

African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child - Advocacy Brief on the Climate-Conflict Nexus in Africa: Protecting Children's Rights and Wellbeing

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1. Executive Summary

Children in Africa are increasingly exposed to overlapping risks of climate change and armed conflict. These crises disrupt access to education, nutrition, health care, and child protection services which further expose them to heightened risks and vulnerability. Although the nature of the relationship between climate change and conflict remains unresolved, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC), in its Continental Study on Climate Change and Children's Rights in Africa (2024), highlights how climate-related effects such as droughts, floods, and rising temperatures intensify competition over scarce resources, disrupt essential services, and contribute to insecurity.

The Study draws attention to concrete examples in the continent, including farmer-herder clashes in central Mali, Nigeria, Sudan, and northern Kenya, where climate-induced resource constraints led to various feuds and clashes. The study also underscores how conflict undermines climate action, with fragile states facing barriers to climate finance despite their heightened vulnerability. These dynamics, while complex and context-specific, have profound implications for children's rights under the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, particularly Article 22 on children in conflict situations, and Articles 5, 14, and 27 on survival, health, and protection respectively.

This Advocacy Brief calls on Member States to adopt child-sensitive approaches to climate action and conflict responses. It recommends integrating children's rights into national adaptation plans, disaster risk reduction strategies, and peacebuilding frameworks. Other specific measures include strengthening early warning systems, expanding inclusive social protection, safeguarding education and health services in conflict-affected areas, ensuring climate adaptation efforts do not discriminate against children in armed conflict, and addressing conflict blind spots in climate finance. The brief also emphasises policy options such as conflict-sensitive adaptation programming and child participation in decision-making. Upholding the African Children's Charter amid these intersecting risks is not only a legal obligation, but also a moral imperative.

2. Introduction and Background

The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) has conducted a *Study on Climate Change and Children's Rights in Africa: A Continental Overview* which examined how climate change intersects with broader social and governance dynamics to undermine the rights and well-being of children across the continent. Among the various critical issues analysed in the report is the climate-conflict nexus, exploring how climate related factors play a role in fueling conflicts in Africa, with profound implications to children and their rights.

The report highlights climate change impacts such as droughts and floods intensify competition over scarce resources, disrupt essential services, and contribute to displacement and insecurity in fragile contexts. These pressures, when compounded by weak governance and weak dispute-resolution mechanisms, may exacerbate communal tensions and increase the risk of violence. The IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report also warns that climate change can exacerbate risks of conflict indirectly, by intensifying drivers such as resource stress, economic shocks, displacement, and governance fragility.¹ Children, due to their age-specific vulnerabilities, limited access to information and services, and reliance on adult care, are disproportionately affected by these converging risks.

This Advocacy Brief builds upon the ACERWC's Continental Study on Climate Change and Children's Rights in Africa by further unpacking its findings on the climate-conflict nexus and expounding on the ways in which these intersecting crises amplify threats to children's rights across the continent. It aims to provide actionable insights and recommendations to guide Member States in safeguarding children's well-being amid escalating environmental and security challenges.

3. Scope of the Problem

3.1. Climate–Conflict Dynamics

Climate-related impacts and armed conflict in Africa increasingly intersect in ways that undermine and threaten children’s rights. While the precise nature of the climate-conflict nexus remains contested, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) highlights the growing evidence identifying climate change as a “threat multiplier” that exacerbates existing vulnerabilities and contributing to displacement, resource competition, and social tensions in fragile contexts.²

The ACERWC’s study notes that, in conflict-affected areas, droughts and floods exacerbate competition over scarce resources such as water, pasture, and arable land. This often interacts with exiting poverty, governance deficits, and weak traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms, to increase the risk of intercommunal tensions and conflicts. For example, clashes between farmers and herders in central Mali (between Dogon and Bambara farmers, Fulani herders, and Bozo fishers over access to water and land), Nigeria (between Tiv/Agatu farmers and Fulani herdsman over access to grazing land and water points), South Kordofan in Sudan (between farmers and herdsman over access to water), and in northern Kenya (near Marsabit between farmers and pastoralists) have often been linked to climate-induced resource scarcity.³ In these settings, water wells and infrastructure is frequently damaged or neglected because of violence and/or extreme weather conditions, further affecting access and fuelling tensions and conflict between communities.⁴

