

Children displaced in a changing climate

Preventing and minimizing risk of displacement and preparing
for climate mobility in Eastern and Southern Africa

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Key messages

Eastern and Southern Africa is among the regions of the world most at risk from the impacts of climate change, and children are already bearing the brunt of these impacts. Between 2017 and 2023, weather-related disasters displaced an estimated **8.8 million children** across the region – an average of **1.26 million in any given year**. Floods alone forced **5.2 million children from their homes – 2,400 every single day** – with Ethiopia, Somalia and South Sudan experiencing the greatest impacts. Drought displaced nearly **1.8 million children**, hitting Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia hardest, while storms – particularly cyclones – drove a further **1.8 million displacements** in southern Africa, devastating Madagascar, Malawi and Mozambique.

The outlook is even more sobering. Even under the most optimistic climate scenario (+1°C by 2100), **3.9 million children** could be displaced in any given year by riverine floods, drought, cyclonic winds and coastal flooding. In the worst-case scenario (+5°C), that number climbs to **6.2 million children annually**, or 2.3 per cent of all children in the Eastern and Southern Africa region. Drought alone could force nearly **3 million children** from their homes each year in the best-case scenario, and **5.1 million** in the worst. No country faces a higher relative burden than South Sudan, where up to **14.4 per cent of the child population** could be displaced annually in the worst-case scenario.

This scale of displacement demands urgent, coordinated action. Preventing, preparing for and responding to weather-related child displacement will require strengthened early warning systems; resilient and inclusive services; better data to track children as they move; and greater investment in children's protection, participation and resilience. Loss and damage from climate impacts – already experienced in the form of destroyed homes, livelihoods and futures – must be addressed with adequate financing and support for recovery. At the same time, the growing links between climate impacts, displacement and conflict make climate security a pressing concern for the region.

Investing in the resilience of the most vulnerable children in Eastern and Southern Africa is not only a moral imperative – it is a strategic investment in the stability, prosperity and sustainability of communities, economies and countries. Local, national and regional strategies must place children – especially those already uprooted or living in high-risk areas – at the centre of climate, humanitarian and development planning and finance. Without decisive action now, millions more children will face the loss of not only their homes but their safety, education and chance to grow up with hope and dignity.

The challenge



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Climate change poses an urgent and escalating threat to children's protection, rights and well-being. While the relationship between climate and mobility is complex, it is increasingly clear that rising temperatures are driving shifts in displacement patterns.¹ Large-scale disasters that were once rare are now striking with greater frequency and intensity. With each additional degree of warming, the risk of displacement due to flooding is expected to surge by around 50 per cent.² Nowhere is this reality more starkly experienced than in Eastern and Southern Africa.

Children and adolescents across the region are being confronted by the accelerating impacts of climate change, compounded by conflict, fragility and poverty. Each year, millions are uprooted by weather-related disasters intensified by a changing climate. For many, the decision to move is sudden and forced – triggered by floods or storms – while others are pushed by a complex interplay of economic hardship, insecurity and environmental factors. In this context of diminishing livelihood opportunities and deepening vulnerability, children are often caught between pressures to migrate and the responsibilities they carry for their families and communities. Their journeys are shaped not by choice, but by survival.

Displacement – whether short-lived or protracted – can multiply climate-related risks for children and their families. Children on the move are among the most exposed to the impacts of climate shocks.³ In the aftermath of a disaster, children may become separated from their parents or caregivers, amplifying the risk of violence, abuse and exploitation, including trafficking. Displacement can disrupt child protection, education and healthcare systems, and many children on the move lack identity documents, preventing access to critical services.

Moreover, overcrowded and under-resourced camps and evacuation sites are often located in hazard-prone areas, further compounding the risks children face. At the same time, even with significant progress in climate change mitigation, migration remains a vital adaptation strategy for many children and young people. For youth in Eastern and Southern Africa, moving can open up opportunities to pursue their aspirations, develop new skills and contribute meaningfully to communities and economies.

Further, Africa is the world's youngest and fastest-growing continent, with 70 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa's population under the age of 30.⁴ This demographic reality makes the region central to future debates on migration, labour markets and global demographic shifts. As climate impacts intensify, mobility across Eastern and Southern Africa will not only be a humanitarian issue but a defining driver of economic, social and geopolitical dynamics worldwide. How Africa responds to climate mobility – whether through resilience, preparedness or investment in its young population – will shape the future of global labour markets, security and sustainable development. Prioritizing children in climate-focused solutions can simultaneously help us achieve co-beneficial progress for their wider communities, populations and countries.

Background

To date, children displaced by weather-related disasters have been statistically invisible. Existing displacement data are rarely disaggregated by age, and in contexts where extreme weather events collide with rapid urbanization, fragility and conflict, children on the move are even more likely to slip through the cracks unnoticed. The lack of data hampers efforts to identify children most at risk to help them recover, thrive and build resilience to future impacts of climate change.

To shine a light on the growing number of children displaced by weather-related disasters across the region and identify those most at risk, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), in partnership with the International Migration Capacity Building Program of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, analysed child displacements linked to weather-related disasters from 2017 to 2023 and, based on IDMC's risk model, estimated the risk of child displacement in the future.

This regional report analyses historical displacement data, data from IDMC's future risk model, and proxies of population and georeferenced data for each country in the region to estimate child displacements linked to weather-related disasters (from floods, droughts, storms, wildfires, and landslides) and identify and map high-risk hotspots of past and future displacements. Based on the available data, these findings represent conservative estimates, and the actual number of disaster displacements of children across the region is likely to be much higher.

The report then takes a closer look at three of the highest-risk countries in Eastern and Southern Africa – Ethiopia, Kenya and South Sudan – where climate change, conflict and fragility converge to drive some of the highest rates of child displacement in the region. Through country-level data analysis and human stories, the report unpacks how climate hazards interact with existing vulnerabilities; examines the protection risks children face before, during and after displacement; and identifies opportunities to strengthen resilience and safeguard children's futures.

These analyses and recommendations were informed by a regional convening that brought together key governments, policymakers, United Nations agencies, civil society and young people impacted by climate change and displacement across Eastern and Southern Africa to explore the new data. The discussion aimed to heighten awareness of the impacts of

weather-related disasters on child mobility and displacement across the region, while generating innovative ideas and actionable recommendations in response to these growing challenges. Key outcomes included renewed momentum among governments and expert networks to advance emerging proposals, and recognition of the vital role young people can play as agents of change in shaping policy and solutions. The dialogue also supported collaboration among government representatives, policymakers, academic experts, donors, civil society and youth networks – helping to bridge critical silos across climate, child protection and migration actors.

These new insights can support national and local governments, regional bodies and communities across Eastern and Southern Africa to identify children most at risk of weather-related displacement, map high-risk areas and, most importantly, target efforts and resources to build the resilience of the most vulnerable children and families. They also provide an evidence base to inform and advance regional policy commitments, such as the Kampala Ministerial Declaration on Migration, Environment and Climate Change (Kampala Declaration), and complement existing data modelling on climate displacement and mobility, including the Africa Climate Mobility Initiative. In a region increasingly affected by climate shocks and displacement, this knowledge is essential to protect the rights of the most vulnerable populations with the fewest resources.

The face of child displacement

Hassan's Story

Drought displacement in Somalia has severely impacted children, causing emotional distress and disrupting their lives. Thirteen-year-old Hassan was forced to flee his home in 2021 after drought destroyed his family's livestock. Seeking refuge in Arladi camp, he struggled to adjust to the difficult conditions. However, a temporary learning centre in the camp provided him with education, stability and hope. With UNICEF's support, the centre provides 149 students with education and psychosocial support, contributing to efforts to reach 4,800 children in Galmudug State. Across Somalia, displacement has left 300,000 children without access to education.⁵

The Data

Weather-related child displacement
in Eastern and Southern Africa



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Regional Analysis

Between 2017 and 2023, Ethiopia, Somalia and South Sudan experienced the highest levels of child displacement in the region, together accounting for over half of all cases, with Somalia alone recording 2.9 million displacements, followed by Ethiopia (1.6 million) and South Sudan (just under 1 million). This concentration of displacement in the Horn of Africa underscores the region's acute vulnerability to weather-related shocks, while also exposing stark gaps in visibility and data collection elsewhere. Many crises across the region remain underreported and poorly documented, limiting the ability to respond effectively and equitably to child displacement.

Between 2017 and 2023, an estimated 8.8 million children in Eastern and Southern Africa were displaced due to weather-related disasters.

Floods accounted for the largest proportion of these displacements, followed by storms and droughts. This surge in weather-related displacement has created a humanitarian catastrophe, affecting children in particular. While children contribute the least to climate change, they are disproportionately affected by its impacts – and face high risk of displacement due to flooding, storms, short-term weather fluctuations and long-term precipitation changes.

