



unicef  
for every child

**The State of the World's Children 2024**

# The Future of Childhood in a Changing World

Executive Summary

# We are creating the future now

The demographic trends of today will shape tomorrow's population patterns. The carbon we pour into our atmosphere today will shape tomorrow's climate. The technologies we develop and govern today will influence not only how future generations learn, work and communicate, but also the well-being of children for years to come.

As we near the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century, *The State of the World's Children 2024 (SOWC 2024)* looks ahead to the year 2050. It asks: How can we best secure a future where the rights of every child are realized – a world where all children survive, thrive and meet their full potential?

This report examines three powerful, long-term global forces – megatrends – that will profoundly affect children's lives between now and 2050: demographic shifts, climate and environmental crises, and frontier technologies. By understanding these trends and their implications for children, we can better grasp the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

## Young voices

Children have the right to express their views – including on matters that affect them. Throughout this *SOWC* about the future of childhood, we share the perspectives of children and young people in their own words.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing on the megatrends and other socioeconomic indicators, *SOWC 2024* models how several potential pathways could shape how children experience the world of 2050. These scenarios are possible outcomes, not predictions: The future is ours to shape.

As we envision a better world, we must be guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted 35 years ago. This landmark treaty has transformed millions of children's lives and remains our compass for navigating the complex challenges we face.

These principles matter even more today as the world witnesses backsliding in child rights, especially the rights of girls. Decades of progress – including legal protections – are under threat. Reaffirming our commitment to the CRC is crucial as we chart the course to 2050 and beyond.

## Young voices

“By 2050, we need empathy, communication and policies that promote new activities and sustainable jobs. Leaders, build an inclusive and prosperous future.”  
**U-Reporter, 16, female, Ecuador**

The CRC has transformed millions of children's lives and remains our compass for navigating the complex challenges we face.



# Three megatrends shaping children's futures

## Demographic transition

By the 2050s, the global child population is projected to stabilize at around 2.3 billion, similar to today's levels. But this global figure obscures regional shifts: While South Asia will remain one of the regions with the largest child populations, it will be joined by Eastern and Southern Africa, as well as West and Central Africa. These regions already struggle to meet children's basic needs, while also facing significant climate risks and lacking adequate digital infrastructure.

The share of children in the population will decline in every region, but some will still have a high proportion of children, while others will have many more adults. For example, while the share of children is expected to fall below 40 per cent in Africa (from about 50 per cent in the 2000s), it will fall below 19 per cent in East Asia, Western Europe, North America and various high-income countries, including Australia, the Republic of South Korea and Singapore.

These shifts can create opportunities and challenges. Some regions may benefit from a 'demographic dividend' – a potential boost to economic growth – as their working-age populations grow. With fewer young dependents relative to workers, more resources could be freed to support children and boost the economy. Countries with a greater proportion of older persons, meanwhile, will need to care for them while maintaining child-focused services and policies.

### Young voices

"By 2050, new generations will have grown up with the decisions we make today. We must take responsibility for [building] a prosperous and sustainable future for all."

**U-Reporter, 19, female, Algeria**

Demographic shifts can create opportunities and challenges.

## Climate and environmental crises

We are facing an unprecedented planetary crisis. Nearly half the world's children – about 1 billion – live in countries that face high risk of climate and environmental hazards. Amid climate destabilization, biodiversity collapse and widespread pollution, threats are intensifying globally. Children are confronting a more unpredictable, hazardous environment than any previous generation.

Children's developing bodies are uniquely susceptible to these hazards. From before their first breath, children's brains, lungs and immune systems are vulnerable to pollution and extreme weather. Air pollution is especially harmful to children; its impact on their respiratory health and development can last a lifetime. Rising temperatures increase mosquito populations, spreading diseases like malaria, dengue and Zika. Floods contaminate water supplies, leading to waterborne diseases, which are a major cause of death for children under 5 years of age. Extreme weather limits food production and access, increasing children's risk of food insecurity. Climate-related disasters can also cause feelings of helplessness, trauma and anxiety in children.

### Young voices

**“Protect the environment, human lives and maintain peace without war.”**

**U-Reporter, 17, female, Ukraine**

The climate and environmental crises affect many other aspects of children's lives. Climate shocks can close, damage or destroy schools. Since 2022, 400 million students around the world have experienced school closures due to extreme weather. In addition to violating child rights, inhibiting learning stifles economic growth. Climate and environmental hazards also displace children from their homes.

Protecting children's rights in these crises requires immediate action to reduce emissions, transition to clean energy and implement climate adaptations. Governments and the global community must prioritize children's well-being in climate policy and action to safeguard the future of childhood.

