

The world is failing to ensure children have a 'liveable planet', report finds

Children in biggest carbon-emitting nations are healthiest, while those with tiny environmental footprints suffer twofold from poor health and living at the sharp end of the climate crisis

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All children are facing an 'existential threat' says the joint report by the WHO, Unicef and the Lancet.

Photograph: Andres Pantoja/SOPA

Every country in the world is failing to shield children's health and their futures from intensifying ecological degradation, climate change and exploitative marketing practices, says a new report.

The report says that despite dramatic improvements in survival, nutrition, and education over the past 20 years, "today's children face an uncertain future", with every child facing "existential threats".

"In 2015, the world's countries agreed on the **sustainable development goals (SDGs)**, yet nearly five years later, few countries have recorded much progress towards achieving them," says the report by a commission of 40 child and adolescent health experts from around the world.

“Climate change, ecological degradation, migrating populations, conflict, pervasive inequalities, and predatory commercial practices threaten the health and future of children in every country,” it says.

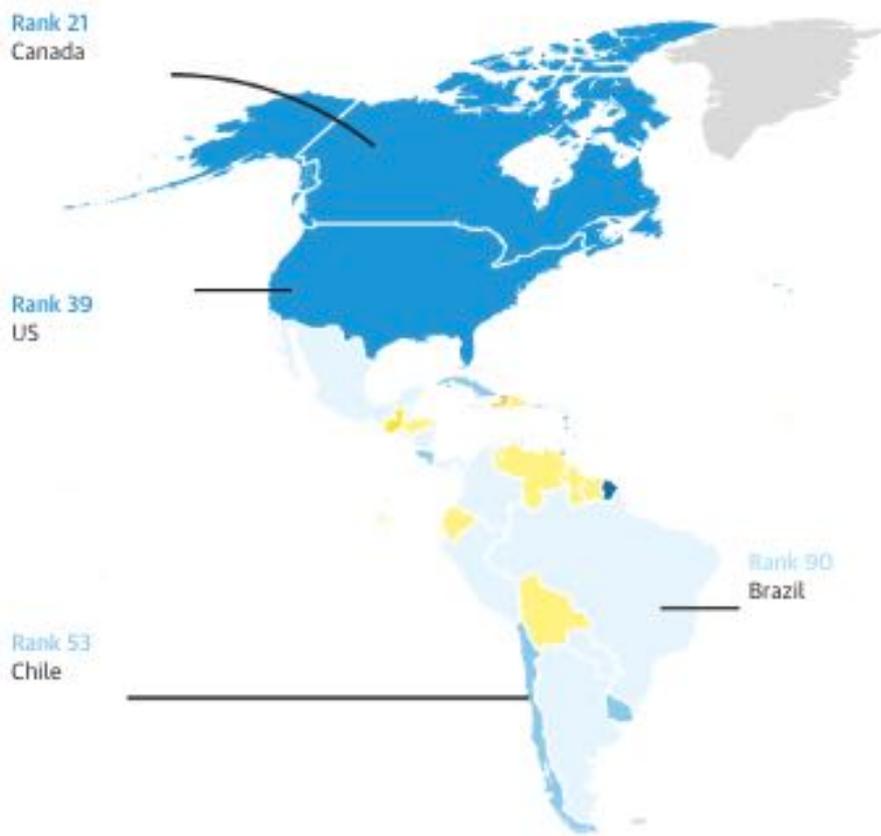
The commission, convened by the **World Health Organization** (WHO), the United Nations children’s agency, Unicef, and medical journal the Lancet, calls for radical changes to protect children’s health and futures from the intensifying climate emergency.