FIGURE 1: Percentage of child displacements per country (2017-2023)

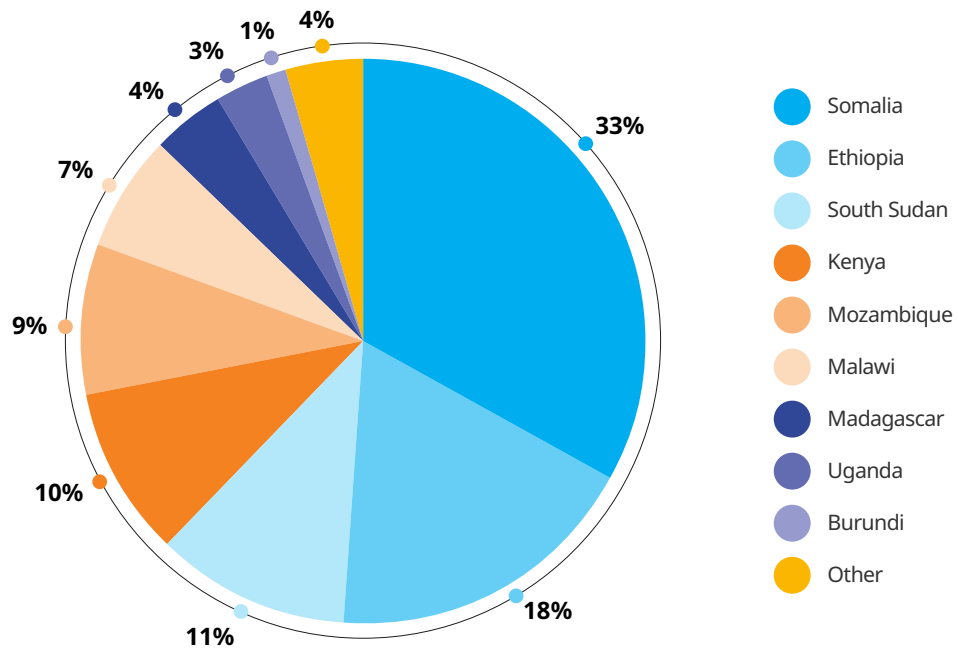
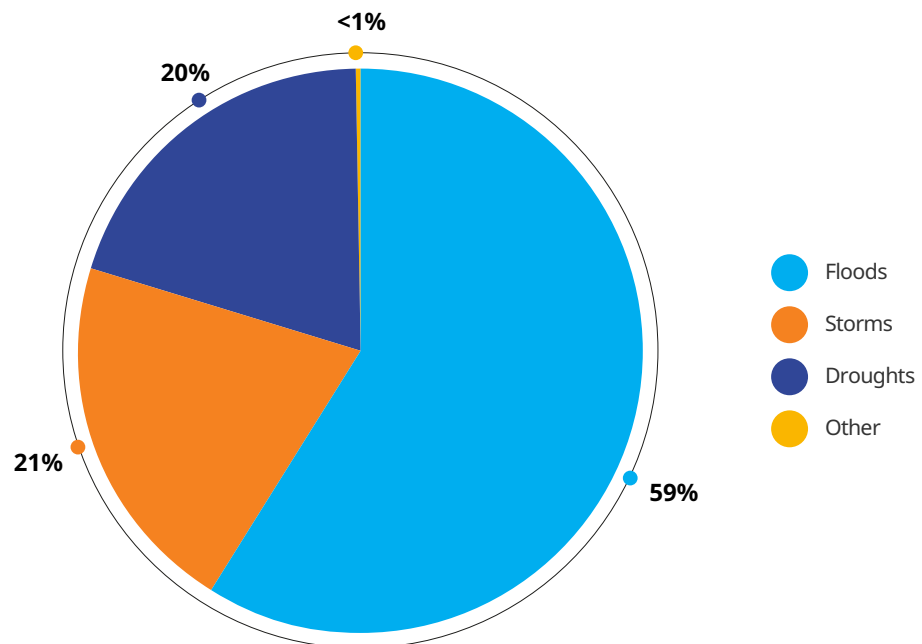


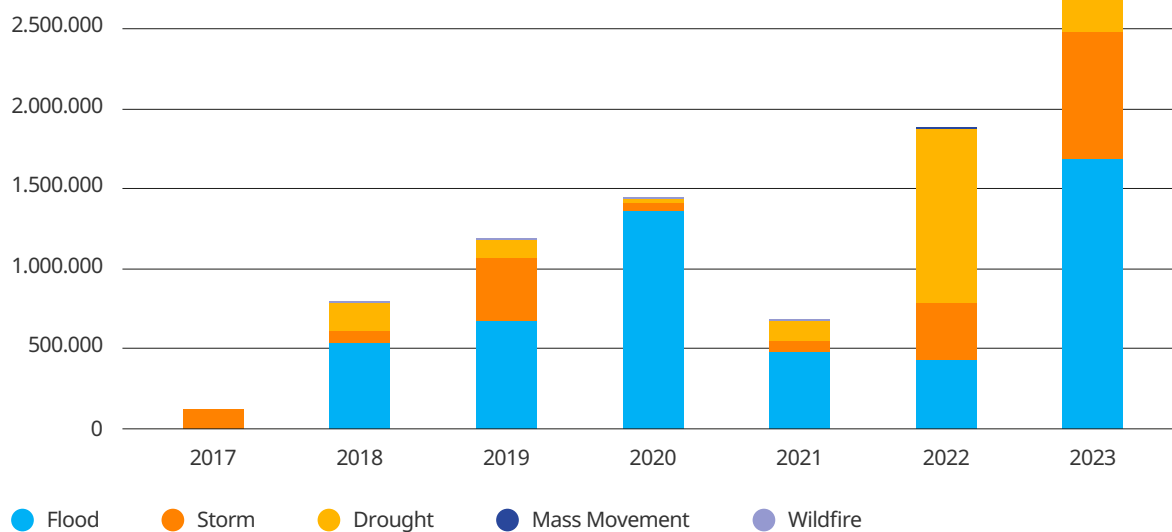
FIGURE 2: Percentage of child displacements per hazard (2017-2023)



The data show a clear and troubling rise in disaster-related child displacement across the region, with sharp spikes in 2022 and 2023. While some years were dominated by drought-driven movements, others were defined by heavy rains and floods. The 2023 rainy season was especially devastating, triggering nearly 2.5 million child displacements – the highest storm- and flood-related figures ever recorded in the region. This pattern reflects both the escalating frequency and intensity of weather-related disasters and, in part, improvements in data collection and monitoring that are bringing the scale of the crisis into sharper focus.^a

FIGURE 3:

Estimated child displacements linked to weather-related disasters (2017-2023)



Floods

In the low-lying plains and river basins of the Horn of Africa, floods have become an almost predictable catastrophe – returning year after year and sweeping away homes and schools, and eroding the resilience of families and communities.

Between 2018 and 2023, 5.2 million children were uprooted from their homes by floods. Somalia (1.9 million), Ethiopia (1.1 million) and South Sudan (977,000) bore the brunt – together accounting for the vast majority of displacements. That amounts to 864,000 children uprooted each year, or 2,400 every single day.

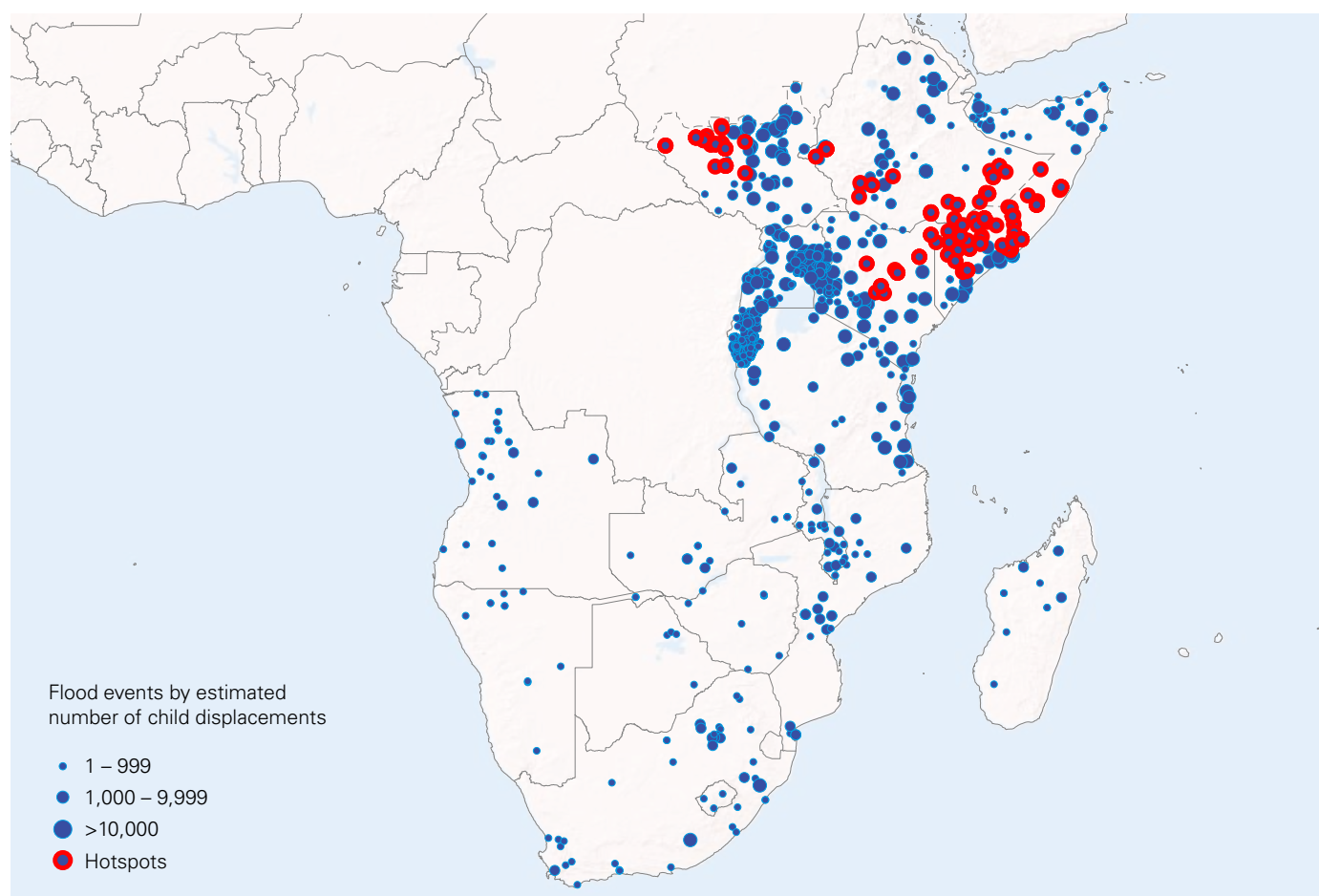
The crisis reached breaking point in 2020 and again in 2023, when extreme weather pushed entire communities into sudden displacement. Somalia's intense Gu rains in 2019 and 2020, South Sudan's devastating 2021 floods, and Kenya's El Niño-driven deluge in 2023 each displaced more than 200,000 children in a matter of weeks.