### Frontier technologies

Frontier technologies – including artificial intelligence (AI), neurotechnology, next-generation renewable energy and vaccine breakthroughs – could significantly improve childhood in the future. To harness the benefits of these technologies while mitigating risks, we need to ensure equitable access, robust regulation and child-centric design.

Digitalization can empower children. It allows them to create, learn and connect with friends while laying the foundation for their future economic prospects. But it can also expose children to online risks, including sexual exploitation and abuse.

### Young voices

**“We must ensure that AI development is guided by ethical principles. It is crucial to mitigate risks, protect privacy and prevent biases that could deepen existing societal divides.”**

**U-Reporter, 23, male, Rwanda**

Yet many children cannot access these digital opportunities at all. Over 95 per cent of people in high-income countries are connected to the internet, compared with barely 26 per cent in low-income countries. Infrastructure limitations, high costs and permission barriers continue to impede progress. This digital exclusion threatens to exacerbate existing inequalities, especially in regions with rapidly growing child populations such as those in Africa.

Emerging technologies such as AI and neurotechnology facilitate personalized education, improved health care and other enhancements to children's lives. Yet without adequate governance, they carry risks related to cognitive liberty, privacy and algorithmic bias. These issues disproportionately affect marginalized groups and children with disabilities, potentially reinforcing systemic discrimination.

Breakthroughs in vaccine development and green technologies offer hope. The COVID-19 pandemic has reinvigorated vaccine investment and research, including in messenger RNA (mRNA) technology, which can speed up the development of novel life-saving vaccines. Meanwhile, renewable energy innovations are rapidly gaining market share and helping expand children's access to clean energy.

Nearly half the world's children – about 1 billion – live in countries that face high risk of climate and environmental hazards.

Digital exclusion threatens to exacerbate existing inequalities, especially in regions with rapidly growing child populations.

# Children in the world of 2050

Future scenarios analysed by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital offer insights into how these megatrends will converge with other forces to shape childhood in 2050.

The scenarios in the *SOWC 2024* are based on several potential global trajectories, analyzing decadal averages from the 2000s through the 2050s.<sup>2</sup> 'Business-as-usual' assumes a continuation of current trends; an accelerated development pathway means faster progress through increased social investment and a sustainability focus; and a delayed development track entails slower progress due to underinvestment and greater global fragmentation.

Findings from the scenario analysis cover seven areas: child survival and life expectancy; climate and environmental hazards; socioeconomic conditions; education; gender equality; conflict exposure; and urbanization.

The emerging picture offers us signposts towards a better future for children. In areas like climate and environmental hazards, it reveals the potential costs of maintaining the status quo. Across all domains – including education and urbanization – the analysis highlights where intervention and resources are most urgently needed. Ultimately, these findings illuminate where strategic, evidence-based investments could unlock a brighter future for every child.

While the full analysis considers three potential futures, the projections that follow are based on the business-as-usual trajectory. By exploring this path, we illustrate the potential costs of inaction while also highlighting areas of opportunity to improve children's lives.

## A business-as-usual pathway to the 2050s

### Child survival and life expectancy

A continuation of historic drops in newborn and child mortality is reason to be optimistic about the future. But when it comes to child survival, even one death is too many.

Our analysis projects that in the 2050s:

- Newborn survival rates globally increase by nearly 4 percentage points from the 2000s to over 98 per cent.<sup>3</sup>
- The probability of a child surviving to the age of 5 – given surviving as a newborn – rises by 1 percentage point from the 2000s to 99.5 per cent.
- Life expectancy increases from 70 years for girls and 66 for boys born in the 2000s, to 81 years and 76, respectively.



These findings illustrate where strategic, evidence-based investments could unlock a brighter future for every child.



## Climate and environmental hazards

Children are uniquely vulnerable to the planetary crisis, with risks escalating as climate and environmental threats intensify.

By the 2050s, significantly more children are projected to be exposed to extreme climate hazards compared with those in the 2000s. In the business-as-usual scenario comparing these decades, *SOWC 2024* finds that:

- ~8 times more children are projected to be exposed to extreme heatwaves.
- 3.1 times more children exposed to extreme river floods.
- 1.7 times more children exposed to extreme wildfires.
- 1.3 times more children exposed to extreme droughts.
- 1.2 times more children exposed to extreme tropical cyclones.

### Young voices

“Imagine ... a future where climate change and harsh conditions will lead schools to turn into night mode, forcing everyone to only study at night because of unbearable conditions during daytime.”

