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Editorial Note

This is a brief introduction to a timely and intellectually relevant conversation in this AYIKA publication. It centres on ten articles that cover unique aspects of development challenges in Africa, with particular attention to South Africa and Nigeria. These contributions, taken together, not only identify persistent challenges in environmental protection and economic growth but also advance policy recommendations in response to Africa's changing circumstances across various fronts. To be clear, the needs of Africa are multifaceted and interconnected in several ways; the challenges are similar across the board, although the manifestations may differ geographically. These articles address the connections in the needs and choices of Africa while projecting a better future. Motswaledi's article illuminates this in this volume, concluding that equitable and inclusive energy provision should be prioritised as a fundamental social justice intervention to redress historical inequalities, promote human dignity, and advance socio-economic transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. Such insight applies to all of Africa.

Collectively, these contributions demonstrate that Africa's development challenges cannot be understood in isolated compartments. Governance affects environmental management; energy affects social justice; infrastructure affects economic growth, etc. The major strength of this collection is therefore its interdisciplinary character. It brings together governance, economics, environmental studies, development studies, public policy, agriculture and social justice. More importantly, the articles consistently return to a central question: how can African societies build institutions and development pathways that improve human welfare without undermining the environmental and social foundations of the future? This collection does not claim to offer simple answers. Instead, it provides evidence, cases and critical perspectives that can help scholars, policymakers and practitioners ask better questions. New and better research questions are a right way in the right direction.

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BEYOND THE CLIMATE CRISIS: PROTECTING AFRICAN CHILDREN FROM RISING VIOLENCE

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Abstract

Climate change is increasing vulnerabilities across Africa, particularly impacting children through indirect pathways that heighten their risks of violence, exploitation, and neglect. This study investigates the link between climate-induced stressors, such as drought, displacement, food insecurity, and economic shocks, and the rising violence against children across the continent. While the connection between climate change and environmental degradation is well established, its social consequences, particularly to child protection, are less well understood. Underpinned by the Ecological Systems Theory and the Vulnerability Framework, the study aims to identify the key drivers connecting climate change to violence against children in Africa and to assess policy frameworks that address these emerging risks. A desktop approach was employed, combining a systematic review of the literature with a qualitative analysis of policy documents from selected African countries (Kenya, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Nigeria) that experience both climate volatility and high levels of child vulnerability. The findings show that climate shocks disrupt livelihoods, increase household stress, and often cause displacement, all of which are associated with higher rates of physical, emotional, and sexual violence against children. Weak child protection systems, inadequate climate adaptation policies, and poor coordination between climate and social sectors worsen these risks. Despite national climate strategies, few policies explicitly address the social and protection aspects of climate impacts on children. The study concludes that safeguarding children requires integrated policy responses that connect climate adaptation with social protection and child welfare. Recommendations include integrating child protection into climate policies, strengthening community-based resilience mechanisms, and investing in early warning systems that incorporate child-specific

indicators. By moving beyond environmental mitigation to tackling the social consequences of climate change, governments and development partners can better shield Africa's children from a growing tide of violence.

Keywords: *Climate Change, Violence Against Children, Vulnerability, Child Protection, Policy Integration*

1. Introduction

Africa is widely regarded as one of the most vulnerable continents to climate change due to its limited adaptive capacity, high dependency on climate-sensitive livelihoods, and weak infrastructure (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2022). The continent is already experiencing increasing temperatures, erratic rainfall, more frequent and intense droughts, and rising sea levels, which have far-reaching implications for human security and development. According to Niang et al. (2014), these climate-related changes threaten food and water security, exacerbate poverty, and undermine socio-economic progress. Although much attention has been paid to the environmental and economic consequences of climate change, its social impacts, particularly on vulnerable populations, are only beginning to receive due focus. Climate change is now increasingly recognised as a 'threat multiplier', exacerbating existing social inequalities and contributing to conflict, displacement, and social disintegration (Rüttinger et al., 2015). For instance, climate-induced displacement disrupts community structures, weakens traditional social safety nets, and increases exposure to

various forms of violence, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2021).

Children are disproportionately vulnerable to climate change due to physiological, psychological, and social factors, which heighten their exposure to health risks including malnutrition, respiratory illnesses, and waterborne diseases (Watts et al., 2015). According to UNICEF, children have higher metabolic rates, smaller body sizes, and greater nutritional needs, making them more vulnerable to the impacts of climate-related food insecurity and health risks (UNICEF, 2022). In addition to these physical health impacts, climate change indirectly places children at greater risk of abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence. During climate-induced crises, such as drought or flooding, children may be forced to drop out of school, engage in child labour, or experience increased domestic violence (Save the Children, 2022). Girls are particularly at risk, facing heightened exposure to early marriage and gender-based violence (Plan International, 2021). Despite growing evidence of climate change's social impacts, the intersection between climate change and violence against

children in Africa remains underexplored in research and policy. The current discourse largely treats environmental and child protection issues in silos, ignoring how climate-induced stressors heighten children's exposure to violence in both domestic and community settings. As a result, existing child protection frameworks often fail to account for the new and evolving risks posed by climate change. The absence of integrated policy responses limits the capacity of governments and development partners to design effective interventions that protect children in a rapidly changing climate.

