

Plan International - submission to the International Development Committee's inquiry on climate change, development and COP26

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About Plan International UK

Plan International UK is a global children's charity which strives to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child, but this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination, and it is girls who are the most affected.

Summary

Plan International UK believes all children and young people should enjoy full and equal access to their rights, and this should not be hindered by the threat of climate change. Climate change is the greatest global, intergenerational, gender and social injustice of our time. It impacts the rights of the marginalised the most severely and magnifies gender inequalities, especially for girls. Upholding girls' rights and strengthening their meaningful participation in climate decisions and action must therefore be a priority.

- When the two vulnerabilities of age and gender intersect, it is adolescent girls and young women, especially those from marginalised communities in low-income countries, who will suffer the most with serious implications for many of their rights. Climate change is magnifying the inequalities and discrimination girls and young women already face, such as access to the information and resources which might help them adapt and cope.
- When climate change impacts the functioning of education systems, it is girls who are most affected. Girls are often the first to be pulled out of school to help alleviate domestic burdens, and can also become victim to child, early and forced marriage in attempts to reduce financial strain.
- The right to high quality education must be protected before, during and after extreme weather events. Increased investment in, and political support for, resilience strengthening, risk reduction, preparedness and education in emergencies, is vital in supporting the continuous functioning of the education system.
- The Government needs to make links between two of its priority areas on girls' education and climate change. At its most transformative, education equips girls and young women with the skills and knowledge they need to tackle the climate crisis while helping dismantle harmful stereotypes about women and men and their role in decision making spaces. It therefore has the power to eliminate the key barrier girls' face in meaningfully engaging in the development and implementation of national climate strategies.
- We must all acknowledge the critical role girls can play in climate adaptation and mitigation. Investing in resilient education systems that are responsive to the needs of girls will not only reduce the likelihood of girls dropping out of school but will help create the next women leaders of climate decision-making. Quality of learning is fundamental for girls' future ability to navigate and respond to the climate crisis.

- The Send My Friend to School coalition, whose policy group is co-chaired by Plan International UK, have [compiled](#) a series of measures that the UK Government must take to ensure COP26 has impact:
 - Urgently raise ambition
 - Promote youth governance and leadership throughout all climate processes
 - Provide world-leading investment for education and education in emergencies
- Cuts to ODA risks undermining progress made, and undermines the UK's reputation as a global leader, especially in a year that it hosts the G7, the GPE replenishment summit and COP26. The UK Government must therefore immediately:
 - Reverse the damaging decision to cut SRHR programme budgets by using the £2bn cross-cutting funding to fill the gap left behind.
 - Announce what thematic areas and countries will be affected by the cut to ODA, for partners to have clarity on what they can do in the region.
 - Confirm that the cut to the ODA from 0.7 to 0.5% will be a temporary measure.

The extent to which the Government's work to date on climate change and development has taken the sustainable development goals and the needs of low-to-middle income countries and vulnerable groups into account

i. The gendered impact of climate change

Climate change is the most significant intergenerational equity issue of our time. Children and future generations are bearing, or will come to bear, the brunt of its impact on a polluted, degraded planet. The social and regional impacts of climate change are not distributed equally or evenly. Instead, inequality – whether economic, social, or gender-based – increases vulnerability. The impact of rapid onset disasters and the long, slow erosion of land and livelihoods brought about by climate change exacerbates existing gender inequalities, meaning women face greater risks to their lives, health and economic viability than men. There is a wealth of research highlighting the link between gender and climate change, with responses focusing on women's empowerment. Despite these efforts, the 2019 Equal Measures 2030 SDG Gender Index highlights SDG13 on climate action as one of the goals that is furthest behind on gender equality issuesⁱ.

Children too are vulnerable and are shown to be at higher risk than adults of illness, injury and the psycho-social trauma associated with climate-related issues, such as wildfires, floods, droughts and storms, water insecurity, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene.