Complementing the ACERWC’s insights, additional studies, including the African Child Policy Forum’s (ACPF) report on the climate-conflict nexus in the Sahel, provided further evidence of how climate-induced resource scarcity and extreme weather events intersect with armed conflicts to undermine children’s rights, exacerbating displacement, food insecurity, and grave violations like child recruitment and sexual violence.⁵

A 2022 IMF Working Paper also found that climate shocks, particularly weather-related disasters can increase the likelihood of intercommunal conflict in Africa by up to 38 percent, especially in contexts marked by income inequality and youth demographic pressures.⁶ However, the study cautions that this effect is not uniform and does not extend to government-involved conflicts, underscoring the complexity of the relationship between climate change impacts and conflict.

For children, these dynamics are particularly devastating. Conflicts exacerbated by climate change disrupt access to education, health care, nutrition, and child protection services, and heightens exposure to violence, exploitation, and psychosocial harm. These impacts undermine the rights and welfare of children guaranteed under the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, including survival and development (Article 5), education (Article 11), health and health services (Article 14), protection against child abuse and torture (Article 16), and protection of children in conflict situations (Article 22).

The ACERWC emphasises that Member States should anticipate emerging hotspots, embed conflict sensitivity into climate adaptation and peacebuilding strategies, and uphold children’s rights in all climate-related interventions.

3.2. Pathways through which the climate-conflict nexus manifests and affects children

Climate and conflict interact through multiple overlapping pathways that harm children's rights and wellbeing. Three primary pathways with the most detrimental impacts on children are described below.

- **Resource competition and communal violence:** Climate-driven shocks such as prolonged droughts, floods, and other extreme weather events reduce water, pasture and arable land, which may exacerbate competition between farmers, pastoralists, and fishers. In the context of complex historical, political, and socioeconomic factors, these competitions may turn to disputes and escalate further to communal violence and expose children to physical, psychological and emotional harm, family separation and loss of family protection. Recent evidence from a continental review of climate and conflict dynamics in Sub-Saharan Africa highlights how shrinking natural resources, such as in Lake Chad, have fueled competition and created conditions that armed groups exploit, with devastating consequences for children.⁷
- **Climate-Conflict-Displacement Nexus:** In fragile regions with weak governance and persistent violence, climate-induced clashes may force families to flee their homes and expose children to heightened risks of displacement, exploitation, and rights violations. In Cameroon's Far North, climate-related livelihood loss contributed to intercommunal clashes in Logone Birni, displacing over 100,000 people, primarily women and children, with more than 85,000 fleeing to Chad.⁸ In the Horn of Africa, recurrent droughts and conflict have uprooted families, leaving children in camps exposed to malnutrition, disrupted education, and protection risks.⁹ These overlapping crises not only threaten the survival and protection of children, they also undermine long-term development and resilience.
- **Economic shocks, livelihood disruption and exploitation of children:** Climate change impacts and conflict may also converge to disrupt household incomes and undermine coping capacities. When livelihoods are disrupted, families would be compelled to adopt negative coping mechanisms such as withdrawal from school, engagement in hazardous labour, or early and forced marriage that put children at heightened risk. In drought affected regions of Ethiopia such as Oromia, one the most devastating climate-induced emergency in 40 years converged with ongoing conflict to devastate livelihoods and incomes. Parents, facing failed crops, dying livestock, and insecurity, have increasingly resorted to marrying off girls (sometimes as young as 12) to reduce household burdens or obtain dowries, and withdrawing children from school. As UNICEF reports show, in affected regions, child marriage cases more than doubled in a year, and over 600,000 children left school as families, desperate for survival, adopted negative coping strategies that place children at heightened risk of lifelong harm.¹⁰

The ACERWC reiterates that displacement driven by climate and conflict must be addressed through child-sensitive, child rights-based responses. Member States are urged to strengthen accountability for violations against displaced children and ensure access to services, legal safeguards, and education.