Poverty exacerbates the impact of climate change by limiting families' ability to respond to and recover from climate-related shocks. Many households rely on subsistence farming, which is highly susceptible to climatic variations, such as droughts and floods. These climatic events can lead to crop failures, reducing food security and increasing malnutrition rates among children (UNICEF, 2022). Children in impoverished households are also more likely to be involved in child labour to supplement family income, which compromises their education and health. This dependency on vulnerable livelihoods further entrenches the cycle of poverty and vulnerability to climate change. According to the World Bank (2021), the high poverty levels in Zimbabwe are a significant barrier to effective climate adaptation. Families that rely on agriculture, which is increasingly

threatened by climate variability, are often forced to make difficult choices that can negatively impact children's health and education. For example, during periods of drought, which are becoming more frequent due to climate change, families may prioritise immediate survival over long-term investments such as education. This can lead to higher dropout rates among children, particularly girls, who may be required to take on additional household responsibilities or seek employment to support their families. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO, 2016) notes that climate-induced crop failures have a direct impact on the nutritional status of children, leading to higher rates of stunting and wasting, which can have long-term consequences for their physical and cognitive development.

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate how climate change contributes to violence against children in Africa and to assess how effectively current policy frameworks are responding to this growing concern. The research focuses on understanding the specific ways in which environmental and climatic stressors increase the risk of harm to children, while also examining the adequacy of institutional responses aimed at protecting vulnerable populations in a changing climate. The study addresses these objectives through a set of guiding research questions. It seeks to identify the main climate-related stressors that are undermining child protection systems

across the continent. It also examines how these environmental pressures exacerbate ‘the risk of violence, abuse, or exploitation of children, particularly in communities already facing poverty, displacement, or social instability. In doing so, the study examines the policy frameworks in both the climate and child protection sectors that currently acknowledge or address this intersection, and to what extent they provide meaningful support or fall short. Ultimately, it examines the potential for integrating child-sensitive approaches into climate adaptation and resilience planning to inform more inclusive and protective strategies for safeguarding children in the face of increasingly severe climate impacts.

2. Conceptual Framework

Examining the link between climate change and violence against children requires an interdisciplinary perspective integrating environmental, social, and developmental theories (Masten, 2021). This study applies Ecological Systems Theory and the Vulnerability Framework as complementary lenses. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory explains that children’s development is shaped by interconnected environmental layers, including family, schools, communities, and broader socioeconomic and political structures. Climate change functions as a disruptive force that affects these ecological systems, altering children’s

environments, increasing vulnerabilities, and influencing their overall protection and well-being (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). For instance, drought or flooding may undermine household income (microsystem), displace families from their communities (exosystem), and expose children to new risks such as trafficking, abuse, or child labour (UNICEF, 2021). As these disruptions cascade through the child’s environment, the likelihood of exposure to violence increases (Reyes et al, 2019). The Vulnerability Framework illuminates how unequal access to resources, institutional capacities, and adaptive strategies shapes climate impacts. Adger (2006) argues that vulnerability arises not solely from environmental exposure, but from entrenched social, political, and economic disparities that determine communities’ resilience and coping capacities. In many African contexts, weak governance structures, gender norms, and chronic poverty exacerbate children’s vulnerability to both climate shocks and violence (Reyes et al., 2019). Children, especially girls, orphans, and those with disabilities, often lack access to formal protection mechanisms and are disproportionately affected during times of crisis (Rosa & Tudge, 2013; Thomas et al., 2021)..

The integration of these two frameworks enables a more nuanced understanding of how climate-induced stressors, such as food insecurity, displacement, or the breakdown of

community safety nets, interact with systemic inequalities to increase children's risk of violence (Reyes et al, 2019). While Ecological Systems Theory emphasises the layered environmental influences on children, the Vulnerability Framework draws attention to the structural and institutional gaps that leave certain children more exposed than others (Thomas et al, 2021). This conceptual approach also aligns with recent work by the United Nations and humanitarian agencies, which stress the need for child-sensitive climate adaptation strategies (UNICEF, 2021). It suggests that effective policy responses must address both the immediate impacts of climate shocks and the broader socio-political contexts that shape children's resilience (Save the Children, 2022). This study uses these frameworks to investigate not just how climate change affects children, but why certain children are more likely to experience violence as a result, and how policy can mitigate these risks.

3. Methodology

Description of Desktop Research Approach

This study employed a desktop research methodology, relying solely on secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, grey literature, and official policy documents. Desktop research, also known as document analysis or desk-based review, is a qualitative method that enables researchers to synthesise

existing knowledge and identify trends, gaps, and policy implications (Bowen, 2009). Due to the exploratory nature of the study and the complexity of climate-violence dynamics, this approach was suitable for incorporating diverse forms of evidence from various academic disciplines and sectors.

Criteria for Literature and Policy Document Selection

Sources were chosen through a targeted sampling method to ensure they align with the study's goals. Academic literature from peer-reviewed sources was gathered via scholarly databases such as Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, using keywords like "climate change and children in Africa," "violence against children," "climate-induced displacement," and "child protection and climate policy." Priority was given to articles published after 2010 to maintain contemporary relevance. Grey literature, including reports from UNICEF, Save the Children, Plan International, and the African Union, was also included to offer practical and policy insights. Policy documents were evaluated based on three criteria: (1) relevance to climate change adaptation or child protection, (2) national or regional scope within Africa, and (3) availability in the public domain. The documents reviewed included national climate adaptation plans (NAPs), child protection strategies, and disaster risk reduction (DRR) frameworks.

Criteria for Literature and Policy Document Exclusion

Literature and policy documents were excluded if they did not directly address the intersection of climate change and child protection, were published before 2010 without providing foundational theoretical or historical relevance, or lacked sufficient methodological rigor or credibility. Opinion pieces, unpublished manuscripts, blog posts, and non-peer-reviewed sources with limited evidentiary value were excluded unless they were produced by reputable international or regional organizations. Policy documents that were outdated, superseded by more recent versions, geographically unrelated to the African context, or unavailable in the public domain were also excluded. Additionally, documents focusing solely on climate change or child protection without demonstrating relevance to their interrelationship were not included in the review.