When these two vulnerabilities of age and gender intersect, it is adolescent girls and young women, especially those from marginalised communities in low-income countries, who will suffer the most with serious implications for many of their rights. Climate change is magnifying the inequalities and discrimination girls and young women already face, such as access to the information and resources which might help them adapt and cope.

Gender-related discriminatory norms and stereotypes underpin other gender-related realities of girls' livesⁱⁱ such as time spent in unpaid domestic labour and care work. These often dictate the behaviour and receptivity of policy makers to girls' participation, resulting in gender- and age- blind policy and programme design for climate change adaptationⁱⁱⁱ. Forced

displacement can exacerbate existing gender inequalities and discrimination, leaving girls and women extremely vulnerable whilst also facing barriers to assistance and protection. Girls and young women often have to take on extra responsibilities and duties when men are forced to migrate to look for better work.

Case study

In South Sudan, hunger is acute in Pibor county, which is heavily affected by conflict and suffered devastating flooding in August 2020. This has destroyed people's homes, crops and livelihoods, particularly in communities that rely on livestock such as cattle. As a result, nearly 60,000 people have been forced from their homes. The upcoming lean season is expected to be the most severe on record. South Sudan's April-September rainy season is likely to result in widespread, severe, flooding in many parts of the country by August, resulting in a third consecutive year of significant flooding in Pibor.

When food is scarce, families increasingly resort to negative coping mechanisms to survive. For adolescent girls, this often means that the risk of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) and with it their risk of early pregnancy increases. Adolescent girls in contexts such as South Sudan overwhelmingly tell us that their vulnerability to CEFM is closely linked to the economic situation of their families.

ii. Girls' education and climate change

We are clear that the right to high quality education (a Government manifesto commitment) must be protected before, during and after extreme weather events. Increased investment in, and political support for, resilience strengthening, risk reduction, preparedness and education in emergencies, is vital in supporting the continuous functioning of the education system.

When climate change impacts the functioning of education systems it is girls who are most affected. Girls are often the first to be pulled out of school to help alleviate domestic burdens, and can also become victim to CEFM in attempts to reduce financial strain.

With girls less likely to be in school, they are also more vulnerable to climate impacts as they have less access to the knowledge and skills to strengthen their resilience and adaptive capacities.

Evidence shows that ensuring girls' access to quality education is a sustainable and cost effective¹ tool for strengthening societies' resilience to climate change: countries that have focused on female education have suffered far fewer losses from droughts and floods than countries with lower levels of girls' education.² Additionally, research from the Brookings

¹ World Bank (2009) The Costs to Developing Countries of Adapting to Climate Change: New methods and estimates: the global report of the economics of adaptation to climate change study

Institute study suggest that for every additional year of schooling a girl receives, her country's resilience to climate disasters improves by 3.2 points.

It must be noted that in recent years there has been an increasing narrative on the power of girls' education to tackle climate change, particularly driven by Project Drawdown which highlights girls' education and family planning as top solutions to climate change. We hold serious concerns about this approach and research methodology which is based on an assumption around a reduction in greenhouse gas emitters - fewer people mean fewer consumers - as emissions are often considered on a per capita basis within and across countries. Whereas while less-developed countries have higher population growth rates, their citizens contribute the least to global carbon emissions on a per capita basis. These narratives also lack a rights-based approach of the fundamental right of women and girls to choose if, when and how many children to have themselves.

Using population control as a key driver for investing in girls' education shifts attention away from tackling the more significant challenges that need addressing in order to tackle climate change including overconsumption by wealthy countries and inefficiencies in production and consumption^{iv}. The risk of this narrative, particularly in the current climate of increasing xenophobia, is that an approach which is underpinned by population control will result in blaming climate change on individual women largely in African countries.