^a Recorded displacements may be higher where there are stronger systems in place to track and monitor populations as they move. This can result in higher caseloads, but potentially less vulnerable populations.

Across East Africa, floods follow predictable seasonal patterns yet cause devastating and repeated upheaval for children. In Kenya, annual long and short rains displace hundreds of thousands, with the 2023 floods alone forcing nearly 300,000 children – mostly from arid and semi-arid areas – out of their homes. In Ethiopia, overflows of the Awash River in the Afar and Somali Regions regularly submerge communities, while in South Sudan one of the world's largest wetlands has seen flooding displace the equivalent of 18 per cent of its child population since 2018. Somalia faces its own cycle of flash floods, river overflows and urban inundations, with poor drainage systems compounding the damage. Environmental degradation, weak infrastructure and inadequate land management magnify the impacts, leaving communities with few effective defences.

For children, the consequences are profound and far-reaching. Floods destroy homes, schools and health facilities, cutting off access to education, healthcare and safe shelter. Loss of crops and livestock deepens hunger and malnutrition, while repeated displacement takes a heavy toll on mental health. Damaged roads and bridges often block humanitarian aid and, as in South Sudan, flooding frequently coincides with conflict, amplifying the crisis. Stagnant floodwaters can also spark outbreaks of cholera and malaria, further endangering already vulnerable children. These recurring disasters are not isolated events – they are part of an intensifying cycle that demands urgent action to build climate-resilient infrastructure, services and workforces.

FIGURE 4: Child displacements triggered by floods (2017-2023)



Droughts

Drought is an increasingly urgent driver of child displacement in the Horn of Africa, devastating pastoral communities whose livelihoods depend on livestock.

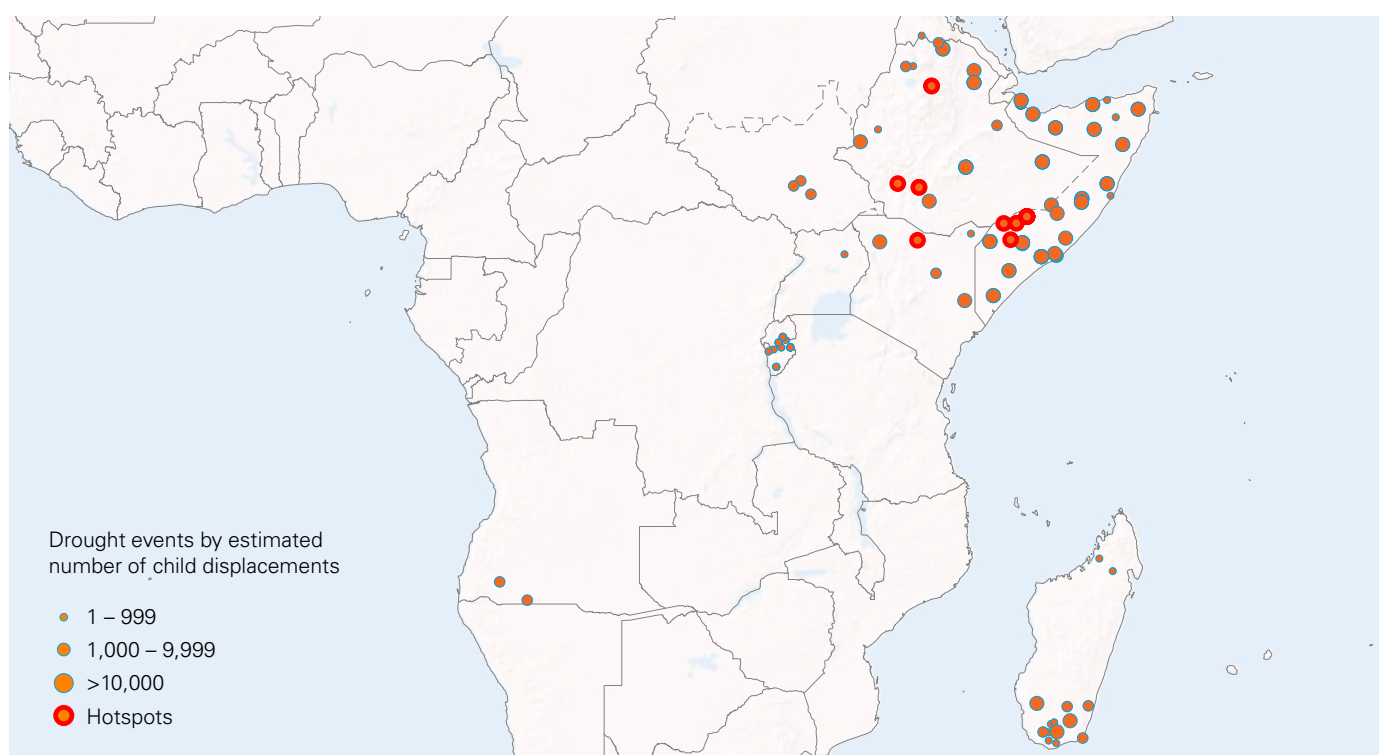
Between 2017 and 2023, nearly 1.8 million children were displaced by drought, with Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia hardest hit.

The crisis peaked in 2022, when failed rains in Ethiopia and Somalia forced nearly 1 million children to leave their homes in search of water, food and pasture. In countries like South Sudan, where data are scarce, the combined pressures of drought and conflict are intensifying hunger and humanitarian needs.

The impacts on children are severe – malnutrition and food insecurity soar as crops fail and herds die, waterborne diseases spread with the scarcity of clean water, and education is disrupted for months or even years. In drought-affected areas, loss of livelihood and deepening poverty are driving families to resort to child marriage as a negative coping strategy. Marrying off daughters is often seen as a way to reduce household expenses or secure a dowry, but exposes girls to lifelong risks, including early pregnancy, dropping out of school, and heightened vulnerability to violence and exploitation.

Addressing this crisis demands both immediate relief – food, water, protection and healthcare – and long-term resilience measures, such as drought-resistant crops; diversified skills and livelihood opportunities; and climate-resilient, water, sanitation and hygiene, health, child protection and social protection systems. Without urgent action, climate change will drive even more frequent and severe droughts, uprooting growing numbers of children and threatening their future and well-being.

