

# What can cities do to center the unique needs of young children in their climate change policies and strategies?

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Outcomes from the  
Child-Centered City  
Climate Policy Convening

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capita

# Key takeaways

1. The intersection between climate change and early childhood development (ECD) requires urgent attention, investigation, and action because it (1) addresses the needs of the most vulnerable segments of society and (2) is a pathway towards long-term sustainable development.
2. Children and their caregivers must receive knowledge, tools, and opportunities to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes on climate change policy and program development, specifically when those policies and programs affect their lives.
3. Appropriate methods for children's participation should be built into existing local government decision-making processes and plans.
4. Pregnant women and caregivers of very young children need to be involved in decision-making because the first 1000 days of life are a critical period of development during which physical and cognitive growth are greatly influenced by environmental factors.
5. The responsibility for mitigating the impact of climate change on children should be institutionalized within cities, municipalities, and other local government structures with clear understanding of the complex interplay between the care and services required to promote optimal ECD.
6. Measurable outcomes of the success of local government climate actions are critical. Widely communicated and understood outcomes create demand for ECD-sensitive climate change action among citizens, build political momentum, enable benchmarking, encourage accountability, and allow for peer-to-peer learning across municipalities. Measurable outcomes rely on the meticulous and sustained collection of reliable and accessible data.
7. Municipal public servants would benefit from transversal tools that allow them to assess their progress as they adopt a child-centered approach to climate action.
8. Community-led approaches to child-centered climate action can be leveraged and scaled through existing community structures.



# Introduction

Early childhood is the period from before birth until 8 years of age and is characterized by rapid physical, cognitive, and social development. The quality of this development depends on the care that children receive during this time, as well as their physical environment. The foundations for lifelong learning, health, and behavior are established during early childhood. Therefore, the magnitude of risk as well as the immensity of opportunity distinguish this period from all other moments in life.

Children are disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of climate change because it affects the quality and continuity of their care, as well as their physical environments. The impacts of climate change on children's development can have lifelong negative consequences.

The effects of climate change are inordinately felt in the Majority World, which is also predicted to be home to the world's 10 most populous cities by 2100. The 2018 *Revision of World Urbanization Prospects*, published by the Population Division of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, finds that growth in the world's urban population will largely take place in just a few countries. Just over a third of this growth between 2018 and 2050 will take place in cities located in India, China, and Nigeria. Robert Muggah, cofounder of the Igarapé Institute, and Katie Hill of the Omidyar Network write that Africa is urbanizing faster than any other region and that the continent's population of 1.1 billion people is likely to double by 2050; 80% of that growth is likely to take place in cities, especially in slums.

The future is urban but rapidly growing urban settlements in the Majority World lack basic infrastructure and are ill prepared to face the challenges that will be compounded by a changing climate. Rapid urbanization presents multiple competing developmental priorities that need to be addressed.

The intersection of climate change and early childhood development (ECD) requires urgent attention, investigation, and action. First, designing ECD-centered responses to climate change addresses the needs of the most vulnerable segments of society—infants, pregnant women, and young children—whose lifelong health, learning, and social outcomes are under threat. Second, placing children at the heart of climate action is a pathway towards long-term sustainable development because investment in ECD has long-term positive impacts on individuals, communities, and society as a whole. Young children who benefit from good care and a healthy environment enjoy better lifelong health and relationships, exhibit greater resilience, and are more likely to contribute positively to their communities and their country's economies.

Therefore, there is a direct causal relationship between resilient children and sustainable, resilient societies. In this respect, addressing the needs of young children in climate action is an opportunity to reposition young children from most vulnerable to most valuable.

As the intersection of climate change and ECD is interrogated, it makes sense to focus on urban areas because the bulk of population growth (and therefore the concentration of young children) in the near and medium term is projected to take place in cities.

This paper outlines three opportunities to place young children at the heart of climate action by local government:

1. Increase children's and families' formal and structured participation in decision-making
2. Institutionalize the responsibility for mitigating the impact of climate change on children within cities, municipalities, and other local government structures
3. Scale effective community-led approaches

These opportunities are the outcomes of the Child-Centered City Climate Policy Convening hosted by Capita on 9 March 2023 at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study in Stellenbosch, South Africa.

