

## *Lectio Magistralis*

Henrietta Holsman Fore

The climate crisis is a child and young person's rights crisis. It poses an unprecedented threat to the health, education, development, and survival of all young children and adolescents. Urgent action is needed.

Just this summer, we saw evidence of the devastating environmental impacts linked to the climate crisis. Wildfires so vast in Canada and the western United States that the air quality all the way across the continent in New York was the worst it had been in fifteen years. Historic flooding in Germany that devastated entire towns and killed hundreds. Landslides in India. Heatwaves in North Africa.

We see the climate crisis, the nature and biodiversity loss crisis, and the pollution and waste crisis all around us.

The devastation wrought by climate change does not discriminate or stay within borders. It is disrupting lives and livelihoods regardless of income, race, or region. Yet it is the poorest and most vulnerable people who suffer the most. And those least responsible for the climate crisis are bearing its greatest impacts. There is an inherent injustice in this.

Sadly, we are extending this injustice to the next generation – all of whom were born into a world aware of the consequences of inaction, yet unable to agree on measures to stop it.

We still have time to act, but we must do so urgently. According to the latest research from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the world has less than nine years to make the transformation necessary to avoid the worst impacts of climate change.

No one suffers more from a changing climate than a child. Children are more susceptible to deadly diseases, which are on the rise due to climate change. Nearly 90% of the global burden of disease associated with climate change is borne by children under five.

Disasters and environmental stress also increase children's likelihood of living in poverty, being displaced from their homes, and suffering from toxic stress. Flood and drought zones often overlap with areas of high poverty and little access to essential services

such as safe water and sanitation. This means that children and families with the fewest resources face some of the most immediate dangers of climate change.

Water scarcity threatens every aspect of a child's life including their survival and future. The climate crisis is limiting children's access to safe water and is contributing to increasing water scarcity. Currently 1.4 billion people, including 450 million children, live in areas of high or extremely high water vulnerability.

Extreme weather events and changes in water recharge patterns are making it more difficult to access safe drinking water, especially for the most vulnerable children. Around 74% of natural disasters between 2001 and 2018 were water-related, including droughts and floods. With climate change, their frequency and intensity are expected to increase.

To avert the worst impacts of the climate crisis, comprehensive and urgent action is required to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We need to reduce emissions by at least 45% compared to 2010 levels by 2030. And total emissions must be cut to as close to zero as possible by 2050 to avoid the worst impacts of global warming.

At the same time, more investment is urgently needed to protect children by adapting critical services to the changing climate. Out of an average of 410 billion US dollars in climate finance per year, only 22 billion US dollars goes to adaptation while 382 billion US dollars goes to mitigation. We must invest heavily in making essential services like water and sanitation, health, nutrition, education and social protection resilient to climate shocks. We need to look at preventing damage to critical basic services.

The young people who have joined us today can tell you this. They have experienced the impacts of climate change firsthand. They are living in and inheriting an increasingly unrecognizable world. And they are pleading with us to do something about it.

Young people are demanding action. A recent analysis of feedback received by UNICEF in 21 countries with more than 270,000 responses from young people showed that 92% of respondents have heard about climate change. When asked if climate change is caused by human activity, 88% said yes, and 78% of young people said that they were worried about climate change.

All over the world, young people are not just demanding action – they are acting themselves. Standing up for their futures. Inspiring and enlisting others in their cause. Leading by example and showing that change is possible. Starting community projects, being volunteers, and dreaming of and fashioning solutions. They are coming up with ideas and innovations that make a difference,

and they are putting into practice actions that reduce CO2 emissions in their own lives and communities.

At UNICEF, it is our responsibility to make sure these voices and solutions are heard.

Children and young people must be included in all climate-related decision-making. They are consistently overlooked in climate and water policies. This undermines their right to be heard and participate, and for their best interests to be a primary consideration in decision-making and actions that concern them.

That is why UNICEF has been collaborating with Fridays For Future to amplify the voices of children and young people on the frontlines of the climate crisis. On August 20<sup>th</sup>, following an amazing panel with Greta Thunberg and other youth climate activists, we launched the Children's Climate Risk Index. It was the third anniversary of the youth-led climate protests that have grown into a global movement.

The Risk Index and its report are the result of over a year of work by dedicated colleagues at UNICEF and our partners and represents a compilation of evidence that we have generated over the last few years. Its stark findings validate the message we have been hearing from young people: We are in a crisis of crises. A pollution crisis. A climate crisis. A child rights crisis.

According to the report, almost every child on Earth is exposed to at least one climate and environmental hazard, shock or stress. Almost every single young life will have to cope with heatwaves, cyclones, air pollution, flooding or water scarcity. A startling 850 million – approximately one-third of all children – are exposed to four or more of these stresses, creating incredibly challenging environments for children to live, play and thrive.

Globally, about 1 billion children – nearly half of the world's children – live in countries that are at an “extremely high-risk” from the impacts of climate change. These children face a deadly combination of exposure to multiple shocks with high vulnerability resulting from a lack of essential services.

The survival of these children is at imminent threat from the impacts of climate change.

Until now, no climate index has focused solely on child climate risk in a global context. This groundbreaking report provides the first comprehensive view of children's exposure and vulnerability, because understanding where and how children are uniquely vulnerable to this crisis is crucial in responding to it.

Without ambitious, comprehensive, urgent action on climate change, children will suffer now, and in the decades to come.

But addressing the climate crisis requires every part of society to act. There are a range of solutions in front of us.

By improving children's access to essential services, we can significantly increase their ability to survive these climate hazards.

Protecting children now and in the future requires climate adaptation. Governments must increase their adaptation investment to 100 billion US dollars a year, prioritizing water and sanitation, health, education, social protection and disaster risk reduction.

Water scarcity is a major – but overlooked – threat that will continue to get worse in many countries. Governments must prioritize water and sanitation systems in adaptation plans, ensure existing water and sanitation systems are climate resilient and prioritize the most vulnerable communities and countries to protect life.

For children to survive and thrive, every child must have access to the facts about climate change, and the skills to respond and prepare for its impacts. Every child must have access to education on climate change, resilience and adaptation, as well as an education and training in green skills. One exciting example of green skills development is the new partnership between Generation Unlimited and the IKEA Foundation on the Green Entrepreneurship Initiative. The initiative aims to support young entrepreneurs as they turn environmental challenges into green growth and business opportunities that benefit families and protect the planet for future generations.

Young people must also be given a full part in all national, regional and international climate negotiations and decisions, including COP26.

The Covid-19 recovery must respond to the climate crisis to deliver a just, healthy and sustainable future for children and future generations.

UNICEF urges governments and businesses to listen to children and prioritise actions that protect them from impacts, while accelerating work to dramatically reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Governments must also ensure environmental policies are child-sensitive. Schools need to be educating for green skills in both the first and second decade of children's lives. These are skills necessary to help children manage climate risks, as well as those that are relevant for the future of work, including in the growing green economy.

So, in closing, to the world's children, we need your voices. We need your actions. And we need your influence as world leaders make the decisions and investments that will affect the future that you will inherit.

Children and young people need to be recognized and listened to as the rightful family and heirs of this planet we share. Theirs is the most important perspective in this crisis.