FIGURE 5: Child displacements triggered by drought (2027-2023)

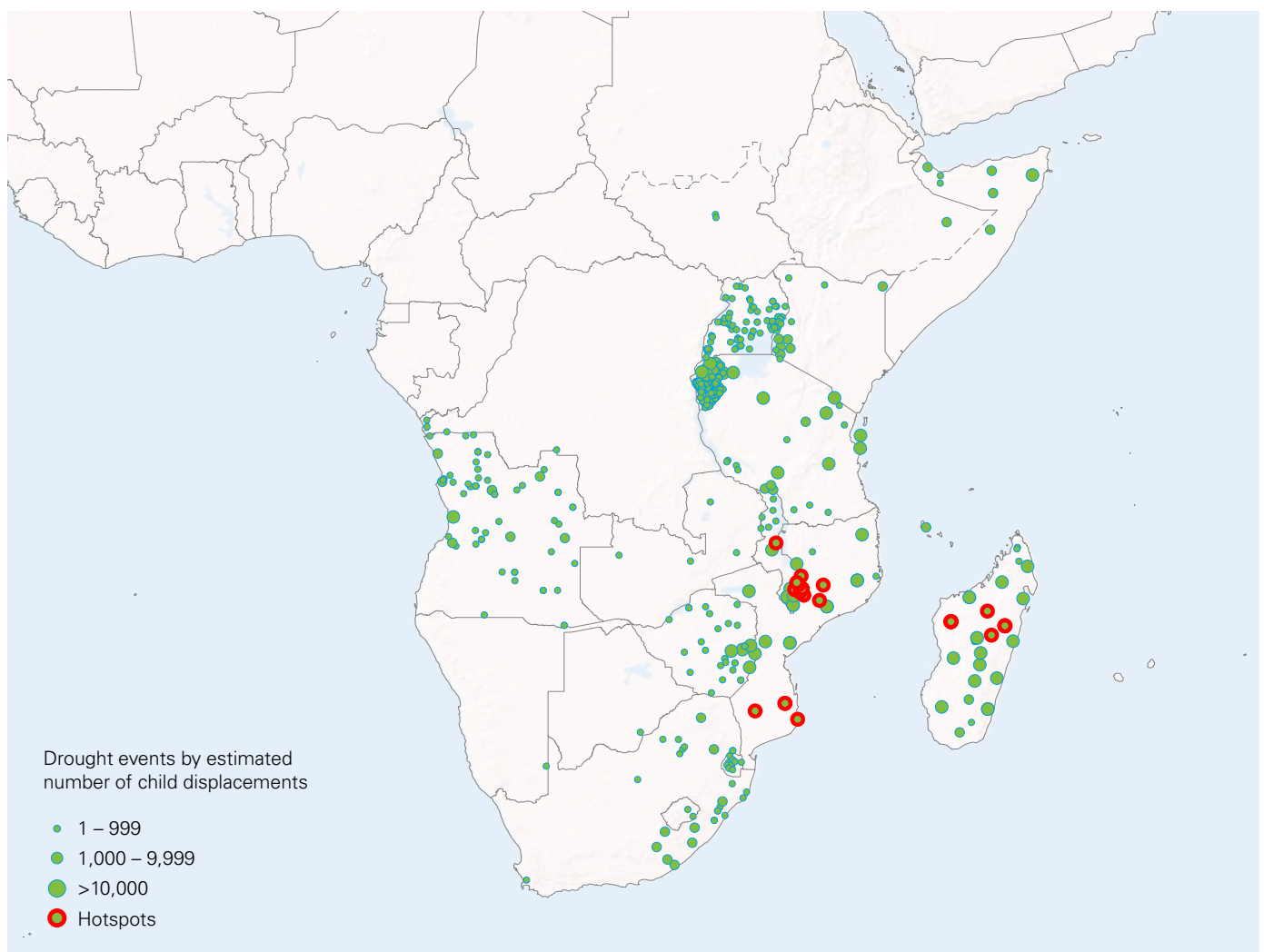


Storms

Between 2017 and 2023, storms – particularly cyclones – drove over 1.8 million child displacements across southern Africa, with Madagascar, Malawi and Mozambique hardest hit.

Storms have caused rapid, large-scale displacement across the region – destroying homes, schools and health facilities within hours and severing access to essential services and community protection mechanisms. Peak cyclone season, from January to March, brings the highest risk, as seen during Cyclone Freddy in 2023, which displaced an estimated 704,000 children across the region and was the largest storm-related event on record, followed by Cyclone Idai in 2019 and Tropical Storm Ana in 2022. The sudden devastation heightens the risk of family separation and psychological distress. Humanitarian response often centres on immediate shelter, healthcare, protection and temporary learning spaces, while investing in disaster preparedness, including child-centred early warning systems and pre-emptive evacuation plans, remains critical to reducing children's vulnerability in future storms.

FIGURE 6: Child displacements triggered by storms (2017-2023)



Displacement, conflict and insecurity

Displacement in Eastern and Southern Africa is rarely the result of climate hazards alone – it emerges where environmental shocks intersect with poverty, conflict and weak governance, creating acute protection risks for children. In South Sudan, years of conflict have magnified the devastation of recurring floods, forcing families into prolonged displacement where access to food, shelter and child protection services is severely limited. In Ethiopia, conflict has disrupted livelihoods, education and health systems, leaving children more exposed to the impacts of droughts and floods, and at greater risk of exploitation, including recruitment by armed groups and gender-based violence (GBV). When climate shocks and conflict converge, the consequences for peace and security are profound, as instability, resource competition and displacement are fuelled across borders. Somalia's 2011 famine – driven by failed rains and insecurity – demonstrated how such crises can spiral, uprooting millions from their homes. These interconnected drivers demand integrated action that strengthens climate resilience, prioritizes child protection and advances efforts to build social cohesion to break the cycle of vulnerability.



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Future risk modelling

Looking at past displacements can provide valuable insights into where disasters have occurred and how many children were affected, but it also has limitations. The short seven-year data window can miss the risks posed by rare but catastrophic events – those that might occur only once every 100, 500 or even 1,000 years. While infrequent, such extreme disasters can cause enormous loss of life and mass displacement.

To address this gap, IDMC's disaster displacement risk model estimates future risk by combining data on hazards (such as cyclonic winds), exposure (people and buildings) and vulnerability (structural fragility). It accounts for medium- and large-scale events that happen more regularly but cause relatively fewer displacements and for 'once-in-a-lifetime' disasters – those that may only occur once in a century or even a millennium but have the potential to displace vast numbers of people. The model calculates the average annual displacement – the estimated number of people who could be displaced in any given year in the future. This figure should not be read as a prediction for each year, but rather as a long-term average across the range of possible events over the next 10, 20 or 50 years.

There are important differences between the risk model and historical displacement analysis. The risk model considers a narrower set of hazards due to how the calculations are made. For example, while historical data often combine all types of flooding – coastal, riverine and flash floods – the risk model only includes riverine floods. It also excludes pre-emptive evacuations, focusing instead on displacement caused by actual damage and destruction from hazards of varying intensity. As a result, the model's projections significantly underestimate the true number of children likely to be displaced in the future.

A future of unprecedented child displacement

New projections paint a stark picture for Eastern and Southern Africa – millions of children face being uprooted every year as climate hazards collide with the realities of a young and rapidly growing population.

Even under the most optimistic climate scenario – where warming is limited to +1°C by 2100 – an average of 3.9 million children could be displaced annually by riverine floods, drought, cyclonic winds and coastal flooding.

Under a pessimistic scenario of +5°C, this number climbs to 6.2 million children each year – 2.3 per cent of the entire child population. The data are clear – every fraction of a degree of global warming will magnify the risks, pushing more children from their homes and communities.

Drought – the leading threat

Drought is projected to be the single biggest driver of future child displacement in the region. **In an optimistic scenario, it could uproot nearly 3 million children annually. In the worst-case outlook, that figure surges to 5.1 million – around 2 per cent of all children in Eastern and Southern Africa – in any given year. Ethiopia is expected to bear the heaviest absolute burden**, but the risks are equally severe in countries like South Sudan, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania, where historical displacement data are scarce. This gap suggests that current figures may significantly understate the true scale of drought-driven displacement. Without better monitoring and stronger preparedness measures, millions of cases will continue to go undocumented, and opportunities to build drought resilience will be lost.

Riverine floods – a hidden risk

Flood-related displacement tells a different story. **The model projects an annual average of 868,000 child displacements from riverine floods alone in a pessimistic scenario.** This represents a similar annual figure to the observed displacements, but is actually a significant underestimate, as it refers to riverine floods only. In contrast, the historical analysis takes into account potential displacements triggered by coastal flooding and flash floods, both of which are frequent and destructive across the region.

South Sudan – the country at highest risk

No country in the region faces a higher weather-related displacement burden than South Sudan. In a worst-case climate scenario, 787,000 children – 14.4 per cent of the country's entire child population – could be displaced each year due to riverine floods and drought alone. Even in the most optimistic case, 7.8 per cent of children remain at risk annually. These figures exclude conflict-related displacement, which already uproots vast numbers of children. In South Sudan, climate shocks compound the effects of violence, instability and poverty, trapping children in cycles of repeated and prolonged displacement. Understanding these intersecting risks is essential for designing climate-resilient and inclusive systems for children on the move.

Data limitations and future research

While significant progress has been made in documenting weather-related displacement, data gaps and methodological challenges remain. Further research is needed to better understand the complex interplay between climate change, conflict and displacement, as well as the long-term impacts on children's protection, health, education and well-being.

Country deep dives



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Kenya

In Kenya, climate change is already uprooting children at an alarming scale. Between 2017 and 2023, an estimated **851,000 internal child displacements** were recorded, with floods the primary driver. Seasonal rains, once the lifeline of pastoral and agricultural communities, have become increasingly unpredictable – swinging between years of crippling drought and destructive floods. The 2023 El Niño floods displaced nearly **300,000 children**, mainly in Mandera, Wajir and Garissa Counties, following six failed rainy seasons linked to La Niña. Livelihoods collapsed, food insecurity deepened and entire communities already hosting refugees were pushed into further crisis. In Dadaab, home to one of the world's largest refugee populations, flooding displaced already vulnerable children, compounding protection risks.