3.3. Children in vulnerable circumstances

Children in vulnerable circumstances including girls, children with disabilities, and those living in pastoralist communities face compounded risks within the climate-conflict nexus. These intersecting vulnerabilities heighten their exposure to harm and deepen their exclusion.

- Girls are often required to travel longer distances to fetch water which increases their risk of gender-based violence, particularly in areas where water points become contested or militarised.¹¹
- Children with disabilities face systemic barriers to accessing early-warning systems, evacuation support during disasters, and humanitarian assistance, due to stigma and low awareness, and inaccessible infrastructure and communication.¹²
- Children in pastoralist communities, who are already marginalised from various services, are disproportionately affected by unlawful expropriation of ancestral or communal land, forced migration, and exclusion from relief and recovery programmes.¹³

The ACERWC underscores the imperative of integrating intersectional analyses into all climate-related assessments and responses. Without deliberate inclusion, these vulnerable groups of children risk being further marginalized in both policy and practice.

3.4. Climate Solutions and Conflict Risks: A Child Rights Imperative

While climate action is essential, certain climate solutions, particularly those linked to the green transition can inadvertently exacerbate conflict and child rights violations when pursued without safeguards.¹⁴ The global shift to electric vehicles and renewable energy technologies, for example, has driven surging demand for critical minerals like cobalt and copper, which are predominantly sourced from Africa, including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).^{15, 16} In the DRC, which supplies over 70% of the world's cobalt, this demand has intensified artisanal and small-scale mining operations, exposing an estimated 40,000 children to hazardous labour conditions, including toxic dust inhalation and physical abuse.^{17, 18, 19, 20} These practices not only violate Article 15 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which protects against economic exploitation, but also fuel local conflicts, as armed groups vie for control of mining sites, leading to forced displacements and community violence.²¹

The Committee urges Member States and partners to ensure climate solutions are grounded in a rights-based approach, with safeguards for children in fragile and resource-rich contexts. It is important to prioritise human rights due diligence in supply chains, enforce child-labour-free certifications, and integrate conflict-sensitive approaches into green transition strategies. This will help ensure that climate solutions uphold rather than undermine children's rights.

3.5. Conflict as a Barrier to Climate Action

The ACERWC notes that armed conflict not only worsens climate vulnerability, but it may also obstruct climate action.²² In countries like Sudan, Somalia, and South Sudan, instability and weak governance have severely limited access to climate finance, despite high exposure to climate risks. For example, Somalia received less than 0.6% of its estimated climate finance needs in 2019-2020, largely due to donor concerns over absorptive capacity and institutional fragility.²³ Similarly, Sudan's ongoing conflict has disrupted national climate planning and access to adaptation finance, with humanitarian actors reporting that climate and conflict are increasingly inseparable in fragile contexts.²⁴ Requirements for political stability, financial oversight, and long-term planning often exclude conflict-affected states from global climate funding mechanisms.^{25, 26} This "conflict blind spot" in climate finance undermines efforts to build resilience among the most vulnerable children and communities.²⁷

4. Policy Options for Governments

To address the complex interplay between climate change, conflict, and child rights violations in Africa, the ACERWC's Continental Study and complementary research call for integrated, child-sensitive policy responses. These must go beyond sectoral silos and include multi-layered strategies that build resilience, prevent harm, and uphold children's rights under the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