While girls' education, and subsequent activism, play an undeniable role in mitigating and adapting to climate change, the burden of responsibility should not fall on girls. In just five days, a UK adult uses as much carbon as their Rwandan peer does in one full year.³

Despite the evidence showing the benefits that education has on tackling climate change, it is neglected as part of the global climate response. Climate strategies do not feature education in a meaningful way and too many education systems around the world are inadequately preparing children and young people for a changing climate. No Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) formally recognises the contributions that investment in girls' education could make toward their climate strategy. Although 68% of NDCs reference education, often in vague terms, such as 'awareness raising', these are not necessarily with young people as a specific focus or as part of a national curriculum. Climate strategies overall concentrate on technological fixes, ignoring social concerns and the contributions that people, particularly girls and young women empowered by education and information, might make.

It is now almost five years since the international community signed The Paris Agreement, a historic moment when 197 governments committed to strengthening their efforts to limit global warming to at least 2°C below pre-industrial temperatures, with the aim of below 1.5°C. However, the world is currently woefully off-track to achieving the goals of the agreement – current national pledges would still result in an increase of 3°C – which would have catastrophic consequences for all, particularly the most marginalised. Within all of this, the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare that education systems around the world are not resilient enough and are often unprepared to deal with large scale disruption: in 2020

² Blankespoor, B. Dasgupta, S Laplante, B and Wheeler D (2010) Adaptation to climate extremes in developing countries: the role of education. Policy Research Working Paper 5342, The World Bank

³ https://oxfamapps.org/media/press_release/average-brit-will-emit-more-by-12-january-than-residents-of-seven-african-countries-do-in-a-year/#:~:text=Researchers%20found%20that%20someone%20in,does%20in%20an%20entire%20year.

COVID-19 interrupted education for 1.6 billion learners. It is therefore critical that education systems are built to withstand the impacts we know are coming. The Coronavirus pandemic was a test paper for the future – climate change will be a final exam. We therefore need urgent action now.

SDG target 4.7 commits governments to ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development. Inclusive quality education that is gender transformative is an essential component of the global response to climate change. We recognise that education plays a crucial role in empowering girls to take up leadership roles in climate justice movements, and that girls' education is often the most significantly impacted by climate change. There are a number of things that governments can do to work towards this target:

1. Prioritising resilience and climate justice approaches in education systems must be matched with recognition of education in climate agendas. National climate policies and strategies – particularly NDCs and National Adaptation Plans - must recognise the impact climate crises have on girls and their education as well as the importance of gender transformative education as a core part of a climate just approach.
2. We need an expanded vision of climate education to adequately respond to the intersecting challenges of climate change and gender inequality. 'Climate education' must be gender-transformative, adopt a climate just approach, and adequately support all students to contribute to and thrive in the modern world. This includes teaching climate justice and policy processes in addition to the science, and supporting equal access to the knowledge and skills needed to respond to climate change (for example, equal access to STEM, economics, politics).
3. We must prioritise strengthening education systems and preventing future disruption to ensure every girl can learn. As governments seek to “build back better” out of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is vital that they take this opportunity to make education systems more resilient to shocks and stresses, ensuring that all students are able to continue their learning. Making education systems 'fit for purpose' for every girl should be at the heart of this.

iii. Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)

When girls and women are empowered to freely control their own fertility and have children by choice not chance, this has the positive effect of reducing unplanned pregnancies and slowing population growth. However, when they are denied this right, populations grow, sometimes beyond the coping capacity of families and communities. Completing a quality education and having the ability to freely control one's sexual and reproductive life empowers girls to contribute to more resilient and adaptable societies and greener economies. Having services that realise girls' rights to education and SRHR are therefore of the highest priority and must be integral to climate change plans and actions.

There are potential human rights risks to seeing curbing population growth as an optimal climate mitigation solution. Rights are most at risk when poorly developed policies and actions threaten rather than protect the sexual and reproductive rights of girls' and women. Girls and women from the Global South must not be made to bear responsibility for climate change nor for its mitigation through population control policies, especially as they are least responsible for its cause. Ensuring the promotion, protection and fulfilment of all girls' and women's SRHR must be the highest priority in any policy or intervention.

