

COP30: children's education



| — *United Nations Bangladesh*

IN EVERY policy debate, every public forum, every headline about climate, economy or geopolitical security, one crucial constituency is too often sidelined: children. Yet, children's education is where the future lies, in stable societies, resilient economies and peaceful communities. As global crises pile up, from climate shocks to pandemics to economic inequality, education for children cannot be a side note. It must be central.

Placing children's education firmly at the heart of global discussions is not just morally imperative. It is practical, strategic and urgent. I make three main points: first, children's education is under threat from multiple converging crises; second, education must be reframed as a foundational preventative investment, not merely a remedial one; and third, that policy conversations, from climate summits to refugee responses, must systematically integrate education as a core element, not an after-thought.

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Education under siege

IN RECENT years, children's education has been jeopardised by a perfect storm of forces. The COP30 climate summit organisers, for example, have explicitly called to 'put children's education at the heart of discussions.' Why? Because the climate crisis is not just an environmental issue. It is an educational crisis. Extreme weather, displacement, the disruption of infrastructure, the loss of livelihoods all interfere with children's ability to attend school, learn and plan for the life ahead.

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But climate is only one piece of the puzzle. Conflict and forced displacement continue to uproot children in many parts of the world. When schools become unsafe or inaccessible, children's learning stops. The consequences extend far beyond lost years in the classroom. And when economies falter, families deprioritise education in favour of survival. When teacher shortages grow, curriculums lag, digital divides deepen and children fall further behind.

In Bangladesh, for example, the twin burdens of climate-induced disasters such as flooding, cyclones and river erosion, and socio-economic vulnerability mean that millions of children are at risk of never completing secondary education or becoming NEET — not in employment, education or training. If we do not raise the alarm now, entire cohorts of children will be lost, not just to schooling but to the promise of meaningful lives.

Reframing education

TOO often education for children is treated as an after-shock rather than a front-line response. We talk about 'catching up' children who missed a year, 'bridging' them into school and 'remediating' deficits.

These are necessary efforts. But, they reflect waiting for damage to happen, rather than preventing the damage in the first place.

Instead, we must frame children's education as a preventative investment. When children are educated, they are more resilient to disasters, displacement and economic shocks. Educated children grow into adults who are better able to work, adapt, innovate and participate in society. By contrast, when education falters, the cost is borne not just individually but societally, in unemployment, in poverty and in political instability.

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International policy forums are waking up to this. The Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies emphasises that schools should not just reopen after crises. They should be protected, built for resilience and adapted to new risks. We must shift from a mindset of reacting to disruption to a mindset of designing education systems for disruption. That means resilient infrastructure, flexible curricula, digital access, psychosocial support and sustained funding.

For Bangladesh, this reframing has an immediate relevance. Given the climate vulnerability of the haor regions, river basins, riverine islands and coastal zones, a preventative education investment means safe schools, early warning integrated into school programmes, teacher training for disaster contexts and curriculum that embeds climate and resilience literacy from early years. It means children learn not only reading and mathematics but also how to adapt, respond and lead when their communities face floods, storms or forced migration.

If children's education is to be placed at the heart of discussions, global policy forums must deliver concrete mechanisms and governments must embed education in all policy domains. Three intersecting areas stand out: climate policy, humanitarian response, and economic reconstruction.

Climate policy: At COP30 and beyond, the agenda often centres on mitigation, adaptation, finance and technology. Education must be added as another pillar: the capacity-building of future generations. The Action for Climate Empowerment agenda already emphasises education, training, public awareness and participation. But children, and their schools, must be more than add-ons. They must be recognised as central stakeholders. Nationally determined contribution plans include child-education resilience indicators, school-based climate drills, curriculums that address climate impact and funding windows targeted at schooling in climate-vulnerable zones.

