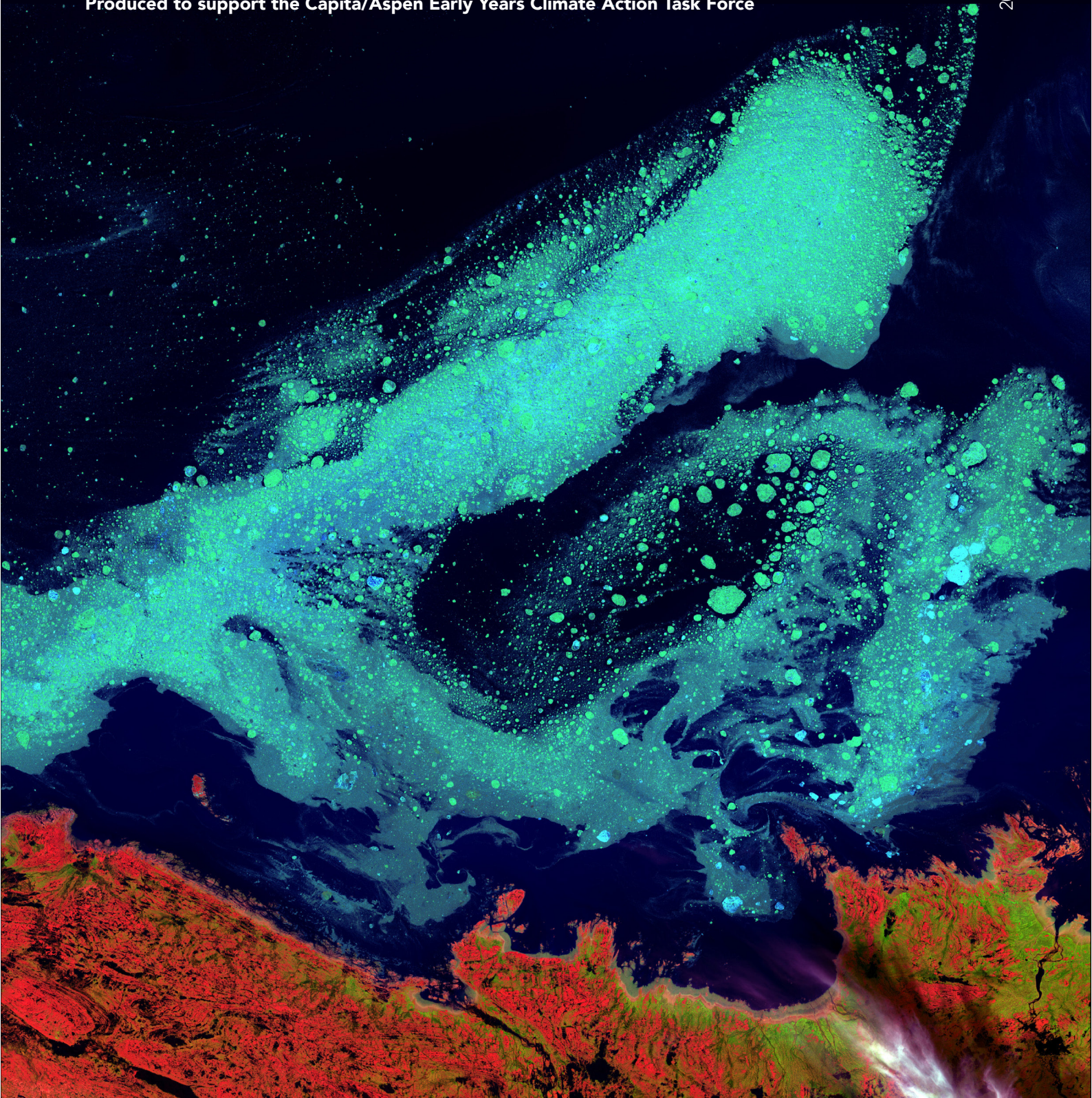


# Protecting Our Future Now: A Policy Framework for Climate Change and the Early Years

capita

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# Key Messages:

- In the face of climate change, focusing on our youngest children and families is an important avenue for ensuring an equitable, sustainable future for all.
- Aligning early years and climate change policies, practices, and financing protects those most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and drives action on adaptation, mitigation, and reducing loss and damage.
- The U.N. Sustainable Development Goals provide an optimal framework for aligning action on climate change with action on the needs of young children.