The trend continued in 2024, with 41 of Kenya's 47 counties hit by heavy rains, floods and landslides, displacing tens of thousands of households and damaging schools, health facilities, roads and water systems.⁶ Drought remains an equally devastating force – responsible for **164,000 child displacements in 2022** alone – particularly in Turkana, Garissa and Marsabit Counties. In these high-risk areas, drought-related displacement is closely linked with heightened child protection and GBV risks, including female genital mutilation, child marriage and teenage pregnancy. Families facing extreme economic strain often resort to these harmful practices as negative coping strategies. At the same time, climate change is undermining, overwhelming and disrupting already stretched child protection services, leaving survivors of sexual violence, child marriage and neglect with little to no support.

The overstretched and underresourced workforce struggles to cope with overwhelming caseloads, leading to burnout and high turnover rates, and leaving displaced children without adequate protection and care.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including increased investment in preparedness, better training and support for caseworkers, uniform standards, and enhanced preventive and mental health services. The Government and partners need to reduce climate-related displacement risks through inclusive disaster risk reduction (DRR) and preparedness, making child protection systems and services more climate-resilient and inclusive of children on the move.

Sabina and Analia's story

The human impact can be best understood through the story of **Sabina Naboi** and her young daughter **Analia Walli**, who live in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Turkana County. Six consecutive seasons of severe drought, accelerated by climate change, have taken a toll on Analia's health and nutrition. With support from European Union humanitarian aid, and through the sustained efforts of the county government, UNICEF and the International Rescue Committee, children like Analia are receiving life-saving health and nutrition services. Today, more than **22,000 children** in Turkana County are being reached, but the needs continue to grow as drought and displacement persist.



Insights from the Children's Climate Risk Index Disaster Risk Model^b

The displacement analysis closely aligns with Children's Climate Risk Index Disaster Risk Model (CCRI-DRM) findings in some areas, but also reveals important gaps. IDMC data show significant drought-related displacement in **Turkana, Marsabit, Garissa, Isiolo and Mandera** Counties, all counties with very high water scarcity exposure in the CCRI-DRM, making such displacement predictable. However, several counties with equally high exposure, such as **Wajir, Samburu and Tana River**, show no recorded drought displacement in IDMC's data. This may indicate more resilient systems that prevent displacement – or simply underreporting. For floods, some counties with recorded displacement match high CCRI-DRM exposure to riverine floods. But there is also a large group of counties where displacement due to flooding is evident in IDMC's data, yet the CCRI-DRM does not rate them as a high riverine flood risk. This discrepancy could stem from a focus on flash floods rather than riverine floods, the widening footprint of floods due to climate change or very high community vulnerability, where even small floods can trigger displacement.

Breaking the Cycle

Kenya's climate shocks are not isolated – they are part of an escalating cycle where recurrent floods close schools, spark cholera outbreaks and cut children off from clean water, healthcare and learning, while prolonged droughts destroy crops, kill livestock and drive desperate migration. These overlapping crises are eroding children's rights and protection – especially in refugee-hosting regions and the arid north.

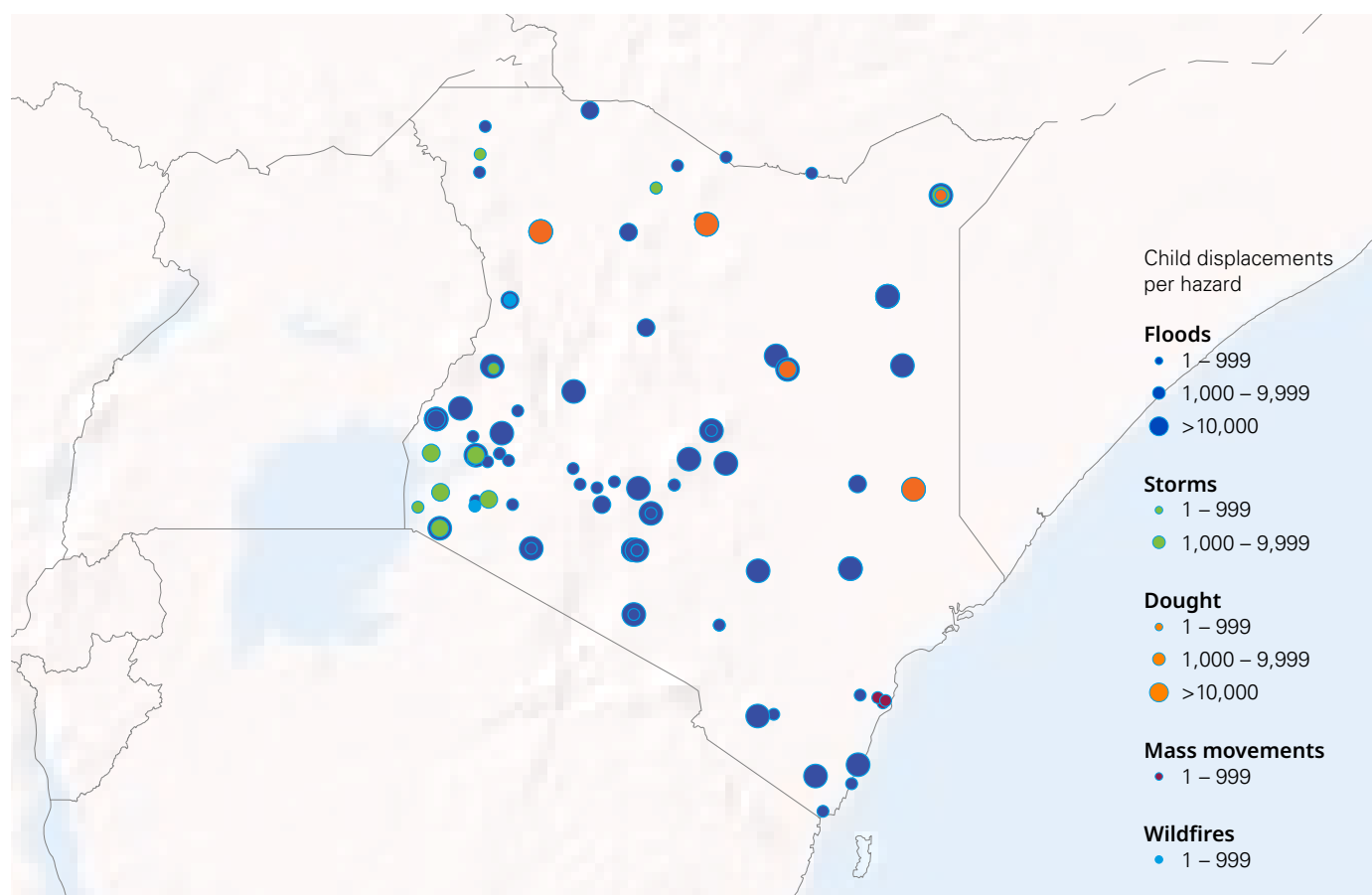
Although Kenya's rainy seasons are predictable on the calendar, their impacts are increasingly extreme and widespread. This predictability offers an opportunity – and an obligation – to act early. By utilizing seasonal forecasts to prepare inclusive early warning systems; investing in resilient infrastructure, services and workforces in locations with the highest displacement risk; and embedding child protection and GBV prevention into all disaster preparedness and climate resilience plans, Kenya can better minimize risks and prepare for child displacement.

^b UNICEF's CCRI-DRM subnational risk assessment was developed to improve the understanding and management of risks that children, young people and families and their communities face from climate, environmental, and other natural and human hazards, shocks and stresses, and disasters. The CCRI-DRM includes a subnational risk assessment model and interactive geospatial platform that can be used for analysis.

The evidence is clear: without urgent efforts to prepare for child displacement and mobility in the context of climate change, risks associated with displacement will continue to rise, putting children's futures in jeopardy. UNICEF is working on integrating child protection into climate change and disaster strategies to ensure displaced populations are protected while maximizing the impact and sustainability of climate action and investments. This means:

- building the capacity of front-line and community-based child protection workers at national and community levels to effectively support children on the move in disaster-prone locations.
- strengthening the national Child Protection Information Management System to better track children as they move; this will include integrating a climate and migration tag into the system for effective data analysis.
- enhancing access to integrated, climate-resilient and inclusive child protection and GBV services, including mental health and psychosocial support, to reach children as they move through individualized case management.
- leveraging positive parenting programmes to build the capacity of parents and caregivers to better protect and care for their children in the face of climate-related disasters and displacement.

FIGURE 7: Weather-related child displacements in Kenya (2017-2023)



Data analysis

- **851,000** internal displacements of children were estimated in Kenya between 2017 and 2023.
- Flooding has been a significant driver of child displacement in Kenya, with approximately **682,000** child displacements reported between 2017 and 2023.
- In 2022 an estimated 164,000 child displacements were associated with drought, mainly in Turkana, Garissa and Marsabit Counties.
- **The recurring nature of Kenya's rainy seasons presents an opportunity to anticipate displacement events** and inform more proactive measures for child protection and resilience-building, ensuring better preparedness for displacement.



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South Sudan

For over a decade, South Sudan has been shaped by the intersecting forces of conflict, political instability and economic crisis – now intensified by the mounting impacts of climate change. Since the outbreak of civil war in December 2013, more than a million children have been displaced within the country, with nearly one in five forced to flee their homes due to violence and insecurity. The Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan of 2018 ended the major conflict, but the legacies of war continue to weaken resilience, erode livelihoods and heighten vulnerability to climate shocks.

