disabilities to access education and other services.

The tools used to undertake vulnerability assessments often do not look at intersecting identities or consider disability, nor ensure the participation of children with disabilities, which is vital for informing appropriate inclusive responses. This results in inaccessible climate change adaptation, early warning systems, evacuation plans, shelters, temporary schools and relief distribution.[[6]](#footnote-6) Climate change can also dramatically change the physical environment, making effective planning involving children with disabilities all the more crucial[[7]](#footnote-7) .

A human-rights based approach requires informed and evidence-based decision making which relies on the availability of good quality, disaggregated data. That includes strengthening education management information systems (EMIS) to ensure that there is systematic data disaggregation, as well as ensuring coordination of data systems, including to inform more effective, inclusive and targeted interventions to respond to environmental and climate impacts and build long term resilience.

**The report should address the existing data gaps in both population data and EMIS and the importance of ensuring that data to inform both education and environmental and climate policies is disaggregated, at a minimum, by sex and disability.**

### **Disability inclusive approaches**

Inclusive, people-centred approaches to climate smart education systems, that consider which children are likely to experience contextual marginalisation and ensure their engagement in the design of effective climate interventions that enhance their resilience, are required.

It is crucial that disability inclusion is mainstreamed through a twin-track approach that embeds inclusion into all environmental planning and climate-related interventions in schools, and that the provision of targeted interventions is available where required.

The most effective long-term interventions build the resilience of marginalised groups, through effective empowerment, participation, systems strengthening, and developing the capacity of institutions to ensure rights are embedded and respected, recognising non-discrimination as a fundamental principle. Removing barriers to education and building more inclusive education systems for girls and boys with disabilities would therefore help enhance resilience to climate shocks.

### Financing for inclusive climate education

Despite recognition of the role of education in addressing and responding to the climate crisis there is a lack of finance available to develop education systems which are climate-resilient and support climate education. At the same time, financing for inclusive education is also insufficient. Although Official Development Assistance (ODA) to climate has increased, the proportion of ODA spent on education has decreased. In 2020, education-oriented climate sector aid accounted for just ~1.3% of total climate-oriented bilateral aid by DAC countries[[8]](#footnote-8).

**The report should recognise the importance of adequate financing for education systems that can address and respond to the impacts of climate change. This should include both considerations around domestic and international financing. It is critical that any discussions on financing take an intersectional and inclusive approach.**

### Transformative and equitable approaches to climate education

While there is strong agreement that education has a role to play in creating citizens that are more resilient and able to adapt to climate change, in reality, many education systems are not well-equipped to deliver climate education.

Many of the barriers that children with disabilities and other contextually marginalised children experience within education will also prevent education systems from delivering climate change education which can truly respond to the challenges presented by the climate crisis.

The global education community must set out vision for climate education that see climate education as not just an add on, but as fundamental to the education system[[9]](#footnote-9).

There is huge potential for inclusive approaches and a more transformative approach to climate education to be delivered in tandem. For example, pedagogies which support children with disabilities also have the potential to deliver more effective climate education. Re-imagining and re-designing education systems with the needs of a diverse range of children at the centre will be critical to this.

**The report should consider what systemic barriers exist to educating children in the context of the climate crisis and to delivering climate education. Building equity and inclusion into the way in which systems are designed and delivered offers an opportunity to respond to the climate crisis.**

**For more information please contact Mariana Rudge (**[mrudge@sightsavers.org](mailto:mrudge@sightsavers.org)**)**

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2. IPCC (2014) [Fifth Report](https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/syr/) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, (2020), [**Analytical study on the promotion and protection of the rights of persons with disabilities in the context of climate change**](https://www.ohchr.org/en/climate-change/impact-climate-change-rights-persons-disabilities), Human Rights Council, 45 session, June-July 2020: A/HRC/44/30 - E - A/HRC/44/30  [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Carolyn Kousky, [Impacts of Natural Disasters on Children](https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1101425.pdf), 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Birkmann, J., E. Liwenga, R. Pandey, E. Boyd, R. Djalante, F. Gemenne, W. Leal Filho, P.F. Pinho, L. Stringer, and D. Wrathall, 2022: Poverty, Livelihoods and Sustainable Development. In: Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. CBM (2012) [Technical brief for the post-2015 consultation process. Disability, sustainable development and climate change.](https://www.preventionweb.net/files/38017_sustainabledevelopmentpostmdgconsul.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sightsavers (2015) [Disability, disasters and empowerment.](https://www.sightsavers.org/reports/2015/11/disability-disasters-empowerment/) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. GPE, [Climate change is threatening climate change financing](https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/climate-change-threatening-education-financing-launching-joint-effort-identify-trends-solutions) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [From Roadblocks to a Roadmap, Transformative Education Pathways to Radical Change in the Midst of Climate Breakdown](https://brill.com/display/title/60973); [The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development: business as usual in the end](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13504622.2015.1011084) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)