

February 15, 2023

Dear Members of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child:

The undersigned 24 organizations and individuals appreciate the opportunity to inform *General Comment No. 26: Children's rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change*. We acknowledge that meaningful, sustainable, comprehensive solutions to the climate crisis must span across sectors and constituencies, and we come together from the fields of early childhood, public health, maternal health, birth justice, environmental justice, and more to applaud your work on *General Comment No. 26* and provide additional considerations to ensure that efforts to advance climate justice for young children are also inclusive of infants, families, and all early care and learning settings.

### **About the Signatories**

The group of undersigned organizations includes members of the Early Years Climate Action Task Force, a group of cross-sector climate leaders that is developing the first-ever Early Years Climate Action Plan for the U.S. As mentioned in provisions 28 and 78 of *Draft General Comment No. 26*, it is critical that states codify and create plans to ensure that children's rights related to the environment are honored. To that end, the Early Years Climate Action Plan will identify best practices for government, child-serving systems, businesses, not-for-profits, and philanthropy to mitigate, adapt, and respond to climate change as it relates to young children. The Task Force members look forward to helping inform efforts to implement the final version of *General Comment No. 26* and using this critical position statement to inform the Early Years Climate Action Plan.

Additionally, as a cross-sector group that cares deeply about early childhood, we applaud the Committee for positioning business leaders as part of the solution to protecting children's environmental rights (e.g. provisions 92 and 114). We concur that states have an obligation to ensure that businesses align with efforts to mitigate climate change in service of children's health and well-being; we also offer that businesses, as global citizens, have a responsibility to mitigate their climate impacts even in the absence of state guidance.

### **Overall Feedback**

Our work on climate change is based on the fundamental truth that the early years of a child's development are critical to their ability to flourish and reach their full potential. We concur with the Committee that children have a fundamental right to environments that support their healthy development, and wholeheartedly support the publication of *General Comment No. 26* as a unifying position statement that we hope will inspire action in support of children, families, and communities. We propose that the Committee fully include early care and learning in its

statement and as a key partner in the solutions and actions that *General Comment No. 26* will catalyze.

Climate change poses a threat to children and families and the physical environments in which they live and learn. Increased extreme heat, extreme weather events, and humanitarian emergencies will create the kind of toxic stress that impedes child and family wellness and children's growth, development, learning, and physical and mental health. Infants, young children, and pregnant peoples' physiology makes them even more susceptible to the effects of climate change. As our climate continues to change, we feel that the early care and learning community must be engaged by the Committee and others to co-create solutions and promote and model climate resiliency by:

- Expanding upon traditional ideas of what it means to care for young children to include addressing the new and increased mental and physical health challenges that many of them have experienced or will experience as a result of climate change;
- Serving as centers of community resources and resiliency in the wake of climate emergencies; and
- When feasible, aligning their own operations and curricular approaches to the principles of climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Racial equity and economic, reproductive, and educational rights are critical to this work. The families who have unequal access to early care and learning services are the same families who will be disproportionately impacted by climate change. The families who are furthest from opportunity when it comes to early care and learning will also be furthest from opportunities to adapt to our changing climate—unless we partner with them to build systems and policies that center their needs and experiences. We appreciate the Committee's focus on human rights and equity, specifically the ways in which a focus on mitigation "has discriminatory effects on children who live in settings where more adaptation measures are needed" (provision 121). The many listening sessions taking place around the world to inform the draft of General Comment No. 26 are evidence that the Committee seeks to center the voices and perspectives of the children and families who experience climate change first-hand. We encourage the Committee to continue to center equity and lived experience in the final document and subsequent initiatives, such as climate and children's rights impact assessments (e.g. provision 43).

We also appreciate that the Committee's comment is anchored in a strong children's rights approach and feel that this should be enhanced by connecting General Comment No. 26 to General Comment No. 7 (see Recommendation 1 below). Climate justice for children is built upon guaranteeing justice and basic rights for children generally; given the U.S.'s emerging climate commitments abroad and focus on environmental justice domestically, we hope that it can re-evaluate the status of its commitment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child as foundational to this work.