# Introduction

This paper offers a conceptual framework. It is intended to enrich the reflection and dialogue of the Capita/Aspen Early Years Climate Action Task Force and to help it select the most promising approaches to help young children flourish in the face of climate change in the United States. In late 2023, the Task Force will publish the first U.S. Early Years Climate Action Plan. The Task Force will identify best practices for government, child- and family-serving systems, businesses, not-for-profits, and philanthropy to mitigate, adapt, and respond to climate change as it relates to young children, their families, and the programs and systems that serve them. It will also identify policy frameworks for implementation at all levels of government.

There is a tension inherent in both the climate change and the early years (which herein is used to refer to the policies, services, programs and/or systems that address early childhood) spaces:<sup>1</sup> how do we react to present and urgent threats, risks, and damage, and at the same time develop long-term, sustainable approaches to address fundamental, systemic challenges? The current (and growing) challenges posed by climate change, especially for populations and communities that have historically suffered from environmental and social injustice, require us to prioritize both the immediate and the long term, the individual and the systemic. In the case of the early years, we contend that adequately supporting young children and their families is a powerful tool to address both the short-term threats and long-term challenges of climate change. We also contend that strategies that align approaches to climate change with those centered on young children hold the key to unlocking local and global goals of sustainable development.

We propose that, by interweaving early years and climate change policies and practices and working at this intersection, we can address the needs of those most exposed to the immediate impacts of climate disruption, including pregnant women, young children, and their families. Meeting their needs today provides fundamental building blocks for resilient communities and drives systemic change in the short and long term. Long-term impacts also go far beyond the urgent threats posed by climate change: they boost the capacity of communities and nations to achieve policy goals and targets of environmental sustainability and social and economic development. To align action on climate change and the early years, we can use existing strategic approaches that are widely recognized and have been adopted globally. We'll describe one such framework, the U.N.'s Sustainable Development Goals, below.

This paper provides a unifying framework to address social, economic, and environmental challenges by leveraging the transformational power of early years policies and programs. In light of the ever-evolving nature of climate change science and policy, as well as national and global trends, it reflects the current state of knowledge on these issues. As a result, it is intended as the first in a series of papers that will explore how young children, families, and communities can flourish in the face of climate change. We expect this exploration to deepen and to provide more practical applications as more sectors recognize the importance of the early years and join the conversation.

# Climate and the early years: a conceptual framework

In the face of climate change, focusing on our youngest children and families is an important avenue for ensuring an equitable, sustainable future for all.<sup>2</sup> The latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) states that “the scientific evidence is unequivocal: climate change is a threat to human wellbeing and the health of the planet. Any further delay in concerted global action will miss a brief and rapidly closing window to secure a livable future.”<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency further points out that “climate change can also impact human health by worsening air and water quality, increasing the spread of certain diseases, and altering the frequency or intensity of extreme weather events.”<sup>4</sup> Communities, particularly vulnerable communities,<sup>5</sup> are already experiencing disasters and emergencies associated with climate change; a recent study of individuals with high social vulnerability in the U.S. found that low-income, minority, and undereducated individuals are significantly more likely to be exposed to climate risks and are less likely in most cases to be able to adequately adapt to the impact of these risks.<sup>6</sup> As underscored by both the IPCC and the EPA, these risks and impacts are expected to increase and intensify in the future.

As the most vulnerable members of any population, young children (and their families)<sup>7</sup> are particularly at risk from worsening air and water quality, disease, and the impacts of emergencies and damage.<sup>8</sup> Pregnant women are highly vulnerable to climate-driven extreme heat events<sup>9</sup> and associated worsening air quality, as well as the spread of vector-borne illnesses. The vulnerability inherent in the early years means that children and families must be a priority in policies, programs, and practices to address the impacts of climate change.