Geographic Focus

To provide contextual depth, the study incorporated case examples from Kenya, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, three countries that experience recurrent climate stress (e.g., drought, flooding, and cyclones), exhibit high levels of child vulnerability, and possess differing policy capacities. Kenya has a relatively well-developed child protection system, but it faces increasing drought conditions

(Kabubo-Mariara & Karanja, 2007). Nigeria faces both climate- and conflict-induced displacement, particularly in its northern regions (Okpara et al., 2016), while Mozambique frequently experiences severe cyclones that disrupt education and community cohesion (UNICEF, 2020).

Limitations of the Methodology

While desktop research allows for broad thematic coverage, it has notable limitations. First, the absence of primary data collection restricts the ability to capture local lived experiences and emerging informal practices that are not documented in formal literature. Second, language and publication bias may have excluded relevant documents, particularly local government reports or NGO evaluations not available in English. Third, while cross-country comparisons enrich the analysis, findings are not generalizable across all African contexts due to socio-political and ecological diversity. These limitations notwithstanding, the study provides a valuable synthesis of existing evidence and highlights key areas for future empirical investigation.

4. Results and discussion

Climate Change and Child Vulnerability Although children contribute the least to climate change, they suffer the most severe impacts, facing heightened threats of malnutrition, illness, displacement,

and violence (Refer to table 1) (UNICEF, 2021).As the climate crisis deepens, it disproportionately threatens children’s rights to survival, development, and protection, especially in impoverished and rural settings where resilience systems are weakest (Plan International, 2021). Most regions in Africa are currently facing notable climate fluctuations, characterized by increasing temperatures, unpredictable rainfall patterns, and a higher occurrence of severe weather phenomena, including

droughts, floods, and cyclones (Nyathi et al, 2024). These phenomena are not only environmental concerns but also major stressors that disrupt livelihoods, destabilise communities, and undermine development gains. According to the IPCC (2022), expanses such as the Horn of Africa, Sahel and Southern Africa are especially vulnerable to recurrent droughts and prolonged dry spells, which directly affect agricultural productivity and water access.

Table 1 showing climate change and child vulnerability

Theme	Vulnerability Description	Child-Specific Impacts	Sources
Displacement & Conflict	Climate-induced floods and droughts displace communities and disrupt social services.	Children face loss of education, exposure to violence and trafficking.	UNICEF (2021); Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre [IDMC] (2023)
Food & Nutrition	Climate stressors reduce agricultural yields and increase food prices.	High rates of child malnutrition, cognitive delays, and school dropouts.	FAO (2022); Watts et al. (2015)
Gendered Vulnerabilities	Girls face greater burdens fetching water and are more likely to be married early.	Increased school dropout, Gender Based Violence [GBV],and reduced life opportunities for girls.	Girls Not Brides (2020); Plan International (2021)

Source: Authors

Conversely, countries such as Mozambique and South Sudan are more prone to flooding and storm surges, resulting in the displacement of

communities and the destruction of critical infrastructure (UNICEF, 2021). Displacement is an especially critical stressorIn just the year 2022,

climate-related incidents led to the internal displacement of more than 7.5 million individuals in sub-Saharan Africa, with a significant number being children (IDMC, 2023). These displacements disrupt education, strain public services, and increase exposure to violence, trafficking, and child labour, especially in informal settlements and overcrowded camps.

Food insecurity is another major consequence of climate change. With many African families relying on rain-fed agriculture, changing rainfall patterns and extreme temperatures have resulted in crop failures, livestock deaths, and increased food prices. FAO (2022) reports that more than a quarter of Africa's population is experiencing severe food insecurity, leading to significant impacts on child nutrition, school attendance, and the stability of families. Children, due to their age, dependency, and developmental needs, are disproportionately affected by these climate stressors. In terms of health, climate change increases children's exposure to diseases such as malaria, cholera, and respiratory infections. Malnutrition, often resulting from food insecurity, compromises immune function and stunts cognitive and physical development (Watts et al., 2015). The Zimbabwe Ministry of Health reported a spike in malaria cases during the 2016-2017 rainy season, particularly affecting children under five years old (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP],

2017). Malnutrition is a significant concern, as climate-induced food shortages lead to inadequate nutrition, impairing children's physical and cognitive development.

In the education sector, climate-related shocks can lead to prolonged school closures or increased dropout rates, particularly among girls. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2021), school facilities can be damaged by floods, whereas drought conditions might force children to participate in earning money or doing household tasks rather than going to school. From a child protection standpoint, climate-related stresses amplify risks of abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Economic hardship caused by drought or floods may lead to increased rates of early marriage, child labour, and domestic violence. In post-disaster contexts where social structures are weakened and institutional responses are delayed, children often lack access to safe spaces and psychosocial support services (Plan International, 2021). Climate change exacerbates gender inequalities, with girls often bearing the brunt of increased vulnerability. In drought-prone areas, girls may spend more time fetching water, thereby missing school and becoming more exposed to harassment or sexual violence. During periods of food scarcity, adolescent girls may be married off early as a coping

mechanism for household survival (Girls Not Brides, 2020).