## **Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1: General Comment No. 26 should reference General Comment No. 7<sup>1</sup> to acknowledge that advancing children’s human rights is fundamental to guaranteeing their right to environments that support their healthy development and to acknowledge the specific needs and opportunities of early childhood.**

General Comment No. 26 would be well served by citing the considerations outlined in General Comment No. 7 about the realization of the rights of children. Children’s right to environments that support their healthy development is built upon the full acknowledgement and realization of the rights of children overall, and we encourage the Committee to link General Comment No. 7 to General Comment No. 26 as a fundamental building block of advancing children’s rights in a changing climate.

General Comment No. 7 describes "the specific features of *early childhood* that impact on the realization of rights."<sup>2</sup> It underscores both the exceptional characteristics of this period in childhood and the vulnerabilities inherent in the earliest years of life.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it emphasizes how policies, programs, and practices that nurture our youngest children and support their circle of care are fundamental to ensuring that they reach their full potential.<sup>4</sup>

**Recommendation 2: Align with the principles of child development and the progression of children’s diverse, changing needs across the continuum of their growth.**

We appreciate the Committee’s efforts to ensure that its approach to protecting children’s rights aligns with the fact that children’s needs vary widely across the spectrums of age and development. This fitting approach is particularly evident in provision 88 with the committee’s position that “impacts on the different stages of childhood” should be included in child rights impact assessments. We encourage the Committee to integrate this important principle more fully into its positioning by specifically referencing infants alongside mentions of children throughout the document when appropriate, particularly when discussing groups that are the most climate vulnerable (e.g. provision 88). Infants, too, have the right to environments that support their healthy development, but also have distinct needs from toddlers and other young children, particularly in the context of food access, education/caregiving needs, and physical

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/GeneralComment7Rev1.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> From *Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*: National Research Council (US) and Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development, Jack P. Shonkoff, Deborah A. Phillips, editors. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2000.

safety/emergency management (e.g. provisions 51 and 105), which must be addressed in adaptation and mitigation efforts.

In the context of environmental challenges, sustainable development, and the challenge of climate change, it is critical to elevate the importance of early childhood, as the nurturing care of our youngest children yields returns in three relevant ways:

- 1) the known benefits for individual and human development;<sup>5</sup>
- 2) the immediate support and lifelong promotion of resilience and the capacity to effectively confront disasters and emergencies<sup>6</sup> and;
- 3) the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>7</sup>

As the extensive and ever-growing literature on early childhood development (ECD) shows, this is a unique period of life in which these types of returns are at their peak.<sup>8</sup> Decades of research and program evaluations in the field of ECD show that policies and programs focused on ECD provide a most cost-effective, comprehensive, immediate, and enduring path to boosting human development, as well as achieving climate resilience and sustainable development.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the very nature of early childhood development – as a critical window of impact – demands that it be considered a key component of climate change solutions.

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<sup>5</sup> For example: A landmark study in Jamaica showed that stunted children children who participated in a psychosocial stimulation and nutrition program, which involved parental education, had higher earnings after participating (Gertler, et al., 2013) and lower rates of violent behavior in adulthood compared to the control group (Walker, et al., 2011). Participating in the program also led to reduced mental health symptoms (depression, anxiety, externalizing behaviors) and reduced physical diseases, disabilities, and fatalities later in life (Walker et al., 2006). Gertler P, Heckman J, Pinto R, Zanolini A, Vermeersch C, Walker S, Chang SM, Grantham-McGregor S. Labor market returns to an early childhood stimulation intervention in Jamaica. *Science*. 2014 May 30;344(6187):998-1001. doi: 10.1126/science.1251178. PMID: 24876490; PMCID: PMC4574862.

Walker SP, Chang SM, Vera-Hernández M, Grantham-McGregor S. Early childhood stimulation benefits adult competence and reduces violent behavior. *Pediatrics*. 2011 May;127(5):849-57. doi: 10.1542/peds.2010-2231. Epub 2011 Apr 25. PMID: 21518715.