**Mamadou Doucoure, 24, Youth Foresight Fellow, Mali**



## Socioeconomic conditions

While children will make up a shrinking proportion of the world population, *SOWC 2024* projects significant growth in the numbers of children living in today's low-income countries in the 2050s.<sup>4</sup> Our analysis finds that:

- 23 per cent of the world's children are projected to live in the 28 countries currently classified as low-income – more than double the share in these countries in the 2000s (11 per cent).
- At the same time, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is projected to more than double in East Asia and the Pacific and South Asia from the 2020s to the 2050s.



## Education

The last century's remarkable expansion in children's access to education is projected to continue through mid-century, opening the door to better health, child empowerment, poverty reduction and economic growth:

- By the 2050s, 95.7 per cent of children are projected to have at least a primary education (up from 80 per cent in the 2000s), while 77 per cent are projected to have at least an upper secondary education (up from 40 per cent in the 2000s).
- To match student-teacher ratios and enrolment rates of high-income countries,<sup>5</sup> Eastern and Southern Africa and West and Central Africa would need to add another 31 million teachers by the 2050s.
- The gap between girls and boys in educational attainment globally is projected to narrow slightly in the 2050s compared with the 2000s, with more girls than boys projected to complete upper secondary education in some regions.<sup>6</sup>

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## Gender equality



Gender equality is key to building a better future for children. It enhances child well-being and development while helping drive economic growth. *SOWC 2024* finds that:

- At the global level, gender inequality is projected to be a less prominent part of children's world in the 2050s than it is today.<sup>7</sup>
- Still, many children are projected to live in societies with considerable levels of gender inequality in the 2050s, particularly in Eastern and Southern Africa and West and Central Africa – two of the three regions where most of the world's children will live.
- In West and Central Africa, a gender gap of about 11 percentage points in upper secondary completion is projected to persist through the 2050s.

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## Conflict exposure



Armed conflict presents one of the world's greatest risks to the rights, lives and well-being of children around the world. Our analysis finds that:

- Globally, fewer children are projected live in areas with a high risk of prolonged subnational conflict.<sup>8</sup> The number of children living in these areas is projected to drop from more than 833 million in the 2000s to 622 million in the 2050s.
- However, in Eastern and Southern Africa, the number of children at risk of facing prolonged subnational conflict is projected to increase from 71 million in the 2000s to 97.8 million in the 2050s, and from 5.1 million to 69 million in West and Central Africa.

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## Urbanization



With more children living in cities in the coming decades, ensuring urban areas are healthier and more secure is essential to building a better world for future generations. We find that:

- Nearly 60 per cent of children globally are projected to live in urban settings in the 2050s, up from 44 per cent in the 2000s.
- Latin America and the Caribbean are projected to maintain the highest share of children in urban settings in the 2050s (84 per cent), while Eastern and Southern Africa are on track to remain the least urbanized (45 per cent).
- In West and Central Africa, the number of children living in urban areas is projected to more than triple, from 63 million in the 2000s to 209 million in the 2050s.

### Young voices

"If we can focus on vocational education, we can help young people gain the practical skills they need to thrive in the future economy."

**May Phyu Phyu Aung, 24, UNICEF Youth Foresight Fellow, Myanmar**

# The future is ours to shape

Rather than make predictions, *SOWC 2024* provides a vision of what is possible for the future while emphasizing our power to shape it. Our ability to create a world where every child thrives rests on adhering to the CRC. States have committed to promoting and protecting the rights it recognizes and guarantees to all children, including ensuring non-discrimination; the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; and respect for the views of the child. These obligations must underpin our response to each of the megatrends we face.

UNICEF recommends that governments and the public sector, businesses, non-governmental and human rights organizations, and civil society mobilize to meet the megatrends outlined above and secure the best future for children. Urgent action is needed in three key areas.

*SOWC 2024 is a call to action for all who have a stake in our collective future.*

## Young voices

"I had to leave my small island for education. I want to figure out how we can provide quality education for all, so that child who is born in 2050 doesn't have to leave their islands to study."

**Fathmath Zahanath Zuhury, 23, Youth Foresight Fellow, Republic of Maldives**

## 1. Prepare for demographic transitions:

- Invest in early childhood, primary and secondary education; expand teacher training and job creation for youth.
- Expand shock-responsive social protection systems, including paid parental leave and universal child benefits.
- Ensure access to maternal, newborn, child and adolescent healthcare, along with sexual and reproductive health and family planning services.
- Create child-responsive cities with safe and nurturing spaces, infrastructure, and support for marginalized children, including children with disabilities.
- Maintain equitable access to services in rural areas experiencing depopulation.
- Ensure intergenerational equity in ageing societies and prioritize children's rights and public services.

## Young voices

"Our future hinges on your decisions today. Embrace renewable energy, protect biodiversity, and invest in healthcare and education. Let's build a world where prosperity is shared equitably, and where every individual can thrive."

