**[The hardest hit](https://www.dawn.com/news/1772974/the-hardest-hit)**

[Abdullah Fadil](https://www.dawn.com/authors/10585/abdullah-fadil) Published August 30, 2023

AS monsoon rains bear down on Pakistan, children’s vulnerability to climate change and extreme weather again comes to the fore. Seasonal rains have already wreaked havoc, displacing communities, damaging homes and vital infrastructure, and claiming the lives of at least 211 people, including 87 children. Tens of thousands of people are currently affected by floods in Punjab. Extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and destructive. All too often, it is children who pay the heaviest price.

The scale of last year’s floods was unlike anything witnessed before. One third of the country was under water, 33 million people affected, over 1,700 lives lost. Homes, livelihoods, future hopes and dreams, wiped out in a flash. We cannot let this happen again. Pakistan is a known climate hotspot, suffering from floods, heatwaves and droughts that directly threaten families and livelihoods. It is only a matter of time before another large-scale climate disaster strikes.

While Pakistan cannot alter the course of climate change alone, there is a clear need to invest in its children today to red­uce their vulnerability to climate change in the future. Last year’s floods made pre-existing inequities and deprivations painfully obvious: it is the poorest, most vulnerable girls, boys and women living in underserved areas who are bearing the brunt of climate change. What little they had was washed away, and access to essential services was severed or disrupted.

Many of the hardest-hit districts were already among the most vulnerable in Pakistan. One- third of children aged five to 16 years were out of school. The floods damaged or destroyed 30,000 schools, locking an additional 3.5m children out of learning. We know from experience that the longer children remain out of school, the less likely they are to return, exposing them to protection risks such as child labour and child marriage. As part of its flood response, Unicef is providing education support for 258,000 children, but this is a drop in the ocean compared to the needs.

Children’s vulnerability to climate change must be reduced.

Pakistan’s looming nutrition crisis has worsened with the floods, bringing immediate and long-term consequences for children’s survival and well-being. Around 1.5m children in flood-affected areas are severely malnourished, the most life-threatening form of malnutrition. Low-birthweight babies continue to be born to mothers who themselves are malnourished. This robs Pakistan of human potential and capital that can help drive its economy forward: malnutrition results in a loss of three per cent in national GDP.

As Pakistan undergoes a period of political transition, nutrition and education must remain national priorities while flood recovery and rehabilitation continue. Pakistan has a window of opportunity to make critical investments in climate-resilient infrastructure and resilient services that bridge equity gaps and reach children, mothers and families in underserved areas. This is vital for not only education and nutrition, but also health, protection, water, hygiene and sanitation.

Sadly, the children affected by the floods in 2010 are again bearing the brunt of last year’s devastation. Without real change and societal transformation, the future for children in affected communities looks bleak. Poverty has increased after the floods, further perpetuating the cycle of intergenerational poverty, increasing inequality and worsening outcomes.

Last year’s climate devastation was a wake-up call for the world. With the right choices and investments, Pakistan can become a global leader on climate change solutions. This requires urg­ently addressing the underlying so­­cial inequities and deprivations negl­ected for far too long.

The action must start at home, with governments at the national and provincial levels leading the way. The whole of society must contribute and play a pivotal role, including the private sector, philanthropists, civil society and communities. With Pakistan’s house in order, efforts exerted and exhausted, the global community will have no option but to take its own moral and ethical responsibilities and make good on commitments to support Pakistan.

There is no time to lose. The caretaker government and the expected incoming elected government must prioritise sound fiscal policies, such as broadening the tax base and public financing for children. This will lead to the economic gains needed to address chronic malnutrition and increase access to quality education.

Unicef is committed to supporting the government of Pakistan to strengthen and expand essential services for children and families and build back resilient systems. Without immediate action, vulnerability to climate shocks will only intensify, and children and the poorest communities will continue to suffer the most.

*The writer is Unicef representative in Pakistan.*

*Published in Dawn, August 30th, 2023*