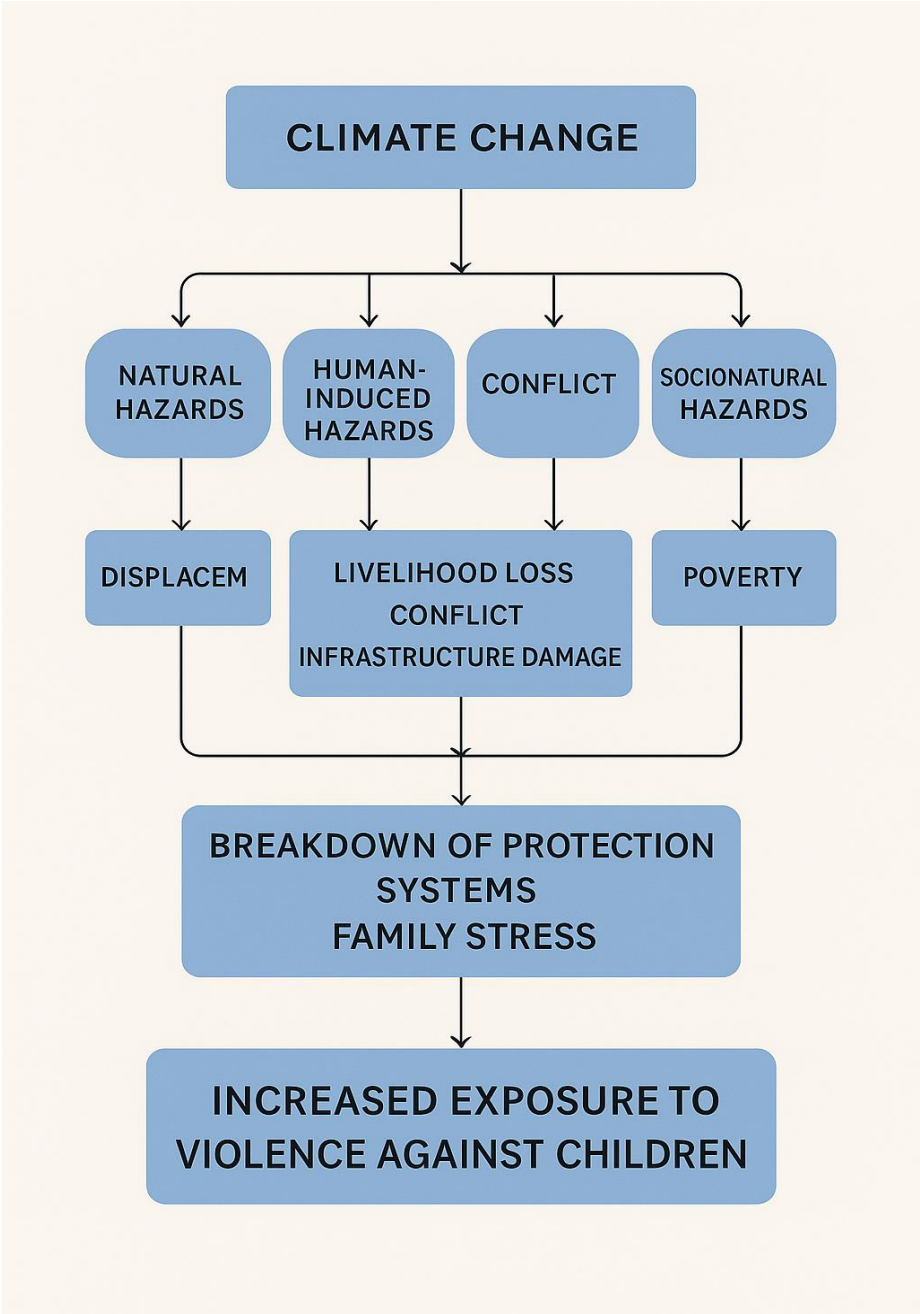
Girls are more likely to suffer from gender-based violence in displacement settings, where protection measures are often inadequate. Age-specific risks are also evident. Younger children are predominantly susceptible to malnutrition and waterborne diseases, while adolescents face heightened risks of exploitation through harmful labour or transactional sex. Boys, while less frequently studied in this context, also face specific challenges such as increased likelihood of child soldier recruitment or hazardous labour in informal sectors during economic crises (Reyes et al., 2019). The results indicate the need for child-centred and gender-sensitive climate adaptation strategies. Policies must move beyond treating children as a homogenous group and instead address the specific needs and risks faced by different age groups and genders. The stress and trauma from frequent natural disasters and the resulting economic hardships can have lasting psychological effects on children. This can manifest as anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues, which are often overlooked in disaster response efforts

(UNDP 2017). Disasters can have significant psychological and social effects, such as children being separated from their parents, experiencing the loss of family members, being compelled into early marriage, or enduring violence and displacement. Children affected by Cyclone Idai in Zimbabwe exhibited signs of trauma and stress due to the loss of their homes, schools, and community members. UNICEF reported an increase in cases of anxiety and depression among children in the affected areas, highlighting the need for psychological support and counselling (UNICEF, 2019).

Drivers of Violence Against Children in a Changing Climate

Climate change exacerbates existing social, economic, and political weaknesses, serving as a threat amplifier (See Fig 1). With the increasing frequency of environmental shocks and gradual events such as droughts and floods, children are at greater risk of experiencing violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The following section outlines the primary pathways through which climate change contributes to violence against children in Africa.

Fig 1 showing the climate drivers of violence against children.



Source: Authors

Displaced and the breakdown of Social structures

Climate-induced displacement is a significant driver of child vulnerability. Disasters, such as floods, cyclones, and droughts have forced millions of African families to abandon their homes and migrate to

urban slums, camps, or temporary shelters (IDMC, 2023). Displacement disrupts traditional community structures that often play a protective role in children’s lives. In the absence of familiar support systems, such as

extended family, schools, or local leaders, children are more likely to fall victim to neglect, exploitation, and abuse (UNICEF, 2021). In Mozambique, for example, Cyclones Idai and Kenneth displaced hundreds of thousands of people in 2019, leaving children without adequate shelter or protection services. Reports from Save the Children (2020) found that unaccompanied minors in displacement camps were particularly vulnerable to trafficking and gender-based violence. Similarly, in drought-affected regions of Ethiopia and Somalia, children in pastoralist communities face increased risk of violence when families are forced to move in search of food and water (De Waal, 2018). UNDP (2020) demonstrated the connections between climate change, livelihoods, and violence against women. During extended droughts, women and girls often travel further and more frequently to gather food or water, increasing their risk of sexual assault.