During extreme weather events, which are becoming more intense and frequent due to climate change, disruption to health services further increases the chances of unplanned pregnancies and sexual and reproductive health complications. Additionally, a lack of comprehensive sexuality education before, during and after extreme weather events can limit girls' understanding of and access to SRH information and services.

The potential of COP26 to address these remaining challenges effectively and the steps the Government needs to take if COP26 is to succeed in tackling them.

The Prime Minister has made clear that providing 12 years of quality education is a top priority, and in May 2021, the UK Government launched the G7 Girls' Education Declaration. This outlined a series of global commitments on girls' education for G7 leaders to sign up to, including new global targets to get 40 million more girls into school and 20 million more girls reading by the age of 10 in low and lower middle-income countries by 2026.

Plan International UK called for many of these commitments, and welcomed the declaration. However, the Government risks undermining these commitments if they do not seize the opportunity it has as host of COP26, G7 and GPE replenishment summit to take decisive action to stop climate change undermining the right to education and strengthen education's role in the global climate response.

To ensure no one is left behind, more attention needs to be paid to climate justice, particularly the impacts on marginalised groups. As already highlighted, girls are often on the forefront of the climate crisis and their rights need to be considered in climate decision making in the run-up to, and at, COP26. They must also be meaningfully engaged in climate decision-making processes.

The government needs to make links between two of its priority areas on girls' education and climate change. At its most transformative, education equips girls and young women with the skills and knowledge they need to tackle the climate crisis while helping dismantle harmful stereotypes about women and men and their role in decision making spaces. It therefore has the power to eliminate the key barrier girls' face in meaningfully engaging in the development and implementation of national climate strategies. We must all acknowledge the critical role girls can play in climate adaptation and mitigation. Investing in resilient education systems that are responsive to the needs of girls will not only reduce the likelihood of girls dropping out of school but will help create the next women leaders of climate decision-making.

Aid cuts

It would be remiss to talk about any progress and recommendations without highlighting the recent announcements by the FCDO regarding Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding. Without funding, it will be impossible for the UK Government to succeed in fulfilling their global and manifesto commitments.

The Government decision to cut ODA from 0.7 to 0.5% GNI not only broke the manifesto commitment upon which they were elected, but will have far-reaching consequences for the world's most marginalised children - especially girls - at a time when they most need our support.

Without backing up announcements and declarations by funding, they are nothing but empty promises. Despite the recent FCDO written statement suggesting £400 million in funding for girls' education, the sector has been left in the dark as to what this actually means, despite continuous assertions by the Foreign Secretary that it has been consulted.

COVID-19 has created the biggest education emergency of our lifetime, and we know that in times of crisis, girls are less likely than boys to return to school. They face a greater risk of early marriage, sexual exploitation, and early pregnancy; and for many, the chance for an education will be lost forever. Cutting UK Aid is therefore a misguided attempt to balance the books on the backs of the world's most vulnerable children, especially girls, at a time when they most need our support.

One area we do have more clarity on is SRHR, and we know that the funding for this thematic area has been slashed, which will have a devastating impact on young women and girls:

Current calculations estimate that the budget to global health, including SRHR, has fallen by up to 41% from 2019/20. As this budget includes recent commitments to the global fight against Covid-19, in reality other areas of global health are facing cuts much greater than 41%. This will have a devastating long-lasting impact for girls & women around the world and derail years of progress on gender equality.

In April 2021, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) announced that the UK Government will be reducing their contributions to the supplies programmes by 85% - taking their contribution over two years from £152m to £23m⁴.

The impact of this is huge: the UNFPA programme is responsible for 40% of the world's contraceptives. In 2019 at the UN General Assembly, UK Government said that this pledge would give over 20 million women and girls access to family planning per year, prevent more than five million unplanned pregnancies per year, and save an estimated 9,000 women's lives per year from complications in pregnancy or childbirth.

