



A ROTARY PEACE FELLOWSHIP SOCIAL CHANGE INITIATIVE

Climate, Children and Peace *Knowledge Brief*

Evidence on how climate hazards affect children and young people in India and the Middle East and North Africa, and what changes when those risks are viewed through a peacebuilding lens.

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India and MENA

Child-centred peacebuilding

Evidence graded throughout

Companion outputs. Climate Champions: Children's Handbook (ages 10 to 18) and the Facilitator Guide, for Rotaract members, NGOs, teachers, youth workers and community facilitators. Both are designed for local adaptation and translation.

The comparison here is deliberately cautious. MENA is not treated as one uniform context, and evidence from conflict-affected countries is not placed on a flat scale with India. Climate stress is discussed as one factor that can add pressure to already strained systems; it is not treated as a direct cause of conflict.

Scope and approach

This brief draws on published research and institutional reports on child climate risk, health, education, displacement, youth participation and climate–peace pathways. Claims were cross-checked across sources so that modelled exposure, observational associations, consultation findings and programme evidence are not treated as equivalent. It also incorporates participatory field learning from community sessions in Delhi and the design logic of the companion handbooks.

Evidence is labelled by what it actually shows. Modelled hazard exposure is not presented as measured harm. Associations from observational studies are not written as causal effects. Consultation findings are treated as reported perceptions. Programme evaluations are used as examples of plausible practice, with their limits kept visible. This matters most in the climate–conflict section, where deterministic language would overstate the evidence.

Modelled exposure

Who lives in a hazard zone. Not who was harmed.

Observational association

Two things move together. Other causes may explain it.

Consultation findings

What people report and perceive, in their own setting.

Programme evaluation

What happened in one project. A mechanism, not a proof.

Exposure is not risk. UNICEF's 2026 child climate risk framework makes an important distinction. A child may live in an area exposed to several hazards, but the outcome also depends on health, nutrition, water and sanitation, education, protection, social protection and the reliability of local services. Headline figures in this brief are modelled exposure estimates. They show who lives under composite risk, not who has experienced the same clinical or developmental harm.

Geographic note. Country-specific MENA evidence is named rather than generalised to the whole region. Türkiye is treated as regionally adjacent where a study is relevant, not as part of MENA. Somalia, The Gambia and Mali appear only as comparative environmental–peacebuilding cases, not as MENA evidence.

Summary

Children experience climate change through the conditions of daily life: heat, water availability, food, air quality, school continuity, household income, mobility and safety. UNICEF's 2026 child climate risk framework makes an important distinction between exposure and risk. A child may live in an area exposed to several hazards, but the outcome also depends on health, nutrition, water and sanitation, education, protection, social protection and the reliability of local services.

India

India's scale of exposure is large. A 2026 UNICEF-linked analysis estimates that 97% of children in India are exposed to at least two overlapping climate or disaster hazards and more than 234 million are exposed to three or more. These are modelled exposure estimates, not counts of children who have experienced the same clinical or developmental harm. Local monitoring adds detail: a 2024 study of early-childhood sites in Delhi, Gandhinagar, Kharagpur and Roorkee recorded severe heat stress and particulate pollution at places used by young children, while also warning against treating those sites as a national average.

MENA

Across MENA, UNICEF estimates that more than 82 million children face high or extremely high climate risk. The regional figure masks very different national realities. Water stress, heat, pollution, displacement, energy insecurity and conflict-related service breakdown overlap in some countries; elsewhere, the same hazards occur in stronger institutional settings. Recent consultation data from Yemen show why context matters: respondents reported reduced access to natural resources and environmental pressures alongside local tensions, but the findings measure perceptions in a conflict-affected setting and do not prove that climate change caused violence.

The peacebuilding question

The peacebuilding question is therefore about pathways and institutions. Climate stress can make existing pressures harder to manage when livelihoods are insecure, services are weak, people are displaced or access to land and water is contested. At the same time, environmental problems can create practical reasons for groups to negotiate, share information and manage resources together. Evidence from youth-focused Peacebuilding Fund projects shows examples of this second pathway, although most of the evidence is qualitative and project-specific.

Young people should not appear in this story only as vulnerable recipients. Save the Children's participatory research across ten MENA settings found that children and young people often have limited routes into climate decision-making, and that participation can become tokenistic when it is confined to events rather than influence.

