

Submission to the Climate Change Authority Annual Progress Report

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Executive Summary

UNICEF Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Climate Change Authority's 2025 Annual Progress Report. As the leading organisation advocating for children's rights globally, we are committed to ensuring that Australia's energy transition is inclusive, equitable, and protective of future generations.

Children and young people are disproportionately affected by climate change, yet their rights, needs, and perspectives remain largely absent from national climate policy and planning. This omission risks exacerbating existing inequalities and undermines the resilience of future generations. A truly effective transition to net zero must be rights-based, intergenerational, and inclusive – one that not only protects children but empowers them to shape a climate-resilient Australia.

UNICEF Australia acknowledges the Australian Government's legislated commitment to net zero emissions by 2050 and its progress in emissions reduction and sectoral planning. However, current policies lack the child-sensitive focus required to address the unique vulnerabilities of children and young people to climate change – particularly those living in poverty, in rural and remote areas, from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities or living with disability.

UNICEF Australia urges the Climate Change Authority to adopt a child-sensitive lens in its recommendations and to ensure that children and young people are not only protected but empowered throughout Australia's transition to a low-emissions, climate-resilient, and prosperous future.

Our submission draws on extensive consultation, evidence, and programmatic experience in international and domestic spheres and responds to the specific questions posed in the Climate Change Authority's Issues Paper that relate to our work.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Invest in green skills training and capacity building initiatives to enable children and young people to play a leading role in driving the transition to a low-carbon future and contributing to current and future adaptation needs.
2. Embed a child and youth lens and intergenerational considerations into the scope of work of the Net Zero Economy Authority to address the current needs of children and youth – particularly those facing disadvantage – and plan for a more sustainable future.
3. Establish the best interests of the child as a guiding principle in climate policy and planning, consistent with General Comments No. 14 and No. 26 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.
4. Establish formal mechanisms for youth participation in climate policy making, including in the implementation phase of Australia's 2025 Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) and the planning and delivery of COP31.
5. Incorporate child-specific indicators into risk assessments and adaptation strategies including the National Climate Risk Assessment led by the Department of Climate Change, Energy, and the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) to ensure the needs of children and young people are systematically addressed.
6. Design for climate resilience by ensuring all new and upgraded schools and early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres incorporate climate-smart design, prioritising high-risk areas.
7. Explicitly integrate climate resilience criteria into funding programs and existing standards, such as the National Quality Standard and school infrastructure guidelines.
8. Strengthen cross-sector coordination by improving collaboration between education, health, planning, and climate agencies to ensure climate resilience across child-focused infrastructure investments.
9. Develop a national disaster framework for children and young people that can be adapted for different natural hazards and operationalised at all levels of government.

Detailed Recommendations

How well is the Australian Government supporting the transition to net zero?

UNICEF Australia acknowledges the Australian Government's legislated commitment to net zero emissions by 2050 and its progress towards these targets, including across sectors. These steps represent a foundational shift toward a low-emissions future. However, from a child rights and equity perspective, to date the transition lacks the inclusivity, and intergenerational focus required to protect children and young people from the worst impacts of climate change and enhance their contribution in driving a more sustainable future. Through the 2025 Local Conference of Youth (LCOY) process—mandated by YOUNGO, the official youth constituency to the UNFCCC—UNICEF Australia supported youth-led organisations to engage over 800 young people across Australia in consultations, surveys, and national forums. Their message was clear: Australia's climate policies should be more ambitious, inclusive, and rights based. Young people consistently called for a transition that not only protects their futures but empowers them to shape a climate-resilient Australia.

Children and young people are central to Australia's clean energy future. As the next generation of innovators, leaders, and workers, they will play a vital role in driving the transition to low-carbon future, as well as contributing to current and future adaptation needs. Yet there is a need to increasingly focus attention on how to build their skills and capabilities to fulfil this role. The Powering Skills Organisation has warned in its 2025 Workforce Plan, that the transition to net zero risks being undermined by a projected shortfall of 42,000 energy, gas and renewables workers by 2030¹, and other sectors essential for achieving Australia's emissions reduction targets face similar challenges.