**The impacts of climate change on children's development can have lifelong negative consequences.**



# Opportunity 1:

## Increase children’s and families’ formal and structured participation in decision-making

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989, gives all children the right to express themselves in all matters that affect them. Meaningful participation involves a transfer of power from adults to children, which transforms the status of children from passive recipients to active agents who are informed and able to influence decisions affecting their lives.

The 2017 UNICEF *Guidance Note on Child Participation in Local Governance* asserts that local government offers the most practical and effective opportunities for children’s participation. Their participation can lead to better services, more responsive local policies and plans, and a more effective use of local budgets in support of children’s priorities.

The *Most Vulnerable to Most Valuable* scoping study published by the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC) in 2022 recommends that children be included in discussions of climate change policy and program development. In the case of very young children, efforts to educate and involve caregivers are needed. The study also states that including children’s voices is only the first step of a process—children need to see the impact of their work in their communities.

### The obstacles

The legal definition of adulthood, which is enshrined in countries’ constitutions, precludes children’s meaningful civil participation. Underlying this barrier are beliefs about children’s ability to participate meaningfully, sometimes accompanied by the view that children are the “property” of adults and therefore excluded from decision-making processes until they come of age. Children should be viewed as part of the collective civil decision-making body, which implies equality in participation. Formal processes, structures, and systems for civil engagement in creating policies and programs are designed for adult participation. To facilitate meaningful participation by children, caregivers, and communities, local government structures need to support processes to enable children’s participation. This may include allowing children to participate in policy and program design in alternative ways, such as using drawings or poetry.

In many cases, systems are bolstered by rigid bureaucracy and obscured by complexity. Therefore, any efforts to incorporate children’s participation would require great effort and cost, which is not always possible when urgent responses to the harmful effects of climate change are needed.

## Potential pathways

- An understanding of climate change could be built into children's early (and later) education with a focus on children's action and agency—both individually and collectively. Children are most vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change during the first 1000 days of life; therefore, awareness and understanding of climate change need to be built among pregnant women and primary caregivers so that they may participate on their children's behalf.
- Systems that encourage and facilitate the participation of pregnant women and primary caregivers in decision-making around climate change actions must be prioritized. There is a persistent societal bias to “age up”—that is, to focus on older children—when early childhood development is in question, and this may have the detrimental effect of excluding the specific needs of pregnant women, infants, and very young children.
- Platforms for consultation and participatory decision-making could be built into existing governance systems, possibly by linking appropriate engagement and action at various governance levels.
- Appropriate methods for children's participation need to be put in place, depending on children's age, vocabulary, attention span, and ability to participate without the guidance or consent of their caregivers, as well as their grasp of the concepts of governance and policy. These methods may include drawing, storytelling, play, and school clubs.
- Decision-making processes that do not include children could be penalized, potentially when decisions are made on which programs to fund as part of public-private partnerships.
- Campaigns that encourage adults to “donate your vote” to a child may help amend cultural norms around the validity of children's opinions and choices and help children understand the democratic election process.

- Outcomes from processes that encourage children to participate must be incorporated into municipal or local government development plans.

### Case study: Commissioner for Children Western Cape

The Commissioner for Children in South Africa's Western Cape province has successfully implemented child participation in governance processes nationally and in the province.

The Commissioner's office engages children as young as 6 through schools, local government-led community initiatives, nonprofit organizations working with children, and public care facilities. Children's submissions into formal policy and law-making processes follow the normal routes of written and oral presentations, but with important changes to make the systems more child centered. For example, children's written submissions to government departments are often presented as drawings, while oral presentations can be made in alternative formats such as spoken poetry, in a closed session with parliamentarians to protect children's identity.

The Commissioner will partner with the Junior City Council (JCC) of the country's second-largest city, Cape Town, to engage local government. With the JCC, the commissioner will enable Western Cape's metro areas to hear children's written and oral submissions.

The Commissioner for Children has supported and advocated for several initiatives that incorporate parents and pregnant women. In these cases, the commissioner brings provincial government representation from across departments with the understanding that the needs of babies and toddlers require crosscutting and wraparound services and care, especially in the first 1000 days.