Today, South Sudan faces one of the most severe displacement crises in the world. Between 2017 and 2023, an estimated **982,000 child displacements** were recorded – equivalent to **17 per cent of the country's child population**. Floods are the dominant driver, particularly in the vast Sudd wetlands and the Nile River basin, where seasonal inundations peak in July and displace an average of 164,000 children each year. In 2022, above-average rainfall for the fourth consecutive year inundated 36 counties – with 31 reporting displacement – destroying homes and farmland, and pushing **6.6 million people (54 per cent of the population)** into acute food insecurity.⁷

Nadia's Story

For children, the consequence of displacement is not only losing their home, but also losing their safety and security. **Nadia Ahmed**, a courageous 10-year-old girl from Upper Nile State, knows this all too well. In June 2022, devastating floods swept away her family's home in Tonga, forcing them to seek refuge in Fashoda County. But, just weeks later, intercommunal violence broke out. Amid the chaos, Nadia and 42 other women and children were abducted by armed criminals and taken to neighboring Jonglei State. For eight long months, Nadia lived in fear, unaccompanied and separated from her family. Her parents, heartbroken but determined, reported her case to UNICEF and its partners. Through persistent tracing, door-to-door searches and the efforts of traditional chiefs, Nadia was found, identified and finally reunited with her family in April 2023. "I believed in your enduring love – that was my strength during those most traumatic months," she told her family. Nadia's journey is one of survival and hope, but it is also a stark reminder of how climate-driven displacement can expose children to grave protection risks in contexts already strained by conflict.

Nadia's story is a testament to what is possible when communities, authorities and partners unite to protect children – but it is also a warning. Without urgent, coordinated action, thousands more children will remain at risk of being displaced, exploited and left behind.

In Unity, Upper Nile and Jonglei States, and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area, such risks are multiplied, as children face the dual threats of flooding and violence. Stagnant floodwaters fuel outbreaks of cholera and malaria, while displacement disrupts access to clean water, healthcare and schooling. With over 70 per cent of school-aged children out of school in 2024, education is one of the most visible casualties of the crisis. The strain is further compounded by South Sudan's role as both a source and a host of displacement: in 2024 alone it received 196,000 refugees/asylum seekers and 422,000 returnees, many arriving in communities still reeling from disasters.⁸

Identity documentation remains another critical gap in South Sudan – nearly half of displaced people interviewed by UNICEF in a 2024 study reported barriers to securing civil documents, and the sex and age of 43 per cent of people on the move remain unknown, complicating protection and assistance efforts.⁹



Climate change projections, which show temperature increases of 1.5–2.5°C and more intense rainfall, threaten to make South Sudan's wet seasons even more destructive. In September 2024, floods displaced 76,000 people, including at least 41,000 children, underscoring the urgency for action. Yet humanitarian access is often blocked by impassable roads, insecurity and even armed checkpoints along river routes, forcing aid deliveries by air or boat at far higher cost and risk. South Sudan ranks seventh globally for children's exposure to environmental shocks, with floods occurring so frequently that the land has no time to recover. Here, displacement is rarely a one-time event; it is a recurring reality that chips away at children's rights, access to services and opportunities.

Yet, despite the scale of the emergency, South Sudan remains one of the most dangerous and underfunded humanitarian contexts globally, and the outlook for funding is no more promising, with several governments already reducing their contributions to life-saving assistance, further jeopardizing critical services for the most vulnerable children.

This reality underscores the urgent need to shift towards adaptive, locally embedded interventions that build resilience and reduce overreliance on aid, particularly in areas where access is frequently compromised. UNICEF is working to deliver targeted capacity-building for government stakeholders to strengthen community-anchored systems – such as youth centres embedded within local structures – that offer a more stable, context-responsive platform for service delivery. These mechanisms are less exposed to political turnover, more resilient during governance disruptions and better positioned to serve as consistent, trusted access points for children and youth on the move – particularly in flood- and conflict-affected areas where humanitarian access is frequently compromised.

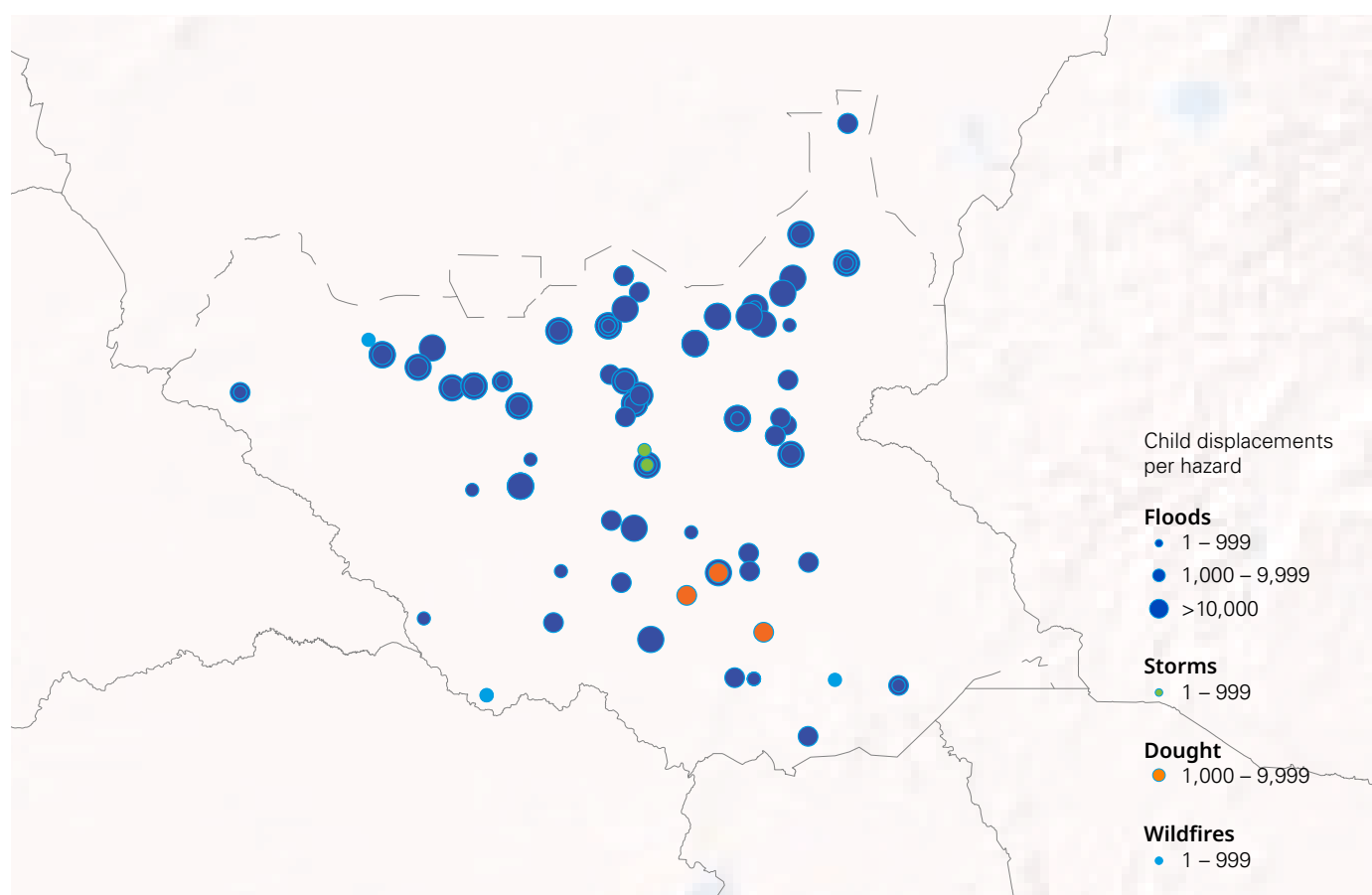
Following national workshops convened in Juba and Malakal in March 2025, a dual-track approach that integrates emergency protection with long-term resilience building, specifically tailored to the needs of children and adolescents on the move, is being developed. This involves:

- **An emergency-responsive track** that identifies key displacement corridors and uses pre-established youth centres as temporary safe spaces during displacement crises. These centres, activated in times of emergency, will offer immediate case management and protection services for unaccompanied and separated children, and serve as referral hubs for mobile populations. The activation and deactivation of the centres will be coordinated by line ministers, community members and all other relevant actors (including other United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations). The centres will be set up within government-owned facilities or, alternatively, activities will be carried out at existing centres set up under other programmes in order to complement them and expand the population reach.
- **A resilience-focused track** that operates all year round, including flood-resilient agriculture sessions, child-centred and displacement-sensitive DRR, and peer-led life skills programming. Through memorandums of understanding with training centres, partners will refer displaced adolescents and youth under case management plans to courses that have proven impactful in their context (carpentry, mechanical and electrical engineering, tailoring, building and bricklaying, and welding; there are also skills-building opportunities in beadwork, music, dance and drama, and gardening).