Recommendations

We want this to be the most inclusive COP, recognising the intergenerational and gender injustice of the climate crisis, and make clear efforts to include young people, including children, in the formal policy processes. Climate decision making and policies at COP26, particularly the review of the Doha Work Programme on Action for Climate Empowerment, should therefore highlight and take action on:

⁴ Cuts to the UNFPA supplies programme from £144m to £20m, and an additional contraceptive supply programme (DMPA-subQ contraceptive method) from £10m to £2m.

- The disproportionate impact of climate change on girls' education, as outlined in the previous section.
- Ensuring gender transformative education is recognised as a key pathway to climate justice.
- Moving beyond climate science to a holistic view of climate education that includes civic engagement, green skills, rights, life skills, policy processes and activism
- Ensuring that the additional barriers to girls' engagement in climate policy processes are recognized, alongside key actions to support their engagement.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has serious implications for girls' education, and has disrupted schooling for over 1.5 billion learners, it also presents an opportunity for decision makers to transform education systems for the better. This includes prioritising resilience strengthening to ensure education systems can anticipate and respond to climate shocks and stresses and prepare for the increasing number of people who are being displaced as a result.

The Send My Friend to School coalition, whose policy group is co-chaired by Plan International UK, have [compiled](#) a series of measures that the UK Government must take:

(1) Urgently raise ambition

- The UK must take action by COP26 to put itself on track to achieve net-zero emissions as quickly as possible, and press other leaders and countries to close the gap between existing Paris Agreement pledges for 2030, and those needed to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 °C.
- Work together across departments to deliver an integrated approach to climate change and education.

(2) Promote youth governance and leadership throughout all climate processes

- Recognise that children and young people are effective and important agents of change and meaningfully involve them in decisions that affect them. The UK must create opportunities in the lead-up to COP26 and at the summit itself to harness, in a diverse and inclusive manner, children and young people's learning, consultation and influence on climate change policy and practice.
- Young people should be included on the high level delegation for COP and the UK should lead regional consultations, coordinated by youth engagement specialists, to seek young people's views on climate processes and policies, especially girls and children with disabilities, who are often the most marginalised.

(3) Provide world-leading investment for education and education in emergencies

- The UK should continue to provide high-levels of investment in and political support for education in emergencies, for example through its strong support for education, including education in emergencies, to enable the continuous functioning of education systems in times of disasters.
- Invest in inclusive and quality education programming that is gender transformative, recognising the specific rights and needs of girls.

- The UK should maintain its commitment to set its ODA budget at 0.7% of GNI, as enshrined in law.

Additionally, regarding the aid cuts, the UK Government must immediately:

- Reverse the damaging decision to cut SRHR programme budgets by using the £2bn cross-cutting funding to fill the gap left behind.
- Announce what thematic areas and countries will be affected by the cut to ODA, for partners to have clarity on what they can do in the region.
- Confirm that the cut to the ODA from 0.7 to 0.5% will be a temporary measure.

ⁱ Equal Measures 2030 (2019) [Harnessing the power of data for gender equality: Introducing the 2019 EM2030 SDG Gender Index](#)

ⁱⁱ Gender inequality and exclusion vary in their expression from place to place but, in all countries where we work, we encounter different forms of gender-based discrimination, gender stereotyping and an unequal distribution of power between women, men, girls and boys, and other genders, as well as exclusion based on multiple factors. These factors include identities such as race, class, ethnicity, ability, language, sexual orientation, and gender identity, among others. We recognise that individuals have multiple identities that shape their experiences. We believe that our work on tackling gender inequality can be strengthened by examining how these identities intersect, and by using this learning to inform programmes and influencing. Gender inequality intensifies the negative effects of all other forms of exclusion and as a result, exclusion is different and often worse for girls and women. Girls often face the most significant barriers to exercising their rights among excluded groups, which is why gender equality and girls' rights remain a distinct priority for our work.

ⁱⁱⁱ Plan International (2018) – [Gender Transformative Climate Change Action in the Pacific](#)

^{iv} Starrs A et al. (2018) 'Accelerate progress - sexual and reproductive health and rights for all: report of the Guttmacher-Lancet Commission' *The Lancet Commissions* 391:10140 26422692