Economic Pressures and Exploitation

Climate change exacerbates poverty and economic instability, pushing families to adopt harmful coping mechanisms. Reduced agricultural yields, loss of livestock, and inflated food prices diminish household incomes, increasing pressure on children to contribute economically. As a result, more children are engaged in child labour, transactional sex, or forced marriage (International Labour

Organization [ILO] & UNICEF, 2021). Economic desperation also drives families to marry off girls at younger ages in exchange for dowries or to reduce the number of dependents in the household. In Nigeria's northern regions, where desertification has reduced farmland and grazing lands, early marriage rates have risen, particularly in displacement-affected communities (Okpara et al., 2016). These forms of exploitation not only violate children's rights but also perpetuate cycles of poverty and marginalisation.

Increased Domestic and Community-Level Violence

Environmental stress often translates into heightened family tensions and community conflict. When basic needs such as food, water, or shelter are scarce, frustration and aggression can manifest as violence within the home or community. Research by Muggah and Savage (2012) shows that resource scarcity linked to climate shocks can escalate interpersonal violence, including domestic violence and corporal punishment. Children are particularly at risk during such periods, as caregivers experiencing psychological stress or economic hardship may resort to harsh discipline or neglect. In communities with weak law enforcement or justice systems, communal violence over land or water resources can spill over into broader insecurity, further endangering children (Rüttinger et al., 2015).

Weakening of Child Protection Systems During Crises

Climate-related disasters often overwhelm public institutions, diverting resources away from social services, including child protection. Health and education systems may be incapacitated, while civil society organisations face challenges in maintaining operations in disaster zones. According to UNICEF (2021), child protection systems in many African countries lack climate resilience and are not equipped to respond to surges in vulnerability following environmental emergencies. For instance, in flood-prone areas of South Sudan, health and social workers have reported difficulties in reaching displaced populations, resulting in a lack of birth registration, case management, and psychosocial support (United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UNOCHA], 2020). This institutional breakdown leaves children invisible to formal systems and highly exposed to abuse and neglect. The interaction between environmental shocks and weak socio-economic conditions drives a range of violence risks for children. Displacement, poverty, household stress, and fragile institutions form a complex web of factors that heighten children's exposure to harm. Addressing these risks requires coordinated policy action that strengthens both environmental resilience and child protection systems.

Nature and Incidences of Climate-Induced Violence -Against -Children

Children face complex layers of violence due to climate change, which arises from environmental pressures, systemic poverty, institutional failures, and social turmoil. Both the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) (2024) and UNICEF (2023) have highlighted that climate change serves as a "threat multiplier," exacerbating current harms and introducing new dangers, especially for children in poverty, conflict areas, or regions of displacement.

Physical and Sexual Violence

Extreme weather events, particularly floods, droughts, and cyclones, frequently displace communities, forcing children into overcrowded shelters or refugee camps where security is often minimal. In such conditions, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) becomes a widespread risk. Girls face increased vulnerability to rape, harassment, and coerced sex in exchange for food, water, or protection. A UNICEF (2023) assessment in East Africa reported that in the aftermath of floods in South Sudan, girls in displacement camps were exposed to significantly higher risks of SGBV, with humanitarian agencies noting sharp increases in incidents of rape and forced sex. Although disaggregated, comprehensive prevalence data is limited, anecdotal and localised

studies consistently report spikes in violence following climate disasters.

Child Labour and Exploitation

The destruction of livelihoods due to drought or storms often forces families to rely on child labour as a coping mechanism. Children, especially boys, are pushed into hazardous labour, such as farming in degraded conditions, herding in drought zones, or informal mining. Girls may be pulled into unpaid domestic work or informal trading. These forms of labour often occur without any safety standards or oversight, exposing children to physical injury, abuse, and exploitation. According to the ACERWC 2024 study, child labour increases significantly in rural farming communities during prolonged droughts. In regions of the Sahel and Southern Africa, children as young as eight are engaged in physically demanding work to supplement family income during food crises.

Child Marriage

Climate shocks often initiate or exacerbate child marriage, which stands as a widespread form of gender-based violence. In many communities, the loss of income and rising food insecurity associated with droughts or floods often leads families to marry off their daughters early, as a way to reduce household burdens or receive a bride price. Data from Malawi, Ethiopia, and Mozambique shows sharp increases in child

marriage following climate disasters. A study cited in the ACERWC (2024) found that in parts of Zimbabwe, the rate of child marriage rose by up to 20% in the year following a major drought, as families saw no alternative means of economic survival.

Violence in Conflict and Resource Scarcity

As climate change intensifies resource competition, particularly over water, pasture, and arable land, communities are increasingly drawn into conflict. In regions like the Zambezi River Basin and the Sahel, children are directly affected by violent clashes, recruitment into armed groups, and the destruction of schools and health infrastructure. The study by Swain et al. (2011) underscores how weak institutions and identity-based tensions interact with climate stress to fuel collective violence. In conflict zones, such as northern Nigeria, northern Mali, and parts of Sudan, children are frequently caught in the crossfire, forcibly recruited, or sexually exploited by armed actors.