Data analysis

- **982,000 internal displacements of children were due to weather-related disasters in South Sudan between 2017 and 2023 – the equivalent of 17 per cent of the child population.**^c
- An average of **164,000 child displacements occurred each year**, peaking in July, between 2018 and 2023.
- **As a result of flood-related displacement, nearly 54 per cent of the population – approximately 6.6 million people – were classified as facing acute levels of food insecurity.**¹⁰
- **Ongoing conflict and violence further increase the vulnerability of displaced children to the impacts of climate change.** Floods hinder humanitarian efforts by destroying homes and farmland, further compounding existing crises and conflicts.¹¹

FIGURE 8: Weather-related child displacements in South Sudan (2017-2023)



^c The data analysis estimates the number of child displacements and not the number of children displaced. However, if each child displacement related to disaster estimated between 2017 and 2023 affected one child, floods would have displaced more than 17 per cent of South Sudan's child population. It is important to note that this figure primarily highlights the vulnerabilities generated by consecutive disasters, which force people to flee repeatedly, undermining their ability to recover and extending their displacement.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous nation, home to more than 126 million people and one of the region's fastest growing economies, is also home to some of its deepest climate vulnerabilities. With most livelihoods reliant on rain-fed farming and livestock, the country's development is tightly bound to the climate. In recent years, more frequent and severe droughts, floods and other weather-related hazards have collided with ongoing conflicts – particularly in the Oromia, Amhara and Tigray Regions – forcing hundreds of thousands of children from their homes and into protracted displacement.

From 2017 to 2023, Ethiopia recorded an estimated **1.6 million internal displacements of children**, with floods and droughts the main drivers. Seasonal flooding from June to September, particularly along the Awash River in the Afar and Somali Regions, destroys farmland, washes away homes, and damages schools and health facilities, leaving children cut off from education, healthcare and safe shelter. Drought, however, is the most persistent threat: since 2017, **522,000 drought-related child displacements** have been recorded, peaking at **324,000 in 2022** in one of the largest single climate displacement events in the region in the past decade. The Somali and Oromia Regions, already affected by conflict, have been hit particularly hard.

Xume's story

Behind these statistics are human stories of resilience and loss – like that of Xume, a 15-year-old girl living with her baby at the Dubluk Wereda Internally Displaced Person's site in Borena Zone, Oromia Region. Severe drought killed her community's cattle, but she was blamed personally after becoming pregnant from a rape she was too afraid to report. "Because I didn't say anything about the rape and tried to hide the pregnancy, I was accused," she says. Shunned by her community, she fled to the internally displaced person's site, where her child was born. "I get a little help – enough to survive. I see my little one as a gift from God. I collect wood to sell and hope I can give her a good education. I couldn't go to school myself." For young mothers like Xume, displacement is not just about losing a home, it is about facing heightened GBV and stigma, and the daily struggle to protect and provide for their children in overcrowded and often unsafe conditions.

As climate shocks intensify, Xume's story is a reminder that behind every statistic is a child whose life has been reshaped by forces beyond their control – and a call to act now to protect Ethiopia's most vulnerable before the next crisis strikes.



Across Ethiopia, climate shocks are magnifying protection risks for children. In drought-affected regions, child marriage rates surged by **119 per cent** between 2021 and 2022,^d and female genital mutilation cases rose by **27 per cent**. Families under severe economic strain are forced into harmful coping strategies, from marrying off daughters to sending children to work. In overcrowded displacement sites, safety risks for unaccompanied and separated children are acute, and lack of access to services leaves survivors of GBV without support. UNICEF, in partnership with the Government and local organizations, has been providing case management and mental health and psychosocial support for GBV survivors, as well as referrals to healthcare and legal aid, while working with communities to prevent violence and raise awareness. The alarming spike in child marriage during the height of the drought had declined to 14 per cent by December 2023. This positive shift is attributed to the concerted efforts of UNICEF, government partners, and other stakeholders who implemented tailored primary prevention interventions in the most affected woredas.

Disasters also disrupt an already fragile civil registration system and, without proof of age or identity, displaced children lose an essential layer of protection.

The crisis also undermines children's health and education. Malnutrition is widespread among displaced children, driven by loss of livelihood, high food prices and weakened local markets. Access to clean water remains scarce during droughts, fuelling outbreaks of cholera, measles and malaria. Education is often interrupted for months or years, and many children drop out entirely to fetch water, care for siblings or migrate in search of food. Accelerated learning programmes exist, but for many climate-displaced children there is no nearby school, or their families cannot afford supplies.

Ethiopia's constitution and the recently ratified Kampala Convention provide clear rights for children affected by displacement, but delivering on these promises requires urgent investment. Without stronger systems and services, climate change will continue to drive children into cycles of displacement, violence and deprivation.

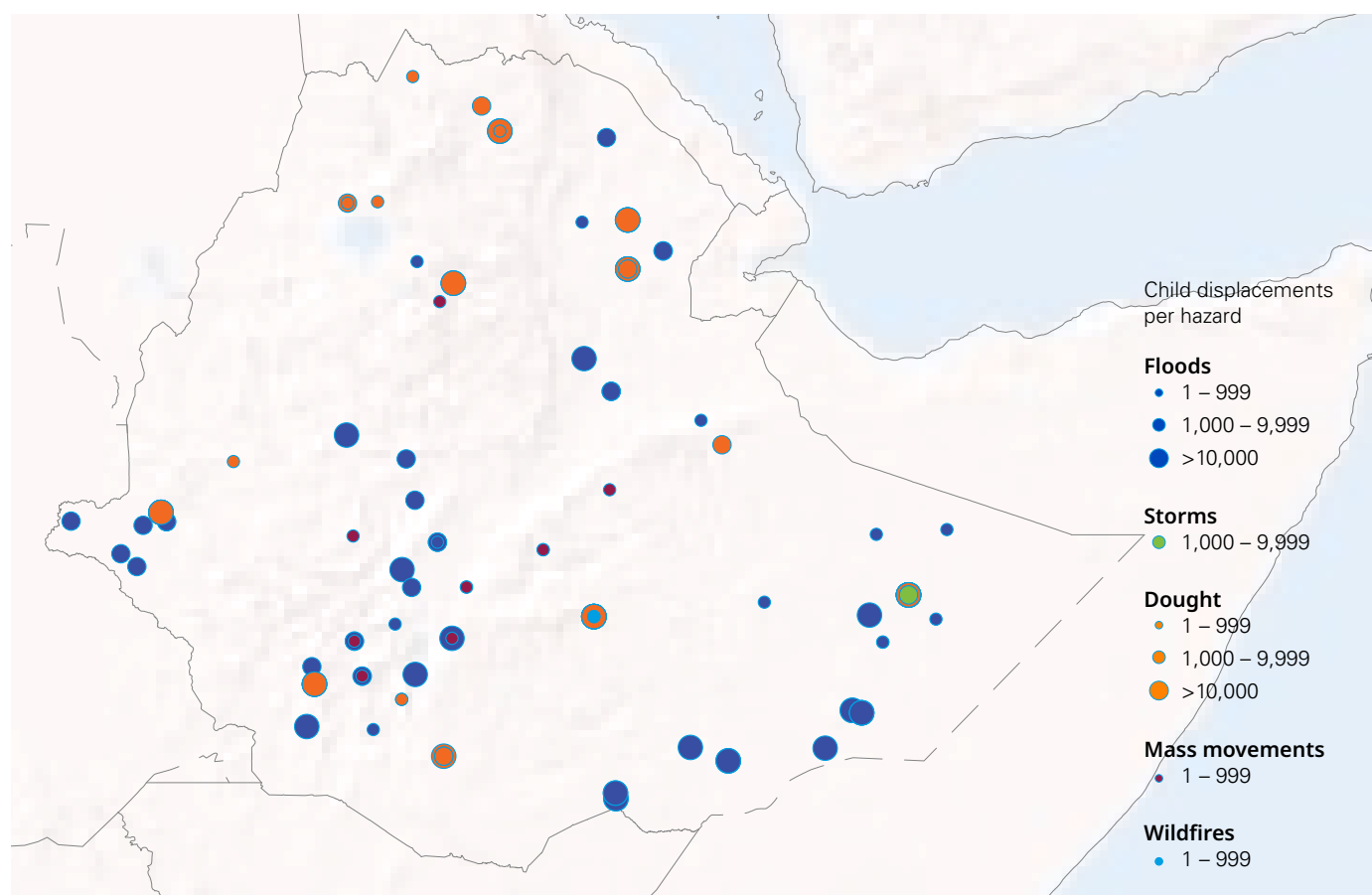
UNICEF is working with the Government and partners to build a scalable model that can prevent and mitigate these risks. This means strengthening child protection systems and climate-resilient infrastructure, expanding mobile birth registration, and ensuring health and education services remain inclusive and shock-responsive. It also includes intersectoral training for social workers, front-line responders and volunteers, and improving coordination among local actors to deliver a continuum of services for children and families – before, during and after displacement. These investments are critical in contexts where floods are disrupting or overwhelming existing services, leaving children the most exposed.

^d This was a comparison of the periods Jan-June 2021 and Jan-June 2022 (the height of the Horn of Africa drought). However, by December 2023, the alarming spike in child marriage had significantly declined – from 119 per cent to 14 per cent.