UNICEF Australia welcomes the Federal Government's announcement in August 2025 that it will invest \$20 million in a National Training Centre for New Energy Skills and \$35 million to expand clean energy training capacity.² It also welcomes new initiatives aimed at supporting women and under-represented groups in energy trades. Further investment from Federal, State and Territory governments is needed, however, to build the diverse skills, knowledge, and opportunities for children and young people so they can lead and thrive in the clean energy transition.

Current climate policies do not sufficiently integrate child-sensitive approaches or prioritise the needs of vulnerable populations. Children and young people living in poverty, in rural and remote areas, from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, or living with disability are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change. These groups are also at risk of being left behind in the energy transition due to multiple and overlapping systemic, infrastructural, socioeconomic and cultural barriers.

For instance, inadequate infrastructure and systemic disadvantage limit their access to safe, reliable energy, which impacts their health, education, and wellbeing. Additionally, these groups are underrepresented in green skills training and clean energy employment, and face barriers to meaningfully participating in energy planning. Ensuring that the path to net zero is inclusive means recognising and addressing these disparities.

What changes could the Australian Government make to improve the effectiveness of existing policies or address gaps in supporting Australia's transition to a low-emissions, climate-resilient, and prosperous economy?

To ensure Australia's climate transition is not only effective but also equitable and future-focused, it is essential to address the current policy gaps that leave children and young people—particularly those experiencing disadvantage—at risk of being overlooked. The following recommendations outline practical, evidence-informed actions the Australian

¹ Powering Skills Organisation Ltd. (2025) 2025 Workforce Plan: High Load, Short Supply Bridging the gap to 2030. Retrieved from <https://poweringskills.com.au/workforce-plan-2025/>

² Giles, A. (2025, August 28). Launch of the Powering Skills Organisation Workforce Plan 2025 – Parliament House, Canberra [Speech]. Ministers' Media Centre, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. <https://ministers.dewr.gov.au/giles/launch-powering-skills-organisation-workforce-plan-2025-parliament-house-canberra>

Government can take to embed intergenerational equity, improve resilience and contribute to current and future economic outcomes.

Prioritise children and young people in green skills development

Investing in initiatives that equip young Australians with the skills needed for emerging jobs in renewable energy, environmental management, and sustainability sectors is critical to building effective and equitable pathways toward a sustainable, low-carbon future. This includes funding programs that integrate clean energy education into school curricula, expanding access to vocational training in green technologies, and supporting partnerships between industry and education providers to offer hands-on experience.

Promising examples are already emerging. For example, with the support of the Queensland Government, the Clean Energy Council has launched the STEM Futures: Energy Careers education program, which provides teachers with lesson plans and resources to inspire students in years 7 to 12 to consider future roles in clean energy³. Additionally, the Canberra Institute of Technology operates a Renewable Energy Training Centre, providing practical courses in wind and solar power technologies⁴.

To ensure children and young people - especially young women and those in rural, remote and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities - can actively contribute to and benefit from the clean energy transition, Federal, State and Territory governments should invest in targeted programs, such as regionally tailored training hubs, mobile learning units, or scholarships for underrepresented groups. These efforts could be complemented by mentoring programs, career pathways in schools, and targeted outreach to communities most affected by the energy transition.

Investing in green skills for young people, particularly in transition communities, can help in building social licence for the clean energy shift. When young people are equipped with the skills to participate in the green economy, it not only enhances their employment prospects but also strengthens local confidence that the transition will deliver tangible economic benefits.⁵ Prioritising skills development for young people in transition communities sends a clear signal that their futures and economic security are being actively supported. Empowering young people in this way would demonstrate that the clean energy transition is not only environmentally responsible, but also socially just and locally grounded.

Recommendation

1) Invest in green skills training and capacity building initiatives to enable children and young people to play a leading role in driving the transition to a low-carbon future and contributing to current and future adaptation needs.