Psychological and Emotional Abuse

Beyond physical harm, climate-related instability causes profound psychological stress. Children displaced by floods, who lose caregivers to drought-induced migration, or who experience the destruction of their homes and schools, often suffer from trauma, anxiety, depression, and emotional neglect. According to UNICEF (2021),

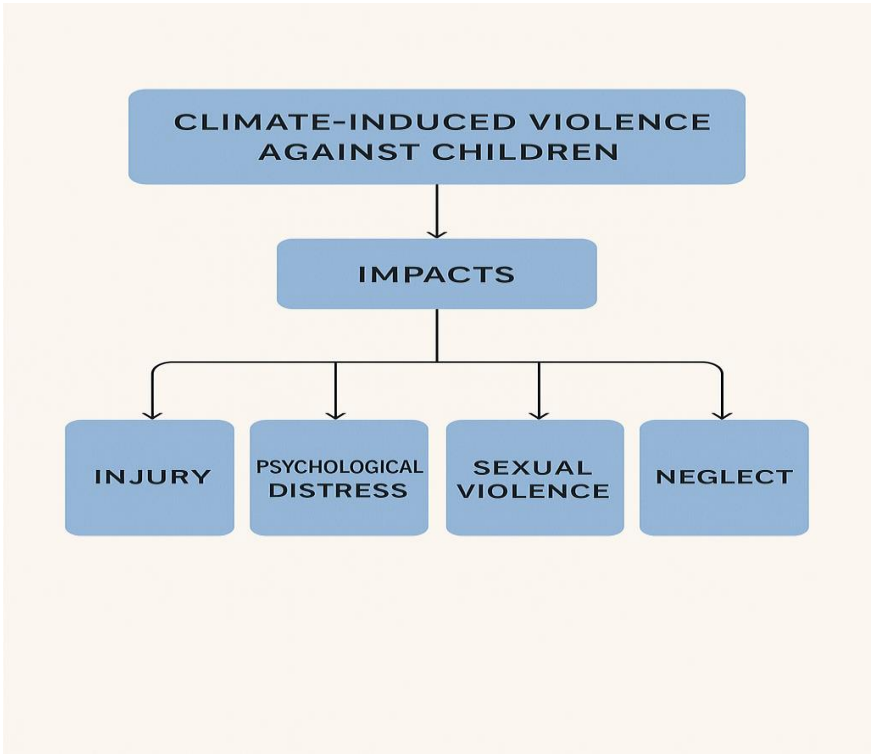
nearly 850 million youngsters worldwide are exposed to at least four overlapping ecological stressors, many of whom live in contexts with no access to psychosocial support services. In Africa, where mental health care for children is extremely limited, the psychological toll of recurring climate crises is deeply under-addressed.

Impact of Climate-Induced Violence Against Children

The consequences of violence against children in the context of climate

change are far-reaching and multidimensional. Beyond the instant physical harm, climate induced violence undermines children's long-term development, disrupts their education, damages their psychological well-being, and weakens their trust in social institutions. These impacts are compounded by poverty, gender inequality, displacement, and fragile governance systems prevalent in many parts of Africa.

Fig 2 showing the impact of climate induced violence against children.



Source: Authors

Violence linked to climate stressors often results in both acute and chronic physical injuries. These can include bodily harm from domestic abuse, sexual violence in displacement camps, or exploitation in hazardous

labour (Reyes et al., 2019). However, the psychological toll is often even more severe. Children exposed to violence may experience anxiety, trauma, depression and trauma, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD),

particularly when abuse occurs in the aftermath of climate disasters that have already disrupted their sense of safety and stability (Masten & Narayan, 2012). For instance, children displaced by the 2019 Cyclone Idai in Mozambique reported increased feelings of fear, isolation, and helplessness due to overcrowded camps, family separation, and the collapse of support systems (UNICEF, 2020). Research indicates that children who are exposed to different forms of violence are more likely to experience suicidal thoughts and develop long-term mental health issues (Hillis et al., 2016).

Educational Disruption and Dropout

Climate-related violence often leads to prolonged school interruptions, especially for girls. In crisis contexts, girls are more likely to drop out due to child marriage, caregiving responsibilities, or fear of sexual violence en route to or within school environments (Girls Not Brides, 2020). For displaced boys, pressure to earn an income often results in child labour, pulling them away from education. Even when schools remain operational, children affected by trauma or malnutrition may struggle to concentrate and perform well academically (UNESCO, 2021). This educational disruption has long-term consequences for employability, economic independence, and social mobility. According to Psaki et al. (2019), each year of missed schooling significantly lowers lifetime earnings,

and for girls, reduces their likelihood of delaying marriage and childbirth.

Health and Nutritional Outcomes

Violence and neglect in climate-affected settings also contribute to poor health outcomes. Children who experience sexual abuse face an increased risk of acquiring sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2015). Malnourished children, often found in drought or flood-prone areas, experience weakened immune systems and delayed growth. These health vulnerabilities are exacerbated in displacement settings, where medical care may be unavailable or unaffordable. Furthermore, violence can prevent children from accessing essential health services. Fear of stigma, retaliation, or disbelief often discourages survivors of abuse from seeking medical or psychosocial support, particularly in patriarchal societies where children's voices are minimised (Plan International, 2021).

Intergenerational and Social Impacts

The impacts of violence reverberate beyond individual victims. Children who experience or witness violence are more likely to normalise aggressive behaviours, increasing the risk of future cycles of abuse, delinquency, and interpersonal violence (UNICEF, 2017). In post-conflict or disaster-affected communities, unaddressed trauma and violence can undermine social

cohesion, perpetuating mistrust and weakening community resilience. Moreover, there are economic costs. The World Health Organisation (2014) estimates that violence against children costs countries between 2% and 8% of GDP annually due to lost productivity, healthcare expenses, and judicial burdens. In the African context, these losses hinder sustainable development and delay recovery from climate shocks. The impacts of climate-induced violence on children are multifaceted and enduring. From health and education to social wellbeing, violence exacerbated by climate change jeopardises children's rights and Africa's development trajectory. These effects highlight the urgent need for climate adaptation strategies that prioritise child protection and address the root causes of vulnerability.