# Opportunity 2:

## **Institutionalize the responsibility for mitigating the impact of climate change on children within cities, and other local government structures**

All countries that signed the 2016 Paris Agreement, a binding treaty between 194 countries to mitigate global warming and to initiate adaptation efforts in response to climate change, are legally obligated to publish Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) that outline their commitments towards adaptation and mitigation. Climate action may include efforts to limit global warming (referred to as mitigation) and to strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate change, as well as the response to loss and damage caused by it. UNICEF reviewed over 100 NDCs in 2020 and found very few to be child sensitive.

Countries may also publish National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) that outline their plans to reduce vulnerability to the impacts of climate change by building adaptive capacity and resilience, as well as to integrate adaptation into new and existing national, sectoral, and subnational policies and programs.

Big cities and municipalities may adapt NDCs and NAPs into city-level climate action plans. Some of these climate action plans acknowledge the needs of children but again, few are child sensitive and most fail to distinguish between the different periods of development in childhood. Local government policies and programs must center on the needs of children and, above all, differentiate between the needs of children in the various stages of development in the early years. ARNEC's *Most Vulnerable to Most Valuable* study maintains that the youngest children, from birth to age three, should be a primary focus as this is the most sensitive period of development. Gender and disability may have further impacts on how the effects of climate change influence development.

### **The obstacles**

The ECD sector is hyper-complex because the delivery of services cuts across multiple departments and levels of government; services interact with care that children receive, the services their caregivers have access to, and the physical environment in which children and caregivers live. Optimal ECD requires the collaboration of many players who must share responsibility. In reality, ECD services tend to be siloed and a disconnect often exists between the care that children receive, services aimed at children's caregivers (which may promote better care), and activities that impact the physical environments of children and caregivers. A real risk exists that this siloed approach will translate to the way the intersection of ECD and climate change is considered at a local government level.

Bureaucracy encumbers decision-making at all government levels, including local government, which presents a further obstacle to adopting a child-centered approach to climate action. Even when a child-centered approach is favored, decision-making processes deadlock due to mismatches between aspirations and capacity to execute or budgets.

In many cases, politicians act with a short-term view. This hinders the allocation of resources into ECD because ECD is by its nature a long-term strategy to sustainable development and human capital growth.

## Potential pathways

- Early childhood development should not be considered as a discrete set of programs but rather as a crosscutting approach where the consideration of young children's needs is incorporated into all climate action. One approach might be to create municipal positions (similar to chief heat officers) that are charged with mitigating the adverse impacts of climate change on young children and that have oversight across multiple departments.
- To further facilitate a crosscutting approach, ECD outcomes and short-term indicators should be visible and communicated widely to improve understanding of how climate actions may affect ECD and increase bottom-up demand for ECD-sensitive climate policy. For example, improved understanding of the link between air pollution and health outcomes (such as the incidence of asthma and damaged lung function in children) will increase public demand for mitigation actions to improve air quality in big cities.
- Measuring success is a critical way to institutionalize the focus on young children within climate change actions by local government. To overcome political short-termism, it can be helpful to choose interventions whose outcomes the public easily understands as being connected to the interventions. Using measurable outcomes relies on the meticulous and sustained collection of reliable and accessible data.
- Measurable outcomes can mobilize political commitment and encourage accountability because they can be applied to ranking and scorecard mechanisms. Both approaches have proved effective in municipalities in different global contexts and across various sectors. Platforms that share rankings and scorecards can become powerful advocacy tools for civil society and showcase case studies and lessons that encourage peer-to-peer learning between cities.
- Resistance to change at the level of local government can be countered by civil society and community action, which needs to be mobilized through awareness and advocacy campaigns, including advocacy efforts that directly link local government activities to maternal and child health. Advocacy efforts should consider and capitalize on election cycles.
- Local media outlets and social media are powerful tools that can ignite communities to demand change, as long as the messaging is compelling and builds a strong case for specific actions. Prioritizing ECD within climate action needs to be reframed as a societywide issue and communicated to all sectors of society, not only to stakeholders who are directly impacted (such as caregivers). A rising tide of opinion will exert pressure on all levels of government and may unlock new sources of funding for ECD interventions.
- High-level political advocates at local government level can help promote change, specifically if they are perceived to be responding to demands made by civil society. Action should be participatory, tangible, and collaborative—applied across public and private sectors.
- Once local government decides to approach climate action with a focus on young children, municipal public servants would benefit from self-assessment tools that allow them to gauge what is working and what areas to improve. The tools would need to reflect the complex and crosscutting nature of ECD policies and services.