6

<https://www.unicef.org/eap/media/12801/file/UNICEF%20EAPRO%20ECD%20and%20Climate%20Change%20Advocacy%20Brief%20doc.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> See: Early Childhood Development in the SDGs (2016) Young Lives Policy Brief No.28, Oxford Department of International Development (ODID) [https://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/YL-PB28\\_Early%20Childhood%20Development%20in%20the%20SDGs.pdf](https://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/YL-PB28_Early%20Childhood%20Development%20in%20the%20SDGs.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> e.g.: The Perry Preschoolers at Late Midlife: A Study in Design-Specific Inference: James J. Heckman & Ganesh Karapakula, May 2019, National Bureau of Economic Research WORKING PAPER 25888. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w25888>

<sup>9</sup> The connection between ECD and the SDGs is explored in the article: *How Investing in Early Childhood Contributes to the Global Goals*, <https://medium.com/@maribelullmann/https-medium-com-how-investing-in-early-childhood-contributes-to-the-global-goals-228cfb4e216c>

While the evidence overwhelmingly supports prioritizing investments in early childhood, these supports have been chronically underfunded, especially in vulnerable communities and vulnerable countries. The literature on ECD policy clearly shows that to realize the promise of ECD for individuals and communities, these programs must be adequately funded, of high quality, equitably distributed, and implemented at the right moment in life.<sup>10</sup> In areas that have already been deeply affected by climate change, access to ECD programs and services is often a major factor in how successfully families can meet their basic needs in climate emergencies; thus additional funding and attention should be directed towards these critical buffers and promoters of child and family resiliency.

The challenges and opportunities presented by climate change highlight the value of the nurturing care agenda: nurturing care policies and programs yield some of the greatest returns on investment.<sup>11</sup> As children and families continue to experience adverse life experiences and trauma as a result of climate change, the investment in a nurturing care agenda will both strengthen the circle of support available to families in emergencies and help ensure that young children can draw on their resiliency in situations that are dangerous and potentially traumatizing for them. While it is necessary and important to develop ECD programs specifically focused on climate change, programs focused on environmental loss, damage, disasters, and emergencies tend to be reactive and remedial rather than proactive and opportunity-driven. The very real and increasingly severe impacts of climate change and environmental degradation highlight the urgency of providing adequate resources to support the nurturing care of the youngest children and strengthening these key sources of stability and resilience.

Early childhood policies and programs yield incredible returns on investment; importantly, as shown by the work by James Heckman<sup>12</sup> and expanded upon by many others, these returns on investment are obtained when programs are implemented in the earliest years in life. Not attending to the nurturing care needs of young children at the right time can lead to cascading negative impacts and the need for costly remedial actions. Just as the positive impacts of attending to the nurturing care needs of young children project in a positive way to the family, community, and nations,<sup>13</sup> the negative impacts of *not* attending to young children compound the

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<sup>10</sup> Most Vulnerable to Most Valuable: A Scoping Study to Put Young Children at the Heart of Climate Actions and Environmental Protection, ARNEC, <https://arnec.net/sites/default/files/2022-12/ARNEC-scoping%20study-web%202022-12-29.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> e.g.: Nurturing care for early childhood development: a framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential (2018) World Health Organization, ISBN 978-92-4-151406-4 <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/272603/9789241514064-eng.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://heckmanequation.org/the-heckman-equation/>

<sup>13</sup> e.g.: From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development: National Research Council (US) and Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development, Jack P. Shonkoff, [Deborah A. Phillips](#), editors. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2000.

risk and vulnerability of communities and nations. As children continue to experience the impacts of climate change, it will be increasingly important to maximize the benefits yielded by investments in child- and family-facing services, and thus increased attention to and investment in the earliest years is essential to promoting climate resiliency.

**Recommendation 3: Acknowledge that child development begins prenatally, is inherently tied to the well-being of parents and caregivers, and takes place in a variety of settings.**

