

NOTE

## **Of Climate and Children**

**L B writes :**

The reality today is that nearly nine million children each year die before they reach the age of five. The vast majority of these deaths - 97% - occur in low- or middle-income countries, and disproportionately within the poorest communities and households. Most children are dying as a result of a small number of diseases and conditions including malnutrition, pneumonia, measles, diarrhea, malaria, HIV and AIDS, and neo-natal conditions.

Against this backdrop, recently climate change was described as the biggest global health threat of the 21st century. It will affect children's health in a range of different ways. It will increase the prevalence of diseases most likely to kill children, as well as undermine the foundations for child survival: functioning health systems, women's education and empowerment, food security, clean water and safe sanitation.

While no-one will be immune to the effects of climate change, children from the poorest families in low- and middle-income countries will be at particular risk.

This is especially true for children under the age of five, who make up between 10% and 20% of the total population in many of the countries predicted to be most affected by climate change. Children in this age group often have less immunity to disease and infection, putting them at further risk.

Diarrhea, for example, claims the lives of around two million children under the age of five each year. A lack of access to water and sanitation is responsible for around 90% of these deaths and, as climate change will substantially reduce water availability, the caseload of diarrhea is predicted to increase by between 2% and 10% by 2020. As children, especially those under age five, are by far the largest group who die as a result of diarrhea, they will carry the majority of the burden.

Malnutrition is an underlying cause in the death of 3.2 million children each year, and 178 million children suffer from malnutrition. Some of the countries with the highest rates of malnutrition in the world, including Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India and Vietnam, are also predicted to be some of the worst affected by climate fluctuation in the future.

Not only will climate change affect the availability of food in some of the world's poorest countries, it's expected to push up food prices. This is particularly worrying for children from the poorest families, as access to food depends not only on its availability but more importantly on a family's ability to buy it. Poor families often spend up to 80% of their income on food, and even then, this is rarely sufficient to provide their children with a healthy and nutritious diet.

While the research evidence linking climate change with child mortality is clear and mounting, there is still a lack of recognition and focus on the particular issues facing children at international, national and local levels. Children must not be seen as victims, but they do face particular risks that must be recognised and addressed in policies and programmes that seek to reduce the impacts of climate change.

At all times, it must be remembered that children have played little or no role in causing climate change. Yet they are the ones who will be hardest hit and will have to face its impacts in the years to come. □□□

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