Yet the early years (especially the first 1000 days) are notable not only for their high risk, but also their immense opportunity. Young children have unique potential that is unlike other moments in the human lifespan, even other moments in childhood.<sup>10</sup> This fundamental difference in both risk and return on investment has been widely documented by developmental scientists<sup>11</sup> and economists.<sup>12</sup> It must be urgently elevated and prioritized in the development of policies and programs intended to address climate change.

A focus on the early years goes beyond addressing the urgent risks posed by climate change on young children. It is also a fundamental and cross-cutting building block of an equitable, sustainable future. In fact, growing evidence shows that policies and programs focused on the early years—when they are appropriately financed, of high quality, distributed equitably and at the right time in life, and aligned with the principles of sustainable development—have a triple dividend: they promote climate resilience and adaptive capacity, protect individual potential and foster human development, and boost the achievement of sustainable development.<sup>13</sup> Over 50 years of research on early childhood development conclusively shows that nurturing care in the early years influences an individual’s ability to escape poverty, gain employment, be healthy, develop good eating habits, experience long-term economic stability and (in the case of care directed at parents or pregnant women) connect with their children.

Projected to the community, these impacts add up to strengthened community resilience, improved use of resources, less waste, a reduced need to produce medicines and assistive devices, and increased impetus and capacity to be involved in civic actions to address conservation and environmental challenges—positive environmental and climate benefits directly associated with care and interventions focused on the early years. Over time, these benefits merge to foster truly sustainable communities with the infrastructure and capacity for innovation, and directly benefit children through improved health equity, birth equity, and economic stability. They drive a powerful virtuous cycle.

### Three approaches to climate change

#### **Mitigation: how to prevent climate change**

Taking action to limit the magnitude and rate of future climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions or advancing nature-based solutions. This includes reducing harmful pollutants that have an impact on climate change and children’s health.

#### **Adaptation: how to avoid the impacts of inevitable change**

Taking action to protect everyone, especially young children and families, and help them to prepare for and adjust to the Impacts we face from our disrupted climate system. This includes strategies that promote resilient infrastructure that will more effectively protect young children and, at the same time, lead to resilient systems that protect and leverage community resources.

#### **Loss and damage: how to address the impacts we cannot avoid**

Taking action to address climate impacts that communities are unable, or lack resources, to adapt to. This includes targeted supports for young children and families affected by events related to climate change, capitalizing on their potential for recovery while prioritizing the resources they need in the face of crises.

# The sustainable development goals (SDGs) as a valuable framework

When we discuss sustainability, we use the framework provided by the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Inspired by the Millennium Development Goals,<sup>14</sup> the SDGs were developed through a broad and diverse global consultation that began in the Rio+20 Conference in 2012 and ended with adoption by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015.<sup>15</sup> They were implemented in 2016 and are intended to end, or be revised, in 2030. The SDGs drive national policies and investments. Countries report on their progress in meeting the SDG's targets.

In our estimation, the SDGs are the most clear, comprehensive, complex, practical, and aspirational "blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future,"<sup>16</sup> as the U.N. describes them. If ever there was an expression of human aspirations for a better world, it is contained in the SDGs.

## What are the U.N.'s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

Adopted by all U.N. member states in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals provide an unprecedented framework that has mobilized countries around the world to concomitantly pursue biospheric resilience, economic prosperity, and social well-being. The SDGs are linked: action on one goal impacts all others. Evidence supports the early years as cross-cutting drivers to achieving all of the SDGs' social and economic goals.<sup>17</sup>

There are 17 SDGs:

1. No poverty
2. Zero hunger
3. Good health and well-being
4. Quality education
5. Gender equality
6. Clean water and sanitation
7. Affordable and clean energy
8. Decent work and economic growth
9. Industry, innovation, and infrastructure
10. Reduced inequality
11. Sustainable cities and communities
12. Responsible consumption and production
13. Climate action
14. Life below water
15. Life on land
16. Peace, justice, and strong institutions
17. Partnerships for the goals