Two pathways, and why neither is automatic

The evidence does not support a direct line from climate change to conflict. Climate hazards affect resources and services; those effects then pass through political, economic and social conditions. The same drought is absorbed in one place and destabilising in another, because institutions, safety nets, resource rules and existing grievances differ.

Risk pathway



Cooperation pathway



Context decides which pathway becomes more likely. Neither is automatic.

"Risk multiplier" is the right phrase, used carefully. It means climate stress can intensify pressures that already exist. It does not mean climate change mechanically produces violence. Guidance from the Folke Bernadotte Academy, UNDP and SIPRI makes the same point and asks who has access to resources, who makes decisions, and how young people are included.

Yemen: perceived links, in a country at war

A 2026 consultation led by the European Institute of Peace and Weathering Risk surveyed 3,694 people across 13 Yemeni governorates. Seven in ten reported at least a moderate climate impact on daily life. 92% perceived reduced access to natural resources, especially water, gas and fuel. More than half reported local tensions they connected to environmental factors, and 57% said environmental challenges should be part of peace negotiations.

Read that as what it is. These are consultation findings from a country affected by protracted conflict. They show how people perceive the overlap between environmental stress and insecurity. They do not establish climate change as a cause of that conflict, and a facilitator should never present them that way.

A companion practice note on mediation adds a point worth carrying into any session about fairness: climate adaptation is political, because it changes who gets access and who bears cost. Poorly designed adaptation can deepen grievances. That is precisely what the Water Tank activity puts children inside.

Two regions, and the temptation to merge them

The comparison earns its place when it identifies shared pressures while preserving institutional and geographic difference. What follows is a summary of the evidence used in this brief. It is not a ranking of which region is worse off, and it should never be used as one.

India

- Heat closes schools
- Displacement mostly disaster-driven, short
- Dense national modelling, uneven local data
- Pollution from transport, industry, burning

MENA

- Heat meets water scarcity and power cuts
- Displacement often tied to long conflict
- Regional indices, fewer country studies
- Dust storms alongside traffic and industry

Same planet, different systems. This is a comparison, not a ranking.

DOMAIN	INDIA	MENA
Heat and learning	Large population exposure; heat-driven changes to school schedules and closures; detailed local monitoring in a few cities.	Extreme heat intersects with water scarcity, energy reliability and housing. Impacts differ sharply between countries.
Water and food	Drought, rainfall variability, flood contamination and agricultural dependence create local child-health and livelihood risks.	Very high baseline water stress in many countries; in some settings conflict and damaged infrastructure add further constraint.
Air quality	High particulate exposure in many urban settings, from transport, industry, dust, biomass and seasonal burning.	Dust storms matter in parts of the region, alongside traffic and industry. Country-level evidence is needed.
Education	Heat and extreme weather interrupt school schedules; the scale is visible in national and state reporting.	Climate hazards may combine with displacement, energy shortages and conflict-related service disruption.
Youth participation	Local child councils and community participation; national mechanisms need country-by-country verification.	Both informal youth action and more formal participation routes are documented in several countries.

The line a facilitator must hold. In India, schooling is interrupted mainly by heat, and displacement is usually disaster-driven and short. Across MENA, displacement is far more often tied to conflict that has run for years, and dust and sand storms put something in the air that nobody caused. Conflict-affected Yemen cannot stand for MENA any more than four North Indian cities can stand for India.

Why childhood changes the risk equation

Children's bodies regulate heat differently from adults, and younger children depend on adults and public services for water, food, health care, transport, schooling and protection. A climate hazard therefore becomes more serious when essential services are already unreliable. UNICEF's 2026 framework makes this interaction central: climate risk combines exposure, child-specific vulnerability and gaps in services.

This framing also changes how inequality is understood. Two children can face the same hot day and have very different levels of risk. One may have shade, reliable water, a cooled classroom and quick access to care; another may travel farther, live in a poorly ventilated home, miss school when temperatures rise, or depend on a household income affected by drought. The hazard is shared, but the capacity to cope is not.

Heat and health

Extreme heat is the clearest point of convergence between the two regions. In India, state-level heatwaves have changed school hours, brought vacations forward and closed schools outright. The ICLEI South Asia study adds child-scale measurement, including heat-index values reaching 55°C and wet-bulb temperatures between 25°C and 32°C, taken inside spaces children actually use. In MENA, heat risk is shaped by more than outdoor temperature: household energy poverty, electricity reliability, housing quality and water access decide whether a family can cool a room at all.