In order to capture the full continuum of child development, we recommend including in General Comment No. 26 references to prenatal development, a time when infants are highly susceptible to the impacts of environmental and climate injustices. Additionally, we offer that the Committee’s emphasis on alignment with child development is incomplete without an acknowledgement that the health, safety, and well-being of parents and caregivers is inherently tied to the resiliency of young children, particularly in the context of adverse childhood experiences like those caused by climate change. We appreciate the emphasis on community (provision 101) and the importance of information-sharing with parents and caregivers (provision 84), but would also encourage the inclusion of parent/caregiver safety and mental health as critical to early relational health and the mitigation of children’s experiences of tolerable and toxic stress, which are expected to increase as climate change progresses. The extreme stress that environmental injustice and climate change create for parents and caregivers will be exacerbated as climate change progresses, which will have secondary impacts on young children. We urge the Committee to acknowledge that foundational, family-supporting policies – such as parental leave, paid time off, access to medical care, support for home visiting, closing the maternal mortality gap, and housing and food access – will help families in two key ways: 1) they will create stronger attachments and relationships that can help mitigate the negative impacts of climate trauma and 2) they will help families deal with the day-to-day uncertainty and basic needs that accompany climate emergencies.

**We also recommend that the Committee be more inclusive of the many settings where children spend their time, with specific references to early care and education as critical infrastructure that supports child development.** Child care and early learning are distinct from school infrastructure and systems in many countries and thus different audiences and approaches (e.g. community connections, types of regulations, etc.) must be leveraged to harness opportunities to advance children’s rights in these settings. Importantly, early care settings also include family homes, as settings for child care and home visiting programs. Specifically, we encourage the Committee to:

- Change the many mentions of “school” throughout the document to “school and early learning and care settings” in order to capture the full breadth of physical environments that impact children’s development and health (e.g. provisions 31 and 73a). Add “settings where children are cared for” to lists of places that are critical to child

development (e.g. provision 19) and ensure that these outside-of-the-home settings are included as important loci where children’s rights must also be advanced (e.g. provision 73a and b should include access to clean air and water in all child-serving settings).

- Include early childhood care and learning in the lists of “essential services” (provision 104), “infrastructure” supports (provision 106), and rights (provision III(a)(ii)). Many of the undersigned organizations operate or partner closely with family-facing early childhood services; we have seen first-hand how climate emergencies like floods, heat, and wildfires can compromise those services and how strong ties to early childhood supports like child care providers, home visitors, and pediatricians can increase family resiliency and community connectivity in the face of climate change.
- Recommend that play spaces themselves – as components of community infrastructure and educational tools – be climate resilient and mitigating through technologies like green schoolyards and cool pavements. (e.g. provision 48).

**Recommendation 4: Take a strengths-based approach to meeting the diverse needs of young learners.**

We commend the Committee for its desire to ensure that diverse learners have their needs met and are able to access information that can advance environmental justice (e.g. provision 86). We encourage the Committee to utilize strengths-based language in relation to these groups by stating that their differences are not “obstacles” to “overcome,” but make up the diverse needs of children across the globe that must be not only met but fully understood and embedded into solutions to climate change mitigation and adaptation. As people at the intersection of two climate vulnerable-populations, young children with disabilities will bear unique and disproportionate impacts of climate change, and must be included in this critical global dialogue in a way that is both empowering and respectful.

**Conclusion**

Thank you for your consideration of the comments above. We look forward to contributing to the Committee’s work to prioritize young children’s rights in the context of a changing climate. For additional information about these comments or the work of the Early Years Climate Task Force, please contact Nadia Gronkowski, Policy Manager at Start Early ([ngronkowski@startearly.org](mailto:ngronkowski@startearly.org)).

Sincerely,

**NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

All Our Kin	National Black Nurses Association
Council for Professional Recognition	National Head Start Association

The Educare Learning Network	Push for Empowered Pregnancy
First Focus on Children	School Readiness Consulting
Low Income Investment Fund*	Start Early*
National Association for Family Child Care*	Zero to Three*

\* Organization is represented on the Early Years Climate Action Task Force.

**STATE-BASED ORGANIZATIONS**

<b><i>California</i></b>	<b><i>Montana</i></b>
Children Now	Zero to Five Montana
Educare California at Silicon Valley	<b><i>Minnesota</i></b>
Madera Coalition for Community Justice	West Central Initiative
<b><i>Colorado</i></b>	<b><i>Texas</i></b>
Clayton Early Learning	Air Alliance Houston
<b><i>Illinois</i></b>	<b><i>Utah</i></b>
The Illinois Association for Infant Mental Health	Early Childhood Alliance
Raising Illinois	

**INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS**

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