The well-being of every child is directly related to the achievement of long-term development goals. Educated and healthy children fulfill their potential and contribute to society; the cost of inaction in the early years has cascading negative impacts on the potential of families, communities, and society.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the SDGs, as argued by UNDP, UNICEF, and others, are not only a platform for societal and environmental development and well-being. They are also a platform to guide necessary investment in the early years while simultaneously increasing adaptive capacity and resilience to a changing climate. In the context of the sustainable development agenda more broadly, the early years, as proposed by former U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, are a fundamental and cross-cutting building block of a sustainable future.<sup>19</sup> “The Sustainable Development Goals recognize that early childhood development can help drive the transformation we hope to achieve over the next 15 years.”<sup>20</sup>

From a practical perspective, the SDGs provide a structure to organize (and evaluate) the movement towards sustainable development for all U.N. members.<sup>21</sup> While not widely known in the U.S. at the national level, the SDGs have been seen as an organizing structure by an ever-growing number of cities and states, including Los Angeles, New York City, Orlando, Pittsburgh, and Hawaii.<sup>22</sup> They are also the organizing frame for the Sustainable Development Center at the Brookings Institution.<sup>23</sup>

Looking at the comprehensive climate agenda in the United States, we already see the organizational structure of the SDGs at work. Issues that people intuitively understand as connected to climate (such as energy, wildlife conservation, water, food security, sustainable cities, and innovation) are, perhaps obviously, part of the climate agenda. However, as this agenda evolves to become more inclusive and equity driven, other priorities emerge: equity, gender impacts, poverty, employment, peace, and justice. All these issues are considered in the SDGs. Attending to all of them, in a comprehensive and integrated way, is the path towards both climate action and improved well-being.

One key lesson from the SDGs is that challenges—systemic and individual, global and local, social and environmental—are interconnected. SDG 13, Climate Action,<sup>24</sup> like all of the goals, can only succeed in concert with, and with the support of, the other 16 SDGs. The IPCC underscores these connections between climate change and the broader agenda of sustainable development; its report “recognizes the interdependence of climate, ecosystems and biodiversity, and human societies; the value of diverse forms of knowledge; and the close linkages between climate change adaptation, mitigation, ecosystem health, human well-being and sustainable development, and reflects the increasing diversity of actors involved in climate action.”<sup>25</sup>

Interventions in the early years are already implicitly organized around many of the same goals and drivers as the SDGs. Early years practice recognizes the negative impacts of poverty (SDG Goal 1), the need for healthy nutrition and food security (Goal 2), the positive promise of early years investments for lifelong health and well-being (Goal 3), the impact of supportive programming in the early years on educational outcomes (Goal 4), and the ability of early years interventions to reduce societal inequality (Goal 10) and to promote peaceful societies (Goal 16).<sup>26</sup>

One significant challenge in using the SDGs as a framework is its relative unfamiliarity among U.S.-based audiences. The Task Force will have to consider the most effective way to frame and communicate the idea of sustainable development (its vital importance in relation to both climate action and the early years) in a way that is understandable and aligned with the values and beliefs of American audiences. Ideally, the conclusions of the Task Force could serve as a bridge to connect U.S. policymakers and constituents with these concepts and the global process.

# Achieving the full potential of human development: interconnected action for the climate and early years sectors

To garner the most benefit from the interconnection between the early years and climate change, two complementary sets of actions must happen:

- the early years sector must have access to resources that increase its knowledge of climate change and allow for the creation of early years programs, practices, and infrastructure that are more climate sensitive and adaptive
- the climate sector must increase its knowledge about the early years to effectively integrate young children into plans that address climate mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage.

To promote these actions, concerted efforts must be made to:

- promote dialogue and collaboration between these sectors
- increase the early years sector's awareness of and sensitivity to plans, policies, programs, and practices to address climate change
- promote early years policies and programs that are aware of and informed by climate change (and sustainable development)
- press for climate finance mechanisms to include sustainable allocations for the early years, enabling implementation of policies, programs, and services that address climate change priorities while addressing social investments for young children and their families.