# Opportunity 3:

## Scale effective community-led approaches

The Nurturing Care Framework published by the World Health Organization, UNICEF, and the World Bank Group in 2018 establishes concentric circles of support that enable primary caregivers to provide the nurturing care their young children need for optimal development. Communities are critical as they are closest to children and their families and can provide immediate social structures to enable access to ECD services and provide the healthy physical environment that children need to thrive.

Climate policy and planning can be perceived as big-picture issues. However, communities are increasingly beginning to associate the urgent and adverse impacts of changing weather patterns (such as food security, access to safe water and sustainable sanitation, and displacement) with climate change.

ARNEC's *Most Vulnerable to Most Valuable* states that understanding the impact of climate change at a local level reveals the needs of the most vulnerable sector of society: young children and pregnant women. Communities are often able to respond to crises and meet the immediate needs of their members faster than other governance structures. This provides an opportunity to mobilize community demand for climate action and to scale effective community-led approaches to mitigation and adaptation when it comes to ECD.

Just as child-sensitive climate action needs to be reframed as a long-term equitable pathway towards sustainable development, so should investment in community-led approaches be repositioned. Investment in community-led approaches is not solely about protecting vulnerable groups of people but rather about harnessing innate scientific, social, and cultural knowledge to build resilient environments for nurturing care.

### Enabling Environments for Nurturing Care

Source: Nurturing Care Framework



## The obstacles

Communities take various forms: some exist in physical spaces, others may connect groups that are spatially diverse. This means that community-led approaches to dealing with climate change impacts on young children may be specific to their own communities and difficult to replicate in different geographic or societal contexts. As urban spaces grow, communities evolve and so do the approaches they take to solving climate change challenges.

These factors pose hurdles to securing funding to scale these initiatives. In addition, budget allocations from national and city-level sources, as well as from climate-related official development assistance, often don't match the funding needs of community-led approaches.

Citizens, especially those living in vulnerable communities, are often time poor, which limits their capacity to engage in the civil processes required to secure funding and scale up solutions. Complex bureaucratic processes can hinder attempts to implement community approaches at scale.

Certain communities may not be able to advocate for community-led approaches.

## Potential pathways

- Many community-based organizations and institutions (such as schools) already have child-sensitive climate activities in place. For example, many ECD centers and schools have food gardens. These serve multiple purposes: from teaching children valuable life skills, to providing practical education on weather patterns and climate change, to supplying school kitchens with nutritious food. Local governments should inventory the child-sensitive climate activities of community-based organizations as the first step towards scaling them.
- In scaling community-led solutions, the focus should be on physical interventions that make climate action visible at a community level. Examples might include greening public spaces and making them safe for children's play or implementing pedestrian-only zones in big cities, which improves road safety and air quality.
- Visual devices in public spaces, such as murals, art installations, exhibits, open access film screenings, and concerts, can inspire change in communities especially when children's participation (as discussed in Opportunity 1) is considered as the devices are developed.
- Cooperation between community activists and political champions from local government can spark change. Communities should lead on public demand for child-centered climate action, influencing action at local government level.

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## About Capita

Capita is an independent, nonpartisan think tank with a global focus. Our purpose is to build a future in which all children and families flourish.

We stand at the edge of seismic shifts in the global economy and our political and environmental systems—systems that frequently ignore children. Yet by prioritizing our youngest and their support networks we have the potential to radically transform the social fabric of our societies for the long term.

Capita explores how the great cultural, planetary, and social transformations of our day affect our youngest children (0-8 years old) and our communities. We focus on the interrelated problems and injustices that prevent society from meeting the needs of children and families, particularly those furthest from opportunity. From the impacts of climate change to parental loneliness and social disconnection, our work catalyzes creative new ideas and solutions to some of the most pressing global challenges.

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