Water, food and livelihoods

Water stress reaches children directly through drinking water, sanitation and hygiene, and indirectly through food production, household income and the hours someone spends fetching water. Analysis across nineteen countries found long-term temperature and rainfall patterns associated with children's dietary diversity, while acknowledging how hard it is to separate climate from wealth, markets and food systems. The implication for programmes is simple: child nutrition cannot be separated from climate-resilient water and livelihood systems.

Learning, mobility and protection

School disruption is the most visible route from climate into childhood. UNICEF's global snapshot for 2024 estimated at least 242 million students across 85 countries had schooling disrupted by climate events, heatwaves accounting for the largest share; the India figure is 54.78 million. Those count disruption, not permanent dropout, and should not be read as learning loss for every affected student. Displacement compounds it: an estimated 43.1 million internal child displacements were linked to weather-related disasters between 2016 and 2021, and repeated displacement deepens the losses.

Mental well-being is real but less settled. Climate worry, heat-related distress and uncertainty affect young people, but local studies often use small or selected samples. This brief treats it as a relevant outcome without assigning a universal effect size.

Young people as participants, not only as casualties

Vulnerability is one part of the picture and it is the part that gets told. Young people also hold local knowledge, experience services directly, and will live longest with the choices being made now. Participation matters. Its quality matters considerably more than its visibility.

Save the Children's 2023 participatory research covered Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the occupied Palestinian territory, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen, with participants aged 8 to 35. It found limited routes for children to influence climate decision-making, and warned that regional and global climate events can produce tokenistic participation, where young people are highly visible and have almost no influence. The wide age range means it should not be treated as child-only evidence.

Carnegie's 2025 analysis documents youth negotiator networks, climate councils, entrepreneurship and advocacy across North Africa and neighbouring contexts. Formal participation is clearly possible. Access to it remains uneven and depends heavily on national political conditions.

What the comparative peacebuilding cases show

Peacebuilding Fund reviews add practice examples from outside this comparison. In Somalia, youth groups worked across clan lines on water-canal rehabilitation. In The Gambia, joint adaptation and natural-resource activities were linked in evaluations with improved inter-community relationships. In Mali, youth-focused local groups created routes into natural-resource decisions and village governance.

Why these cases are here. They show mechanisms: participation, shared work, local legitimacy, resource rules. They are programme evidence, not universal proof of impact, and the distinction is the difference between an honest claim and an inflated one.

The test worth applying to your own session. Attendance is not consultation, and consultation is not influence. If young people present an idea and never hear what happened to it, the activity produced visibility and nothing else.

What changed when the ideas met children

Community learning sessions in Delhi were used as field learning for this project. They were not designed as research, a focus group or an outcome evaluation. The purpose was narrower and more useful: to find out which explanations and activities children could actually engage with in real community settings, and what had to change in the materials as a result.

In the first session, Rotaract volunteers led short discussions on heat, water, air pollution and waste. Children named practical actions they already knew, before anyone taught them: saving water, not burning plastic, keeping surroundings clean, disposing of waste properly, reduce, reuse, recycle. A drawing exercise asking them to represent their own neighbourhoods made the discussion concrete in a way the discussion alone had not.

The second session took place in a busy urban cluster where traffic noise made long explanation hopeless. Children drew small houses, open drains, mosquitoes and visible garbage. They then played the Water Tank. Groups took the roles of a school, a health facility, households and farmers, and the available water was deliberately set below total demand. Each group explained its needs, received less than it asked for, and sent messengers to negotiate. Afterwards the children talked about conservation, sharing, reuse, and holding people accountable.

What the materials owe to those afternoons

WHAT HAPPENED	WHAT CHANGED BECAUSE OF IT
Children arrived already knowing the practical actions.	Start from what they know, then move to systems, unequal impact and shared responsibility.
Noise made long explanation impossible.	Activities became shorter, more visual, and runnable in a loud room.
The Water Tank produced genuine negotiation.	Kept offline. The tokens and the face-to-face bargaining are the activity.
Copying it to a screen would have hollowed it out.	The online route was rebuilt around polls, chat waterfalls and a separate priority-setting exercise.

Field-learning boundary. These observations informed design choices. They do not demonstrate that the activities improved climate knowledge, behaviour, social cohesion or conflict-resolution skills. Any such claim would require a documented evaluation, and none was run.