**U-Reporter, 20, male, India**



## 2. Invest in climate and environmental adaptation, mitigation and education:

- Integrate climate resilience into local planning and infrastructure, including schools, healthcare systems, social supports, and water, sanitation and hygiene services.
- Invest in climate education to equip children to build a sustainable future.
- Ensure children's needs are addressed in National Adaptation Plans and, Nationally Determined Contributions and other climate strategies.
- Invest in renewable energy and promote solutions to cut emissions by 43 per cent by 2030.
- Implement large-scale ecosystem restoration and sustainable land management practices.
- Strengthen waste management and combat pollution.

## 3. Deliver connectivity and safe design for every child:

- Ensure digital equality through infrastructure investments and addressing barriers to full usage.
- Promote digital literacy and skills among children and educators to complement traditional teaching.
- Strengthen legislation to protect children's rights in digital environments, including new types of crimes.
- Adopt ethical guidelines for technology development, focusing on privacy, data protection and accountability.
- Implement rights-based governance for new technologies, with oversight mechanisms to anticipate risks.

### Young voices

"We need to create spaces for children and young people to imagine the world they want. Every child deserves a say in shaping the future."

**Fisayo Oyewale, 27, Youth Foresight Fellow, Nigeria**

As we look to 2050, we face a choice. We can continue on our current path, risking a future where millions of children are left behind, their potential unrealized and their rights unfulfilled. Or we can choose a different course – one where every child survives, thrives and shapes the world around them.

SOWC 2024 is a call to action for all who have a stake in our collective future. It challenges us to think beyond the immediate horizon, anticipate the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, and act now to secure a better world for every child.

# Endnotes

- 1 *SOWC 2024* gathered these perspectives from a UNICEF U-Report global survey (<https://ureport.in/>), as well as from the 2023 Youth Foresight Fellows – a group of young foresight practitioners working with UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight (<https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/youth-fellowships>).
- 2 *SOWC 2024* analysis uses Shared Socioeconomic Pathways (SSPs), a set of scenarios used to explore potential future global socioeconomic trends, particularly in the context of climate change. Each scenario includes assumptions about economic development, population growth, technological advancements and climate emissions. Rather than predict specific outcomes, SSPs acknowledge long-term uncertainty by examining a range of plausible futures.
- 3 This outcome holds true across all three scenarios in the analysis.
- 4 Refers to countries categorized as low-income by the World Bank as of the 2023–2024 revision.
- 5 Refers to student–teacher ratios in high-income countries as of the year 2000.
- 6 Reversing historical patterns, slightly more girls than boys are projected to complete upper secondary education in 2050 in Eastern and Southern Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East and North Africa.
- 7 These projections for *SOWC 2024* are based on the United Nations Development Programme's Gender Inequality Index (<https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/thematic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index#/indicies/GII>) – which includes measures of reproductive health, representation in government, educational attainment and labor force participation – and the SSPs. However, various factors influence gender inequality including violence and discrimination, lack of legal protections, and harmful societal norms, like child marriage, which can restrict opportunities and perpetuate inequalities.
- 8 Estimates of children's exposure to subnational conflict were calculated based on Hegre, Håvard, et al., 'Forecasting Civil Conflict Along the Shared Socioeconomic Pathways', *Environmental Research Letters*, vol. 11, no. 5, 25 April 2016, <10.1088/1748-9326/11/5/054002>. This work calculates the probability of subnational conflict under the SSPs based on countries' history of conflict, the heterogeneity and size of their population, and the level of socioeconomic development.

# About us

**UNICEF**, the United Nations agency for children, works to protect the rights of every child, everywhere, especially the most disadvantaged children and in the toughest places to reach.

Across more than 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive, and fulfil their potential.

Before, during, and after humanitarian emergencies, UNICEF is on the ground, bringing lifesaving help and hope to children and families. Impartial, non-political, and neutral, our focus is protecting every child and safeguarding their lives and futures.

**UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight** tackles the questions of greatest importance for children, both current and emerging. It drives change through research and foresight on a wide range of child rights issues, sparking global discourse and actively engaging young people in its work.

UNICEF Innocenti equips thought leaders and decision-makers with the evidence they need to build a better, safer world for children. The office undertakes research on unresolved and emerging issues, using primary and secondary data that represents the voices of children and families themselves. It uses foresight to set the agenda for children, including horizon scanning, trends analysis and scenario development. The office produces a diverse and dynamic library of high-level reports, analyses and policy papers, and provides a platform for debate and advocacy on a wide range of child rights issues.

UNICEF Innocenti provides, for every child, answers to their most pressing concerns.

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# for every child,

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Wherever he lives.

Every child deserves a childhood.

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It's why we stay to the end.

And never give up.

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