Policy Landscape Analysis Review of National Climate and Child Protection Policies

African governments have increasingly recognised the risks posed by climate change and have developed national climate adaptation plans (NAPs) and child protection strategies. Many of these policies, however, are developed in isolation, with insufficient integration between climate change adaptation and child protection. The African Union's Agenda 2063 underscores the need for climate resilience but does not specifically address the unique vulnerabilities of children in climate

crises (AU, 2015). Similarly, individual countries like Kenya, Mozambique, and Nigeria have climate policies that prioritise environmental sustainability but fall short of incorporating specific measures to protect children.

In Kenya, the National Climate Change Action Plan (NCCAP) (2018–2022) provides a comprehensive framework for strengthening climate resilience and promoting adaptation across key sectors. However, the policy does not explicitly incorporate child protection measures within the context of climate-induced disasters (GoK, 2018). Its primary focus is on sectors such as agriculture, energy, and water resources management, with limited attention to the specific needs and vulnerabilities of at-risk populations, including children and women, in disaster preparedness and response strategies. Similarly, the Kenya Child Protection Policy (2012) addresses critical child protection concerns, including child labour, trafficking, and other forms of abuse. Nevertheless, it does not adequately consider the nexus between climate change, environmental vulnerability, and the heightened risk of violence against children, thereby revealing a significant policy gap in addressing climate-related child protection challenges. Similarly, Mozambique's National Adaptation Plan (NAP) mentions child health and nutrition but fails to account for the disproportionate impacts of climate-

induced violence or displacement on children. The Mozambique Child Protection Policy (2018) acknowledges the general risks children face, but does not address the specific vulnerabilities created by climate-related stressors, such as drought, floods, and displacement (UNICEF, 2020). In contrast, Nigeria's National Policy on Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability (2012) recognises the role of vulnerable groups in climate adaptation, but again, does not include child protection measures in climate resilience frameworks, particularly in disaster-prone areas like the northern regions and the Niger Delta (Federal Ministry of Environment, 2012).

Gaps in Integrating Child Protection into Climate Strategies

One of the primary gaps in the current policy landscape is the lack of integration between climate adaptation strategies and child protection frameworks. While climate policies tend to focus on sectors, such as agriculture, water, and infrastructure, they often overlook children as a specific vulnerable group. Furthermore, climate-induced violence is not sufficiently considered in disaster risk reduction (DRR) and emergency preparedness plans. For instance, the National Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy in many African countries emphasises the protection of infrastructure and the environment. Still, it lacks detailed plans for protecting children from violence

during displacement or emergencies (United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction [UNISDR], 2015). In addition, climate adaptation policies generally fail to address the long-term consequences of displacement on children's mental health, educational outcomes, and protection from exploitation. Moreover, existing child protection policies often overlook the cumulative impacts of climate change. While they may address issues like child labour, early marriage, or trafficking, they do not explicitly link these risks to climate-induced stressors, such as food insecurity or migration. The failure to integrate child protection into climate adaptation policies results in missed opportunities to mitigate the compounded risks faced by children in the context of climate crises.

Good Practices and Missed Opportunities

Some good practices are emerging, albeit in limited form. UNICEF's Child-Centred Climate Change Adaptation (4CA) approach provides a model for integrating child rights into climate adaptation efforts. This approach has been piloted in countries, such as Uganda and Tanzania, where climate adaptation plans have been tailored to address child-specific vulnerabilities, including improving access to education during droughts or floods (UNICEF, 2021). In addition, the East African Community (EAC) has developed a regional framework for climate resilience that focuses on

gender and vulnerable groups, providing opportunities to address child protection in climate adaptation efforts. However, while these frameworks are commendable, their implementation remains inconsistent, and the integration of child protection across all phases of disaster preparedness, response, and recovery is still lacking.

A significant policy shortcoming across many African countries lies in the limited institutional integration among the climate change, health, education, and child protection sectors. This fragmentation constrains the development of coordinated responses capable of addressing the multidimensional risks that climate change poses to children. In Mozambique, for instance, weak collaboration among the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Welfare, and the Ministry of Environment has undermined comprehensive efforts to respond to the compounded vulnerabilities experienced by children in disaster-prone communities (Save the Children, 2020). Although many countries have established separate policy frameworks on climate change and child protection, these frameworks frequently operate in isolation, with insufficient recognition of the interdependence between environmental stressors and child welfare. Consequently, opportunities to mainstream child protection within climate adaptation and disaster risk

reduction strategies remain underutilized. Embedding child-centred protection measures into climate governance frameworks, strengthening cross-sectoral coordination, and institutionalizing integrated disaster preparedness mechanisms are therefore imperative for building resilient systems that safeguard children's rights and well-being. Such an integrated policy approach is essential to ensuring that climate resilience initiatives effectively address the disproportionate risks borne by children, who constitute one of Africa's most vulnerable populations in the context of a changing climate.

Policy Gaps and the Struggle for Protection

Despite increasing global and regional recognition that climate change is fundamentally a child rights issue, significant gaps remain in translating this understanding into effective policy and institutional practice. Across Africa, climate governance frameworks continue to be characterized by fragmented policies, weak institutional coordination, and inadequate integration of child protection priorities. As a result, existing systems often fail to address the disproportionate risks that climate change poses to children's safety, development, and well-being. A major weakness is the limited inclusion of children in climate governance and decision-making processes. National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and

Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) developed under the Paris Agreement seldom contain explicit provisions that protect children's rights or promote their meaningful participation in climate policy. According to the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC, 2024), only a few African countries, including Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa, have made notable progress in integrating child protection into climate resilience frameworks. Even where adaptation and disaster risk reduction strategies exist, children are frequently viewed as passive recipients of assistance rather than as rights-holders with distinct vulnerabilities and capacities.