Humanitarian and development response: When crises such as war, displacement or natural disaster strike, education must not be ‘stage three’ after food and shelter. It must be integrated from day one. The EiE Hub’s statement at COP30 reminds us: ‘Whoever destroys a school destroys an entire nation.’ Schools are more than buildings. They are social anchors, safe spaces and promise zones for children. For Bangladesh’s refugee context, the Rohingya for example, youth development work and displaced children, schooling must be prioritised, funded and given protective status.

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Economic reconstruction and financing: Many national budgets treat education as a fixed line item, not as a cross-cutting instrument of resilience, innovation and future productivity. But investing in children’s education is one of the highest returns a country can make. Thoughtful education financing underpins effective development programmes. If we embed children’s education in economic recovery plans, linking school infrastructure rebuilding with job creation, technology upgrading, community development, for example, we turn education into economic engine, not just social good.

Policy recommendations

PUTTING children’s education at the heart of discussions means translating rhetoric into action. I propose the following policy recommendations:

Child-centred budgeting and data systems: Governments must ensure that budgets for education are protected even in crisis periods and data should capture children’s enrolment, completion, learning outcomes and drop-out risk, especially in vulnerable regions. Data should disaggregate by gender, disability, household income and crisis exposure, such as climate, conflict, displacement.

Integrated curricula for resilience: Curriculums should include climate literacy, disaster preparedness, psychosocial learning, digital skills and civic awareness. Schools should be hubs not only of academic learning but of community resilience. For Bangladesh’s secondary schools, integrating theatre, arts and experiential learning could build creative resilience and critical thinking.

School infrastructure built for risk: Safe buildings, access to technology, flexible learning modalities, such as in-person, digital or hybrid, should be standard, especially in hazard zones. In areas like the

haor regions, seasonal disruption demands flexible schooling, such as floating schools, modular curriculum, and teacher training for crisis contexts.

Sustainable financing mechanisms: Education funding must go beyond annual budgets. Dedicated resilience education funds, climate-education bond instruments and public–private partnerships should be explored. At COP30, climate finance must include schooling components. Donor agencies, development banks and national governments should prioritise education as climate adaptation and mitigation investment.

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Inclusive access and participation: Children’s voices matter. The debate on education must include children and youth. They must be participants in designing curriculums, school policies and climate responses. When children are part of decision-making, governance improves and acceptability rises. For Bangladesh’s NEET youth challenge, involving older teenagers in peer-education, mentoring and community outreach can turn them from disengaged to engaged.

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The stakes for Bangladesh are especially high. With its large young population, climate vulnerability, refugee burden and aspiration to leapfrog development, education is central. If secondary-school children in the char, haor and coastal zones do not receive resilient education, we risk growing generations of NEETs, of youth under-prepared for work, of citizens unable to engage in democratic processes and of communities less able to respond to climate stress.

Furthermore, in a region where energy transition, digitalisation, and global value chains are accelerating, Bangladesh must equip its children with not only foundational literacy and numeracy but also digital and creative skills, climate awareness and resilience. Efficient, inclusive education reform becomes a competitive advantage. The world is shifting rapidly. If children are left behind now, the cost will be borne not just by them but by the nation.

Final thoughts

WHEN we say ‘education matters,’ we must be precise, we mean children’s education, today, in all its dimensions, in crisis and peace, in classroom and online, in urban and remote settings. We mean that it must be prioritised in climate summits, humanitarian response, budgets and local school policy. We mean that it must be proactive, resilient, inclusive and forward-looking.

The call from COP30, to put children’s education at the heart of discussions, is timely and right. Yet, calls alone will not suffice. What is required is political will, funding commitment, strategic integration across sectors and a mindset shift: from seeing education as a static sector to seeing it as the engine of resilience, of development, of justice.

For the sake of our children, and for the future of our societies, we must heed this call. Let every school reopening, curriculum redesign, climate plan and budget debate start with the question: how will children’s education be protected, transformed and elevated in this moment of change? If we answer that question, we do more than teach children: we empower generations.

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