This Task Force is the first concrete step in this direction.

The figure below highlights inputs or entry points from the early years and climate sectors that can be used to leverage or drive policies, programs, and investments at scale. It also highlights entry points that, by their design, provide interconnected frameworks for the two sectors. We argue that these intersections drive the desired outcomes of promoting the developmental potential of children while addressing urgent climate challenges.





We used the conceptual framing above to develop a set of possible actions that the Task Force might choose to incorporate in its recommendations. The detailed list of those actions is not included here, but they are divided into three broad categories:

- Strategic alliances and communication
  - a. Partnerships and coalitions
  - b. Research and evidence-to-policy agenda
- Structural investments and macroeconomic linkages
  - a. Planning and infrastructure
  - b. Equity, child care, and economic opportunity and development
- Direct programs, interventions, and services
  - a. Early childhood care and education in both normative and emergency contexts
  - b. Disaster responses and emergency response plans/strategies
  - c. Health and nutrition
  - d. Early childhood psychological care and promotion of resilience
  - e. Parental support and education

To successfully weave together actions in the early years with action on climate change, we must harmonize the above actions within the framework of three approaches to addressing climate change: mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage.

**Mitigation: how to prevent climate change**

Mitigation involves human interventions to reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases or enhance their removal from the atmosphere by sinks: forests, vegetation, or soils that can reabsorb CO<sub>2</sub>. Carbon dioxide is the largest contributing gas to the greenhouse effect. In the 200 years since 1800, levels have risen by over 30%. Since levels of greenhouse gases are currently rising even more steeply, leading to the most dramatic change in the atmosphere's composition in at least 650,000 years, international action on mitigation is urgently required. Critical to achieving climate mitigation is to transition to forms of energy that do not add heat-trapping gases to our atmosphere and our oceans.<sup>27</sup>

**Adaptation: how to avoid the impacts of inevitable change**

Adaptation refers to adjustments in ecological, social, or economic systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli and their effects. It refers to changes in processes, practices, and structures to moderate potential damage or to benefit from opportunities associated with climate change. In simple terms, countries and communities need to develop adaptation solutions and implement actions to respond to current and future climate change impacts.<sup>28</sup>

**Loss and damage: how to address the impacts we cannot avoid**

Loss and damage refers to "the consequences of climate change that go beyond what people can adapt to, or when options exist but a community doesn't have the resources to access or utilize them. This could include the loss of coastal heritage sites due to rising sea levels, or the loss of homes and lives during extreme floods."<sup>29</sup>

Human-induced climate change, including more frequent and intense extreme events, has caused widespread adverse impacts and related loss and damage to nature and people beyond natural climate variability. Some development and adaptation efforts have reduced vulnerability, but the rise in weather and climate extremes has led to some irreversible impacts as natural and human systems are pushed beyond their ability to adapt.<sup>30</sup>

# Aligning concepts, language, and dialogue in a strategic action plan: key questions and priorities

Given the nascent relationship between the early years community and the climate change community, it is necessary to harmonize both concepts and language to promote deeper collaboration and alignment. For example, to expand the conversation beyond climate risk and vulnerability of the early years, more work is needed to translate current knowledge about the return on investment in the early years into “carbon.” What is the impact of early years policies and practices in terms of reducing (or potentially increasing) the carbon footprint of communities? This translation will help integrate proposed early childhood actions into larger models that understand human impacts on the climate. It can also help show how investment in the early years can impact local, national, and global climate change.

It is equally important to find common concepts or language that sets the table for a productive conversation between these fields, which—on their own—are exceptionally interdisciplinary. “Full potential” or “healthy development” could be useful entry points. Early years interventions are designed to provide children with the tools they need to make the most of their lives—to reach their full potential. The climate community similarly targets full potential through the concept of resilience—recognizing that investments in responsive capacity, community infrastructure, and climate education help communities “bounce forward” following a climate disaster, rather than just “bounce back” to a former state. In this way, “full potential” and “resilience” underscore the shared goals of the early years and climate change.