Data analysis

- There were **1.6 million** child displacements from weather-related disasters in Ethiopia between 2017 and 2023.
- **Floods and droughts are the primary drivers** of child displacement, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive disaster management strategies to protect vulnerable children.
- Seasonal flooding (June to September) mainly affects low-lying areas such as the **Afar and Somali Regions**; the Awash River and other major rivers frequently overflow, damaging farmland, homes, schools and health facilities.
- **Flood impacts are especially severe for communities already affected by drought**, leaving children without access to vital services and compounding existing vulnerabilities.
- Since 2017, **522,000 child displacements** have been linked to drought – this is most acute in the Somali and Oromia Regions, where conflict and violence further heighten risks.
- The **2022 drought** was among the top five disaster events triggering child displacement in the region since 2017, with **324,000 children displaced nationwide**.

FIGURE 9: Weather-related child displacements in Ethiopia (2017-2023)



Taking action



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Eastern and Southern Africa faces some of the world's highest risks of weather-related child displacement, with 8.8 million displacements linked to weather-related disasters between 2017 and 2023 and millions more projected under both optimistic and pessimistic climate scenarios. Floods, droughts, cyclones and coastal flooding are increasingly intersecting with conflict, fragility and economic shocks, pushing children from their homes, disrupting their education, and exposing them to heightened risks of violence, exploitation and malnutrition. These trends represent not just a humanitarian crisis, but a threat to stability, social cohesion and economic development in the region. Addressing disaster-related child displacement is therefore central to achieving climate resilience, peace and security, and sustainable development.

With the loss and damage agenda now firmly embedded in global climate negotiations, the establishment of the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage (FRLD) represents a critical opportunity to channel resources directly to the countries, communities and children most affected by climate shocks. When paired with existing financing streams – including the Green Climate Fund, the Adaptation Fund and the African Development Bank – the FRLD could be a game changer. Strategic, child-focused investment can prevent future displacement, strengthen resilience in hotspot locations, and ensure that displaced children can continue to learn, access services and contribute to their communities. Investing in the resilience of the most vulnerable children is an investment in the resilience of communities, economies and countries, and in the region's future stability and prosperity.

Priority recommendations for investment in Eastern and Southern Africa

To improve outcomes for children and young people at risk of future displacement – and to deliver on commitments under the Paris Agreement, the Sendai Framework, the Sustainable Development Goals, the Kampala Declaration, the Global Compact for Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees – governments, the private sector, international financial institutions and civil society should join forces to prioritize the following actions. These are based on data analysis, country-level consultations and key takeaways from UNICEF's regional convening for Eastern and Southern Africa.

1. Prevent and minimize the risk of displacement, and prepare for climate mobility

- Embed **child-sensitive and inclusive DRR** into national and local strategies, ensuring early warning systems and anticipatory action reach displaced populations and those in high-risk hotspot locations.
- Leverage **displacement-sensitive risk analysis** to inform DRR and preparedness plans, and ensure these plans address the specific barriers faced by displaced children and young people.
- Establish **flexible financing mechanisms**, including through the FRLD, Green Climate Fund, and African Development Bank programmes, to pre-arrange resources for scaling services and absorbing displaced populations after a disaster.
- Strengthen **age- and sex-disaggregated data systems** to monitor weather-related child displacement and inform targeted interventions in a changing climate.
- Engage local governments, communities and children themselves in DRR and displacement planning, fostering a **whole-of-society approach** that supports social cohesion between displaced and host communities.

2. Protect children and young people by ensuring child-critical systems and services are resilient, portable and inclusive

- Design **resilient services in hotspot locations** with flexibility and surge capacity to absorb displaced populations, while safeguarding education by maintaining alternative evacuation sites.
- Ensure **service portability** so that children can retain access to healthcare, education, protection and identity documents as they move within and across borders.
- Build the capacity of a mobile **social service workforce** to deliver life-saving services, build the resilience of communities and strengthen social cohesion in contexts where displacement intersects with conflict and insecurity.
- Ensure strong **coordination between child protection/social welfare agencies and climate change and disaster management authorities**, with functional referral pathways for mental health and psychosocial support, education and parenting support.

3. Strengthen adaptive capacity and resilience of children and young people

- Equip young people in high-risk areas with **transferable skills**, enabling adaptation in place or successful integration into new communities.
- Expand access to **climate education and participation opportunities** so children can meaningfully influence climate policies, budgets and plans – including those on loss and damage and on the climate, peace and security agenda.
- Support and scale initiatives such as the **African Climate Mobility Initiative** youth programme and the **Climate Mobility Guidebook**, ensuring youth voices shape solutions.

4. Prioritize children and young people in climate, humanitarian, and development policy and finance

- Integrate the **specific needs of displaced and migrant children** into national adaptation plans, nationally determined contributions, DRR strategies, and peace and security frameworks.
- Expand safe, voluntary and dignified mobility pathways for children and families in climate hotspots, and plan child-sensitive **pre-emptive evacuations and relocations** in consultation with affected communities.
- Scale up **child-responsive, mobility-sensitive climate finance**, directing funds from the FRLD, the Green Climate Fund, the Adaptation Fund and the African Development Bank to fragile and conflict-affected countries in Eastern and Southern Africa where disaster displacement risks are highest and coping capacities lowest.

Eastern and Southern Africa is at a pivotal moment: the coming years will decide whether the region can adapt to intensifying climate impacts or face deepening fragility and inequality. With child displacement already at alarming levels and set to rise, protecting the most vulnerable must be at the heart of climate action, humanitarian response and development planning. Delivering on the commitments of the Kampala Declaration and leveraging climate financing is essential to protect and empower children on the move. Further, embedding child protection within the climate, peace and security agenda will not only prevent harm, but also strengthen stability, cohesion and resilience across the region. Acting now is both a step towards climate justice and a smart investment – what works for the most vulnerable works for all, advancing the Paris Agreement, the Sendai Framework and Sustainable Development Goals.

About us

In line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF supports governments to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of all children, without discrimination, regardless of their migration status. UNICEF's universal mandate calls for the fulfilment of every child's right to survival, development and participation and to reach their full potential without discrimination, while the most disadvantaged children – including those migrating or forcibly displaced – receive extra protection, wherever they are in their journeys.

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Annex: Key terms & concepts

Child: The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as any person under the age of 18 years.¹⁴

Weather-related disasters: A subgroup of disasters linked to weather-related events (e.g., floods, storms, droughts, wildfires, landslides and extreme temperatures) that can lead to displacement. IDMC has collected geocoded data on disaster displacement since 2016. Although weather-related events involve natural processes, human influence cannot be overlooked – be it human-induced impacts on climate change or environmental degradation. Disasters were responsible for more than 60 per cent of the internal displacements recorded by IDMC worldwide in 2021, and more than 94 per cent of those were the result of weather-related events such as floods and storms.¹⁵

Internal displacement: When people are forced to flee their homes due to armed conflict, generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-made disasters, but remain within their own country.¹⁶ Internal displacement is measured according to the number of internally displaced people at a specific point in time (e.g., the end of the year), or as the number of internal displacement events, which refers to the number of forced movements of people within a time period, usually a year.¹⁷ The number of displacements cannot be equated with the number of displaced people, as the same person can be displaced multiple times by the same or different events over the course of a year.

Average annual displacement (AAD): The average number of people expected to be displaced each year considering all events that could occur over an extended time frame, as estimated by the displacement risk model. This report provides the AAD of children aggregated over a period of 30 years. AAD should be considered an indicator of the potential magnitude of displacement, not an exact value.¹⁸

Climate change and disasters: Although weather-related events such as floods and storms are natural phenomena and a single event cannot necessarily be directly linked to climate change, there is widespread consensus that human-induced climate change is influencing the frequency, intensity, geographic range, duration and timing of extreme weather events.¹⁹ As a consequence, no weather is entirely ‘natural’ any more, but rather occurs in the context of a changing climate.²⁰

Climate security: The impacts of the climate crisis on peace and security, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings.²¹ In policy terms it refers to building resilience to climate change in ways that prevent conflict, protect vulnerable populations and safeguard stability at every level – from individual households to geopolitics.

Loss and damage: The impacts and experiences of climate change that are not avoided by mitigation or adaptation, which can be economic or non-economic. Loss – such as the loss of lives, cultures and biodiversity – cannot be recovered, while damage – such as damage to roads, hospitals or houses – can be repaired or restored. Economic loss and damage can be expressed in monetary terms, such as the loss of income or the loss of or damage to property. Non-economic loss and damage are difficult to monetize or quantify, yet may include some of the most devastating impacts, such as the loss of family members or the disappearance of cultures and ways of life.^{22; 23}

Disaster displacement risk model: IDMC developed the disaster displacement risk model in 2017, based on the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction model, which analyses the risk of economic losses due to disasters. The risk model uses long-term climatological and other environmental data to identify areas at risk of hazards, and data on physical vulnerability (such as the location and quality of buildings) to estimate the number of houses destroyed. This, taken together with the average household size, makes it possible to estimate the number of displacements. However, both the climatological and environmental data and the information on the location and quality of buildings refer to current and historical situations: the current model does not take into account the influence of climate change on the frequency and severity of future hazard events.

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