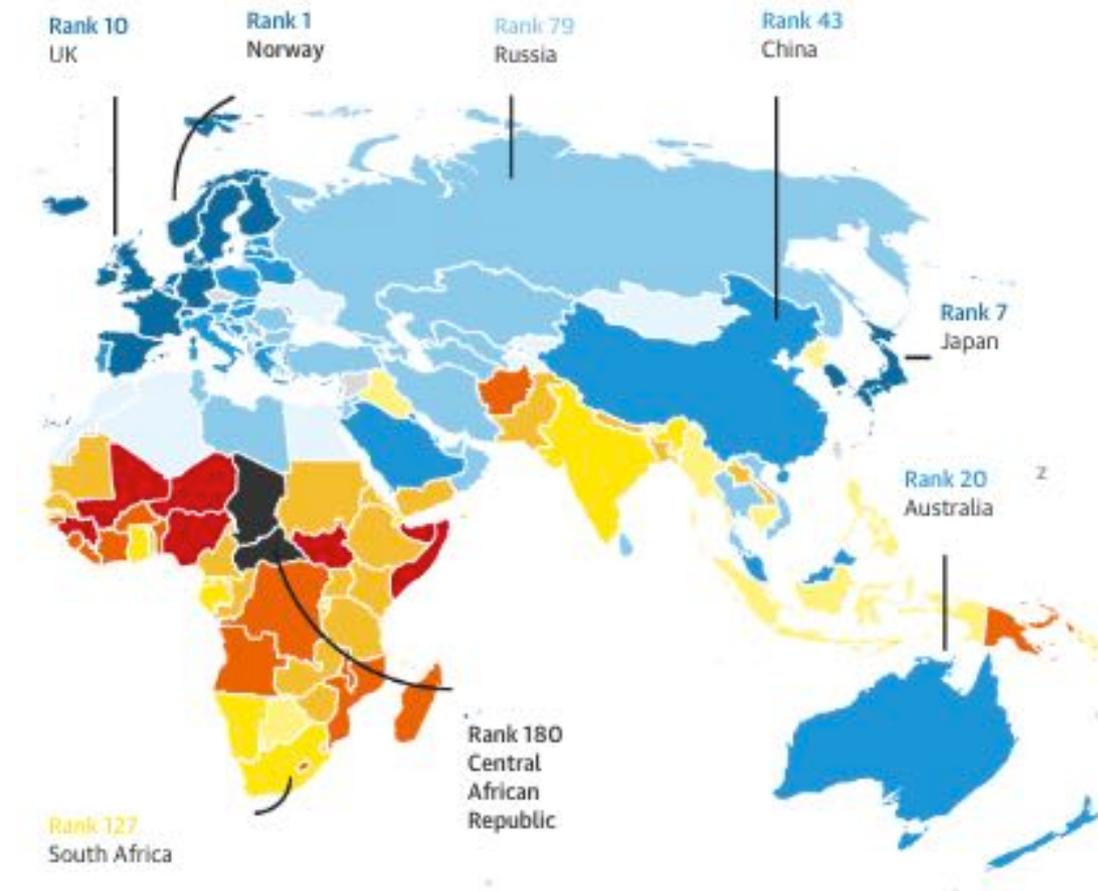
It also highlights the threat of predatory commercial practices, linking children’s exposure to marketing of fast food and sugary drinks to an 11-fold increase in childhood obesity, from 11 million in 1975 to 124 million in 2016.

The report includes an index of 180 countries that compares data on survival, wellbeing, health, education and nutrition; as well as sustainability, with a proxy for greenhouse gas emissions, and equity, or income gaps.

Norway, South Korea, the Netherlands, France and Ireland are found to be the best countries for a child to flourish in his or her early years. The Central African Republic, Chad, Somalia, Niger, and Mali are the bottom five in the list, based on the same ranking.

But when performance is compared taking per capita carbon emissions into account, Burundi, Chad and Somalia are best performers, while the US, Australia and Saudi Arabia are among the bottom 10 countries.





“When authors took per capita CO₂ emissions into account, the top countries [on the child flourishing ranking] trail behind: Norway ranked 156, the Republic of Korea 166, and the Netherlands 160,” the report says. “Each of the three emits 210% more CO₂ per capita than their 2030 target.”

“The only countries on track to beat CO₂ emission per capita targets by 2030, while also performing fairly (within the top 70) on child flourishing measures are: Albania, Armenia, Grenada, Jordan, Moldova, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, Uruguay and Vietnam,” the report says.

The UK is ranked among the top 10 countries when it comes to child flourishing, but placed 133rd on “delivering on emissions targets”; it is “currently on track to emit 115% more CO₂ than its 2030 emissions target”.

Experts behind the report agree that “while the poorest countries need to do more to support their children’s ability to live healthy lives, excessive carbon emissions – disproportionately from wealthier countries – threaten the future of all children”.

Stefan Peterson, Unicef's chief of health, said children living in the poorest countries are facing the brunt of a changing climate, despite having a tiny carbon footprint.

“These children face enormous challenges to their health and wellbeing, and are also now at the greatest disadvantage due to the climate crisis,” he said. “We need sustainable gains in child health and development, which means that big carbon emitters need to reduce their emissions for all children to thrive, poor and rich.”

The report says: “If global warming exceeds 4C by the year 2100 in line with current projections, this would lead to devastating health consequences for children, due to rising ocean levels, heatwaves, proliferation of diseases like malaria and dengue, and malnutrition.”

Anthony Costello, professor of global health and sustainable development at University College London, said the commission was calling for a radical rethink on global child health.

“Climate change threatens our children's future so we must stop carbon emissions as soon as possible,” he told the Guardian. “Our new index shows that not a single country performed well on both child development and emissions indicators.

“We also call for greater regulation of marketing of tobacco, alcohol, formula milk, sugar-sweetened beverages and gambling to children, and of social media companies which target children through secret algorithms and the inappropriate use of their personal data.”

The report says children are at risk from harmful marketing. “Evidence suggests that children in some countries see as many as 30,000 advertisements on television alone in a single year, while youth exposure to vaping (e-cigarettes) advertisements increased by more than 250% in the US over two years, reaching more than 24 million young people.”

Industry self-regulation has failed, said Costello, adding that in Australia, for instance, “children and adolescent viewers were still exposed to 51 million alcohol ads during just one year of televised football, cricket and rugby”.