Embedding a child rights lens, and intergenerational considerations, into the scope of work of the Net Zero Economy Authority (NZEA), is key to addressing the present needs of younger generations, and planning for a more sustainable future. By explicitly incorporating the rights, needs, and voices of children and young people into policy, investment, and workforce planning, the NZEA could assist in addressing current vulnerabilities, while building a skilled, resilient generation to lead the net zero economy.

Recommendation

2) Embed a child and youth lens and intergenerational considerations into the scope of work of the Net Zero Economy Authority, to address the current needs of children and young people – particularly those facing disadvantage – and plan for a more sustainable future.

Embed child rights in climate policy and planning

³ Clean Energy Council. (2025). STEM Futures: Energy Careers education resources. Cool.org. Retrieved from <https://cool.org/stem-futures-energy-careers-education-resources>

⁴ Canberra Institute of Technology. (2025). Renewable Energy Skills Courses. Retrieved from <https://cit.edu.au/courses/science-environment/renewable-energy-skills>

⁵ See e.g. UN SDGs. (2025). Creating Local Skills for Green Energy Transition. Retrieved from <https://sdglocalaction.org/green-energy-local-skills/>

Children and young people are not passive recipients of climate impacts—they are rights-holders under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)⁶ entitled to safety, protection and meaningful participation on issues that affect them. Children are uniquely vulnerable to climate-related harms due to their developmental stage, dependency on caregivers, and reliance on essential services such as education, health care, and housing.⁷ Climate change threatens these services and compounds existing inequalities—particularly for children in low-income households, rural and remote areas, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Without deliberate inclusion of child rights in climate policy, these vulnerabilities will be overlooked, and the resilience of current and future generations will be undermined.

While many of the services that shape children’s wellbeing—such as health, education, housing, and social protection—are governed at the state and territory level, national climate policy plays a critical role in setting expectations and standards. Currently, there is significant variation across jurisdictions in how children’s needs are reflected in adaptation and resilience strategies. Embedding child rights into national climate policy and planning can help harmonise approaches, promote consistency, and ensure that children are not left behind in the transition to a climate-resilient future. It also ensures governments are accountable for ensuring young people’s voices are heard and that climate policy reflects the needs and aspirations of those who will inherit its outcomes.

The CRC provides a clear framework for integrating the best interests of the child as a guiding principle in all policy decisions and General Comment No. 26 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child⁸ outlines specific obligations for states and businesses regarding mitigation, adaptation, loss and damage, and climate finance.

Recommendation

3) Establish the best interests of the child as a guiding principle in climate policy and planning across mitigation and adaptation, consistent with General Comments No. 14 and No. 26 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Support youth participation in climate policy making

Across Australia, children and young people are leading local climate initiatives, participating in adaptation efforts, and advocating for policy reform at state, federal, and international levels. Their lived experience and leadership make their perspectives essential to shaping effective and inclusive climate policy. Despite this, climate planning processes have yet to consistently include children and young people in meaningful ways. Moreover, youth engagement mechanisms are ad hoc and underfunded, limiting meaningful participation in shaping the policies that affect their future.

To ensure climate policy reflects the realities and aspirations of young Australians, well-funded and structured pathways for engagement in climate leadership programs at all levels of government are needed. Establishing youth advisory councils, integrating youth representatives into climate advisory bodies, such as the Climate Change Authority, and ensuring consultation processes that inform climate policies are accessible and inclusive of the diverse lived experiences of children and young people, would further this aim.

Youth engagement should be incorporated into the work of the NZEA and future NDCs processes. It should also be incorporated into the implementation phase of NDC and National Adaptation Plan (once they are released) to empower young Australians as climate leaders and promote transparency in Australia’s commitments and accountability in climate policy making. By involving young people in shaping the implementation of national climate commitments, Australia can ensure its targets and strategies are grounded in intergenerational equity and reflect the urgency felt by younger generations.