No.	Policy Option	What it entails	Why it is important
1	Integrate Child Rights in NDCs and NAPs	Include clear child rights commitments in national climate plans, and make sure they consider conflict risks and involve children and communities in decision-making.	Strengthens legal responsibility and makes sure funding goes to early warning systems and social support that protect children.
2	Conflict-Sensitive Adaptation Programming	Design climate adaptation projects in ways that carefully consider local conflicts, so they do not make tensions worse.	Enhances local buy-in; reduces risk of aid capture by armed groups; strengthens community cohesion.
3	Strengthen Early-Warning and Referral Systems	Strengthen systems that monitor climate risks and signs of conflict and connect them to child protection services so help can reach children quickly.	Improves anticipatory action; prevents displacement; ensures timely deployment of nutrition, education, and psychosocial support.
4	Scale-Up Shock-Responsive Social Protection	Introduce cash-transfer and school-feeding programmes that automatically kick in when a drought or conflict happens in a community.	Helps prevent hunger; keeps children in school, reduces harmful coping strategies such as child labour, early, child and forced marriage.
5	Child participation	Establish child-led climate and peace committees that share ideas and concerns with local and national leaders.	Empowers children; brings communities together and helps them better handle climate and conflict challenges from the ground up.
6	Climate finance for children	Push for special funding channels and clear tracking to show how money is used	Secures long-term, equitable support for programmes that help children cope with climate and conflict risks.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations aim to guide Member States, civil society organisations, and development partners in addressing the climate–conflict nexus through a child rights lens.

For Member States

- ✓ Formally declare climate emergencies in areas where climate risks intersect with conflict or fragility and adopt urgent measures to protect children.
- ✓ Embed child-and conflict-sensitive provisions in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) strategies.
- ✓ Review and reform laws to ensure children have access to justice for climate-related rights violations by addressing barriers such as legal standing, cost, and access to environmental information.
- ✓ Allocate domestic resources and advocate for international funding to support child-focused adaptation, loss and damage, and resilience-building.
- ✓ Establish mechanisms for children’s voices to shape climate and conflict responses, including child-led advisory groups and child-friendly materials on climate risks.

For Civil Society Organisations

- ✓ Track and report on progress on the implementation of child-sensitive climate and conflict policies, and report violations to the relevant national bodies, as well as to regional oversight mechanisms like the ACERWC.
- ✓ Facilitate child-sensitive, community-led adaptation and peacebuilding initiatives that integrate local knowledge, address resource-based tensions, and strengthen resilience among displaced and marginalized children.
- ✓ Amplify children’s voices by creating platforms for children to engage in advocacy, storytelling, and policy dialogue on climate and conflict issues.

For Development Partners

- ✓ Prioritise funding for initiatives that bridge climate adaptation, peacebuilding, and child protection especially in fragile and high-risk areas.
- ✓ Support capacity building training programmes for government officials, humanitarian actors, and community leaders on integrating child rights into climate and conflict governance.
- ✓ Facilitate cross-country exchanges on best practices, innovations, and lessons learned in addressing the climate–conflict–child rights nexus.

6. Conclusion

The climate-conflict nexus poses a growing threat to a broad spectrum of children's rights. With most of the world's high-risk countries on climate change located in Africa, the urgency of a coordinated action among all stakeholders is critical. Children are not only among the most affected, bearing disproportionate burdens of disrupted education, displacement, and exploitation, but they are also key agents of change capable of driving resilient solutions when empowered and engaged meaningfully. Considering the views of children in all climate-related policy and action, peace-making and peacebuilding is thus essential not only to uphold their rights, but to ensure that solutions reflect their lived realities and promote long-term resilience. Furthermore, climate adaptation measures must be designed and implemented in a manner that ensures non-discrimination and equal protection for children affected by armed conflict.

By integrating child rights into climate and peace processes, scaling up early-warning systems, and meaningfully involving children in decision-making as highlighted in the ACERWC's 2024 Continental Study on Climate Change and Children's Rights in Africa, Member States must seize the opportunity to break this cycle of vulnerability.

The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) calls on governments, civil society organisations, and development partners to act swiftly by putting children at the heart of climate and conflict responses ensuring a continent fit for children through targeted investments, inclusive policies, and accountability mechanisms.

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