It is more than just a case of shared goals, however. We argue that the pathway between resilient children and sustainable, resilient societies runs in both directions.

Beyond improving interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration between the early years community and the climate community, additional considerations could be helpful in designing practical interventions. They include:

- **Scale of impact:** Will a proposed intervention have sustained and positive impact on helping pregnant women, young children, and families be more climate resilient, while at the same time mitigating future climate impacts through decreasing carbon intensity and loss and damage?
- **Scope of intervention:** Will a proposed intervention require participation or intervention at the individual, family, community, state, national, regional, or global level?
- **Stage of development/necessary next steps:** Is a proposed intervention ready for further research, policy/program development, public/private partnership, advocacy, financing strategy, or full implementation?
- **Actors:** What actors/stakeholders are needed to move a proposed intervention forward? Individuals, local/state/federal/international government, grassroots organizations, NGO/ENGOS and other nonprofits, academia and other science organizations, others?
- **Points of friction:** What points of friction must be addressed to carry a proposed intervention forward? Beliefs and cultural norms, political platforms, financing, low awareness and knowledge, others?

# Final note on the importance and urgency of U.S. leadership in addressing climate change


Given the U.S. focus of this Task Force, it is important to stress that the U.S. is the country with the largest historical and per capita greenhouse gas footprint on earth.<sup>31</sup> It is therefore critical to advocate for and support carbon mitigation actions by the U.S. This is particularly relevant for the Early Years Climate Action Task Force because our immediate actions as a society—and restoring the leadership of the U.S. regarding climate change—are the only ways to meet our obligations to the youngest children and future generations.

An extension of our responsibility to address the U.S. carbon footprint is to call for U.S. leadership in global climate negotiations and to address the impacts of climate change, especially in the most vulnerable nations. This means substantial contributions to support adaptation, resilience, and tools to address loss and damage. Appropriate financial contributions to the global funds for these purposes, while foundational, are insufficient. We must also bring forth our best knowledge and efforts to enable appropriate global responses to urgent and ongoing climate emergencies and disasters, while at the same time making forward-thinking investments that set us on the path towards the critical goal of a sustainable future.

# Notes

1. As defined by UNICEF, early childhood, which spans the period up to 8 years of age, is critical for cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. <https://data.unicef.org/topic/early-childhood-development/overview/>
2. We use the term families to encompass a variety of caregivers: not only parents but also diverse communities of care for young children, which vary widely according to setting and context.
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4. United States Environmental Protection Agency. Impacts of climate change, <https://www.epa.gov/climatechange-science/impacts-climate-change>
5. This paper recognizes that intersecting and overlapping vulnerabilities compound the risk from climate change and its associated health impacts for children and their parents. In particular, as acknowledged in the UNFCCC Paris Climate Agreement, indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities, and people in vulnerable situations face higher burdens. Gender, age, and other factors can also exacerbate burdens. While this paper regularly references children and pregnant women, we also acknowledge that children (and parents) with disabilities, nonwhite children, female children, and children with other intersecting vulnerabilities may suffer compounded burdens from climate change.
6. United States Environmental Protection Agency. 2021. Climate change and social vulnerability in the United States: a focus on six impacts. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, EPA 430-R-21-003. [www.epa.gov/cira/social-vulnerability-report](http://www.epa.gov/cira/social-vulnerability-report)
7. The terms young children (and their families), early years, and early childhood development refer to a multifaceted concept that encompasses both the child and the child's environment. At the level of the child, it includes the phases of development from the prenatal period through the transition to school, which is complete by age 8 or 9. Holistic development during this period occurs across several domains: physical health and motor development, cognitive skills, social and emotional functioning, competencies in language and literacy, ethical and spiritual development, sense of group membership, and identity within families, communities, cultures, and nation states (Britto, P.R., Gordon, Il, Hodges, W., Sunar, D., Kagitcibasi, C., & Leckman, J. (2014). Ecology of Peace. In Pathways to peace: The transformative power of children and families. Strüngmann Forum Reports, vol. 15, J. Lupp, series ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 978-0-262-02798-4.) tk
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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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