⁶ United Nations General Assembly. (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

⁷ UNICEF Australia. (2024). Fitzroy Crossing policy brief. https://assets-us-01.kc-usercontent.com/99f113b4-e5f7-00d2-23c0-c83ca2e4cfa2/45861d14-d1f2-4c99-a290-1a88ceb4d03f/UA_Fitzroy-Crossing-Policy-Brief_A4_V5.pdf

⁸ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2023). General comment No. 26 on children’s rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change (CRC/C/GC/26). Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/crccgc26-general-comment-no-26-2023-childrens-rights>

Similarly, the planning and delivery of COP31—particularly if hosted in Australia—presents an opportunity for Australia to showcase national leadership in modelling best practice in youth inclusion, from agenda-setting to representation in official delegations.

Recommendation

4) Establish formal mechanisms for youth participation in climate policy making, including in the implementation phase of Australia's 2025 NDC and the planning and delivery of COP31.

Include child-specific indicators in risk assessments and adaptation plans

Compared to previous generations, today's children face significantly more frequent and intense climate-related hazards—including heatwaves, droughts, bushfires, and floods. These events disrupt essential services such as education, health care, housing, and social protection, which are critical to children's wellbeing and development.

To fully understand and respond to the risks of climate change on children and young people, child-specific indicators must be added into the National Climate Risk Assessment led by the Australian Climate Service and DCCEEW. These indicators should span critical domains such as health, housing, education, nutrition, and income support, and be disaggregated by age, gender, disability, and other relevant demographics.

The UNICEF Children's Climate Risk Index-Disaster Risk Model (CCRI-DRM) is a global, child-centred tool that measures and maps children's exposure and vulnerabilities to climate and environmental hazards. Translating the CCRI-DRM into an Australian context would provide a clearer, more accurate place-based picture of climate and disaster risk for children across Australia, including the disproportionate risks for young Australians from remote and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, low socioeconomic backgrounds and those living with a disability.

The CCRI-DRM could be integrated into a dedicated section on children and young people's exposure and vulnerability within a future National Climate Risk Assessment and the National Natural Hazards Disaster Risk Profile. The CCRI could be complemented with other important knowledge sources, including Indigenous knowledge systems, for a holistic understanding of risk.

Using the CCRI-DRM in Australia would enable targeted, evidence-based planning, identify child vulnerability hotspots, and guide equitable, place-based disaster funding. Embedding these indicators into national frameworks—such as the Measuring What Matters Framework and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap—would ensure that children's needs are systematically considered in climate risk planning. This is not only a matter of intergenerational justice, but also a sound investment in national resilience and economic sustainability.

Recommendation

5) Incorporate child-specific indicators into risk assessments and adaptation strategies including the National Climate Risk Assessment led by DCCEEW to ensure the needs of children and young people are systematically addressed.

Adopt a child and youth lens in climate resilience planning

Public infrastructure is essential for safeguarding the health, learning, and wellbeing of children and young people in a changing climate. A child and youth lens must be embedded in broader climate resilience planning, including investments in child-focused infrastructure and services. This includes designing climate-resilient schools, early learning centres, and playgrounds by using heat-resistant materials and incorporating shade and green spaces. It also involves passive cooling and ventilation, and securing reliable, renewable energy sources to maintain safe indoor temperatures during extreme weather. Playgrounds and schoolyards should be flood- and heat-resilient, with nature-based solutions that support cooling and water drainage.

Current frameworks provide a starting point that could be leveraged further. Standard 3 of the National Quality Standard (NQS) developed by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), requires that the physical

environment for ECEC centres be safe, suitable, and promote all children’s learning, wellbeing, and creativity.⁹ While it includes provisions for environments that are fit for purpose and references air quality and ventilation, it does not set out clear requirements for climate adaptation or climate-resilient building design.

Strengthening the NQS and school infrastructure guidelines to explicitly include these elements would support a more consistent and future-focused approach across the sector. With recent reforms to the NQS placing greater emphasis on child safety, now is a timely opportunity to recognise climate resilience as a critical component of safeguarding children – both now and for generations to come.