“The reality could be much worse still,” he said. “We have few facts and figures about the huge expansion of social media advertising and algorithms aimed at

our children.”

The commission calls on governments to put measures in place “to ensure children receive their rights and entitlements now and a liveable planet in the years to come”.

“We live in an era like no other. Our children face a future of great opportunity, but they stand on the precipice of a climate crisis ... our challenge is great and we seem to be paralysed,” it says.

'Failing' food system leaves millions of children malnourished or overweight

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Unicef report finds poorest children at greatest risk, while price of healthy food in rich nations drives food poverty

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The physical and cognitive development of children is threatened by lack of nutritious food. Photograph: Bart

At least one in three children under five are either undernourished or overweight, and one in two lack essential vitamins and nutrients, the UN children's agency has warned.

The Unicef **report** laid bare the alarming rate at which poor diets and a “failing” food system are damaging children, saying that “millions are eating too little of what they need and millions are eating too much of what they don't need: poor diets are now the main risk factor for the global burden of disease”.

In the UK, the situation is a growing crisis. Almost two million children in England live in food poverty and one in three are overweight or obese by the time they leave primary school, Unicef said.

Globally almost 200 million children under five are malnourished, mostly due to poverty and deprivation, while 340 million suffer from hidden hunger in the form of vitamin and mineral deficiencies.

Poor children are carrying “the greatest burden of all forms of malnutrition”, the agency said, stressing that only one in five children aged six months to 23 months from the poorest families “is fed the minimum recommended diverse diet for healthy growth and brain development”.



The Central Africa Republic is one of the countries with severe levels of child malnutrition. Photograph: Vlad Sokhin/UNICEF

Henrietta Fore, Unicef's executive director, said the world was losing ground in

the fight for healthy diets. “Despite all the technological, cultural and social advances of the last few decades, we have lost sight of this most basic fact: if children eat poorly, they live poorly,” she said.

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“Millions of children subsist on an unhealthy diet because they simply do not have a better choice. The way we understand and respond to malnutrition needs to change: it is not just about getting children enough to eat; it is above all about getting them the right food to eat. That is our common challenge today.”

The survival and physical and cognitive development of children is threatened by what Unicef described as “a triple burden of malnutrition” – a combination of undernutrition, hidden hunger from nutrient deficiencies, and obesity among children under five.

“An increasing number of children and young people are surviving, but far too few are thriving because of malnutrition,” the agency said.

In south Asia 50% of children are undernourished or overweight. The malnutrition rate in east and southern Africa is 42%, and 39% in west and central Africa.



Unicef has warned that iron deficiency reduces children's ability to learn. Photograph: Vincent Tremeau/Unicef

“Hidden hunger harms children and women,” Unicef said. “Iron deficiency reduces children's ability to learn and iron deficiency anaemia increases women's risk of death during or shortly after childbirth.”

Globally, 149 million children under five are stunted, meaning they have low height for their age, and almost 50 million are wasted, with low weight to height ratio.

Being too thin for their height can be lethal for children. Most cases, Unicef said, are in Asia, where wasting affects more than one in seven children under five.

“The number of stunted children has declined in all continents, except in Africa, while the number of overweight children has increased in all continents, including in Africa,” the report said.

Obesity is rapidly rising among children and young people around the world, driving early outbreaks of type 2 diabetes. At least 40 million children over the age of five are overweight. From 2000–2016, the number of overweight children aged five to 19 has doubled from one in 10 to one in five.

“Ten times more girls and 12 times more boys in this age group suffer from obesity today than in 1975,” the agency said.

Poorer children in the UK are twice as likely to be obese compared with those from the wealthier backgrounds. So-called “food swamps” – areas abundant in high-calorie, low-nutrient, processed foods – are disproportionately concentrated in deprived areas. In England, less than one in five children aged five to 15 eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day and the poorest areas have five times more exposure to fast-food chains and corner shops.

In the UK, Unicef said 1.2 million people living in deprived areas are in what it calls “food deserts”, neighbourhoods without healthy and affordable food options.

The agency expressed concern about the rising use of breastmilk substitutes: globally only two in five children under six months are exclusively breastfed.

The sale of breastmilk substitutes worldwide rose by 41% from 2008–2013, and by 72% in upper-middle-income countries such as Brazil, China and Turkey. Globally, 44% of children aged six to 23 months are not fed fruit or vegetables,

and 59% don't eat eggs, dairy, fish or meat, Unicef said.



A mass breastfeeding protest at an Extinction Rebellion demonstration in London. Photograph: Peter Summers/Getty Images

The report also looks at how globalisation, urbanisation and the climate emergency are compounding unhealthy diets. Just 100 giant firms dominate 77% of global sales of processed food. “Climate shocks, loss of biodiversity and damage to water, air and soil are worsening the nutritional prospects of millions of children and young people, especially among the poor,” said the report.

In Bangladesh alone, up to 19 million children are on the frontline of climate disasters.

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