This policy gap persists despite the strong legal obligations established by the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). Articles 5, 16, and 27 require states to protect children's rights to survival, protection, and development by preventing abuse, neglect, violence, and exploitation. These risks are increasingly intensified by climate-induced displacement, food insecurity, environmental degradation, and livelihood losses (ACRWC, 1999). The Charter further requires that the best interests of the child guide all decisions affecting children, including environmental policies. However, the limited integration of these legal obligations into climate governance continues to create a substantial implementation gap between policy

commitments and the effective protection of children's rights under climate change.

Elsabé Boshoff (2017) argues that while Africa's human rights instruments are progressive on paper, including provisions that are gender-sensitive and environmentally focused, their operationalisation within climate policy remains limited. The challenges are both structural and political. In many African countries, enforcement agencies are underfunded, understaffed, or lack the technical expertise to monitor or address the complex linkages between climate shocks and child vulnerability. Rural and conflict-prone regions, where children are often at highest risk, are least likely to benefit from legal protections due to weak infrastructure, fragile governance, or outright insecurity (Boshoff, 2017). A significant obstacle in addressing this gap is the inaccessibility of climate finance to local, child-focused initiatives. Multilateral climate finance mechanisms, including the Green Climate Fund and the Adaptation Fund, face criticism for complex accreditation requirements and restrictive financing modalities that hinder grassroots organisations and local child protection systems from accessing funding for child-centred climate adaptation initiatives. The ACERWC (2024) emphasises that current climate financing streams often favour large-scale infrastructure or mitigation projects that do not

prioritise social resilience or child welfare.

What is urgently needed, the ACERWC argues, is the decentralisation and reorientation of climate finance. Funds should be channelled to community-based child protection systems and local service providers that can rapidly respond to emerging climate risks. This requires not only financial restructuring but also the development of accountability mechanisms to ensure that funds are used to reach the most vulnerable children, those in informal settlements, displacement camps, or climate-affected rural communities. As of 2023, however, there remains no widespread continental framework for tracking how climate finance is used to serve children's rights specifically.

A further gap in climate governance is the inadequate inclusion of children in environmental decision-making processes. Although both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) uphold children's right to participate in decisions affecting them, meaningful engagement remains limited. Climate policy forums rarely provide platforms for children's perspectives, thereby diminishing their agency and overlooking their valuable knowledge and lived experiences of local environmental and climate-related challenges. To address these policy gaps, a multi-tiered and child-sensitive

governance approach is required. At the national level, governments must integrate child-specific indicators and priorities into their NDCs and NAPs. At the regional level, institutions like the African Union should strengthen child-inclusive climate strategies, linking environmental policy to the ACRWC's normative framework. At the community level, investments must support the capacity of local actors, such as schools, health clinics, and social workers, to serve as frontline responders in protecting children from climate-induced harm. The struggle for child protection in the face of the climate crisis is not merely about recognition; it is about resources, implementation, and accountability. Bridging the gap between legal commitments and policy outcomes will require not only political will but also a rethinking of how climate justice is defined and delivered, especially for the youngest and most vulnerable across the African continent.

5. Recommendations

National climate adaptation plans must explicitly include child protection strategies. Governments should ensure that climate policies address the unique vulnerabilities of children, incorporating disaster risk reduction measures that protect children from violence, exploitation, and neglect during climate-related emergencies. There is a need to invest in child-sensitive early warning systems. Early warning systems must be child-

sensitive, ensuring that children's needs are considered in disaster preparedness and response. This includes providing information on how to keep children safe during emergencies, as well as ensuring that children's access to education and health services is maintained during crises. Governments should promote stronger collaboration among ministries responsible for climate, child protection, education, health, and social welfare. Local communities should be supported in building resilience through education and training programs that equip them to protect children during climate-induced crises. Investing in research and data collection will provide a clearer understanding of the specific risks children face in climate-related emergencies. This will help inform evidence-based policies and interventions, ensuring that climate change responses are tailored to the needs of the most vulnerable populations, especially children.

6. Conclusions

The interplay between climate change and violence against children in Africa has emerged as a critical and multifaceted policy and human rights challenge, requiring integrated and evidence-based responses. As environmental stressors such as droughts, floods, and displacement intensify, children bear the brunt of the resulting violence, exploitation, and neglect. Climate-related displacement frequently erodes critical family and

community-based support systems, while increased economic hardship exposes children to greater risks of exploitation, including child labour and early marriage. These climate-driven risks are compounded by inadequate child protection mechanisms and limited availability of essential services, such as education, healthcare, and psychosocial assistance. Despite existing national climate and child protection policies, there are critical gaps in addressing the compounded risks children face in climate crises. Current policies often fail to integrate child protection into climate adaptation strategies, leaving children exposed to heightened violence and exploitation during and after climate-related disasters. Good practices in child-centred climate adaptation, such as those seen in parts of Uganda and Tanzania, offer valuable lessons, yet their wider implementation remains inconsistent across the continent. The urgency for action cannot be overstated. Governments, international institutions, and civil society actors must place greater emphasis on embedding child protection considerations within climate change policies and adaptation frameworks, ensuring that children's rights, needs, and vulnerabilities are adequately addressed amid escalating climate-related threats. Strengthening intersectoral coordination, investing in resilient child protection systems, and ensuring that children's rights are central to climate policies will help

safeguard their future and secure the social fabric of Africa's climate-affected communities.

Author contributions

Dr Douglas Nyathi contributed to the conceptualisation and development of the article, including the formulation of the central research ideas, analytical direction, and overall structure of the manuscript. Dr Victor H. Mlambo contributed to the refinement of the

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