From evidence to two handbooks

Both companion handbooks follow one sequence: notice, understand, see differently, work together, take action. It starts with local experience, introduces climate and systems thinking, then moves into fairness, negotiation and shared responsibility. Adult and institutional responsibility is kept visible throughout, so that no child is left with the impression that household behaviour alone will solve a structural problem.

The education literature points the same way. A 2025 analysis of Indian secondary-school curriculum found substantial environmental and climate content already present, and argued that what was missing was teacher capacity, systems thinking and action-oriented pedagogy rather than more content. The handbooks follow that direction by pairing explanation with mapping, consequence chains, negotiation, scenario work and local solution design.

What institutions can do differently

The evidence points to a small number of practical choices cutting across climate, child protection and peacebuilding. The mix varies by setting. The responsibility sits with systems, not only with young people.

GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL SYSTEMS	SCHOOLS, NGOS AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS	ROTARY, ROTARACT AND YOUTH ORGANISATIONS
Map child exposure together with water, health, education, protection and social-protection gaps.	Begin with local conditions children recognise, then connect them to climate processes without overstating causality.	Give young people structured roles in observation, discussion and local action rather than one-off awareness participation.
Protect continuity of schooling, water, health care and child protection during heat, flood and displacement events.	Use invented characters when discussing poverty, displacement, illness or unequal access, so no child is singled out.	Build facilitation skill in listening, disagreement, fair resource-sharing and conflict sensitivity.
Design adaptation rules with attention to distribution: who gains access, who bears cost, and who can challenge a decision.	Track who participates and who is missing, including younger children and children with disabilities.	Connect youth ideas to people who can approve, fund or implement, and report back on what happened.
Use climate and peace analysis together where land, water, livelihoods or services are already contested.	Separate climate hazards from general environmental or service problems. A blocked drain is not automatically climate change.	Work with schools, NGOs, local government and service providers so responsibility is genuinely shared.

The 2026 window

COP31 runs from 9 to 20 November 2026 in Antalya, Türkiye, at a point where implementation, adaptation and climate finance are getting sustained attention. The relevance here is practical rather than symbolic. Child-responsive adaptation needs working schools, water systems, health services, social protection, and routes for young people to take part in decisions. COP31's public programme includes youth, education and inclusive-development themes, which creates space to connect climate delivery to the everyday systems that decide whether a child copes with a heatwave.

One date worth knowing. World Children's Day falls on 20 November, the closing day of COP31. A child-centred climate initiative will not get a cleaner alignment than that, and it is the reason this material exists now rather than next year.

Evidence limits that should stay visible

These limits belong with the findings, not after them. Each one constrains something a facilitator or a partner organisation might otherwise be tempted to claim.

- Many headline figures are modelled exposure estimates. They show who lives under composite risk, not who has experienced measurable harm.
- India has useful national modelling and some detailed local monitoring, but the micro-level evidence is geographically uneven. North Indian city studies are not a national average.
- MENA evidence often rests on regional indices and a small number of country studies. National differences in conflict, income, infrastructure and governance are substantial.
- Climate and conflict pathways are mediated. Claims about violence, extremism or recruitment need separate evidence and cannot be inferred from climate exposure.
- Programme evaluations in environmental peacebuilding show plausible mechanisms and local outcomes. Long-term independent measurement of peace effects remains limited.
- Disability, age, gender, socioeconomic position and displacement status are not consistently disaggregated across the available evidence.
- Participation studies should distinguish attendance and consultation from actual influence.

Conclusion

Across India and MENA, children are already living with climate pressures that affect health, learning, water, food, mobility and household security. The intensity of those effects depends on more than the hazard. Public services, income, housing, displacement, social protection and governance shape who can cope and who cannot.

A peacebuilding lens adds a second question: how are difficult climate and resource decisions made? Where rules are seen as unfair, services are strained and trust is low, environmental pressure can add to existing tension. Where people can take part in decisions, negotiate competing needs and work on shared environmental problems, adaptation can also create space for cooperation. The evidence supports both possibilities; context decides which pathway becomes more likely.

For organisations working with children and young people, the practical task is to connect protection with participation.

That is the link between this brief and the two companion handbooks. Children need safer services and climate-resilient systems. They also need opportunities to understand what is changing, see how impacts differ, practise fair problem-solving and influence decisions at an appropriate level.

Selected references

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Full citations, with DOIs and links, are in the source brief. The wider library of around 305 sources, filterable by country, theme and situation, is at climateactionheroes.org.

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