Recent investments create an opportunity to lead by example. UNICEF Australia welcomed the announcement of the Federal Government’s \$1 billion Building Early Education Fund (BEEF) to help to build and expand more ECEC centres in areas of need. Given the scale and ambition of BEEF, it presents an opportunity to embed climate resilience into the ECEC system, for example, through climate-smart design standards, sustainable material and energy systems, and adaptation and resilience planning.

Local councils are already investing significantly in climate-resilient infrastructure and programs to future-proof their communities from climate impacts.¹⁰ Securing long-term, sustainable federal funding and incorporating a child and youth lens into such initiatives would strengthen and scale these efforts, enabling more effective, coordinated, and lasting adaptation outcomes.

To maximise impact, it is essential to strengthen coordination across sectors by fostering collaboration between education, health, urban planning, and climate agencies, ensuring that resilience is embedded across child-focused infrastructure investments.

Recommendation

6) Design for climate resilience by ensuring all new and upgraded schools and ECEC centres incorporate climate-smart design, prioritising high-risk areas.

7) Explicitly integrate climate resilience criteria into funding programs and existing standards, such as the NQS and school infrastructure guidelines.

8) Strengthen cross-sector coordination by improving collaboration between education, health, planning, and climate agencies to ensure resilience across child-focused infrastructure investments.

Invest in a national child-sensitive approach to disasters

A key component of climate resilience is being better prepared for disasters. Australia lacks a national framework that systematically addresses the needs of children before, during, and after disasters. Investments in child-friendly spaces, emergency psychological care, and long-term recovery programs are inconsistent and often under-resourced. This gap leaves children exposed to trauma, displacement, and prolonged disruption to their development and wellbeing¹¹. Without early and targeted interventions, the impacts of disasters on children and young people can have potentially lifelong consequences for their learning, health and future earning capacity, which are compounded by exposure to multiple disasters.

⁹ ACECQA. National Quality Standard. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-quality-standard>

¹⁰ See Australian Local Government Association. June 2025. Adapting Together: Local Government Leadership in a Changing Climate (Report). Retrieved from <https://alga.com.au/adapting-together-local-government-leadership-in-a-changing-climate-report/>

¹¹ UNICEF Australia. (2023). Flood response and recovery in Fitzroy Crossing: Needs assessment. https://assets-us-01.kc-usercontent.com/99f113b4-e5f7-00d2-23c0-c83ca2e4cfa2/6ae52fb4-f684-462d-ae4e-f029d3c83031/2023%20Flood%20Response%20and%20Recovery%20in%20Fitzroy%20Crossing%20Needs%20Assessment_FINAL%20Web%20A4.pdf

A dedicated framework would ensure that children's needs are embedded in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery efforts. It would also support coordinated action across federal, state, and local governments, enabling consistent delivery of child-focused services during crises.

To support this goal, UNICEF Australia is currently developing a draft national framework for children and young people in disaster contexts, in consultation with state and territory governments. This framework is designed to be adaptable to different natural hazards and operationalised at all levels of government. It will include provisions for mental health support, continuity of education, protection from violence and exploitation, and access to safe housing and nutrition. It will also be informed by children's own perspectives and experiences, ensuring that recovery efforts are responsive to their needs and aspirations.

This initiative aligns with international best practice and Australia's obligations under the CRC, while also enhancing the effectiveness and equity of national disaster resilience strategies. It should also be informed by children's own perspectives and experiences, ensuring that recovery efforts are responsive to their needs and aspirations.

Recommendation

9) Develop a national framework for children and young people before and after disasters that can be adapted for different natural hazards and operationalised at all levels of government.

Conclusion

Australia's transition to a low-emissions, climate-resilient economy presents a critical need and opportunity to protect and empower children and young people from their early years into their future. As the generation most affected by climate change – and the one with the least influence over current decision-making – their needs, perspectives and contributions must be effectively incorporated throughout climate policy and planning. Beyond addressing the immediate needs of children and young people, it is critical to ensure that they are ready to lead in building a climate resilient community and economy as they transition into adulthood. Investing in young people's green skills, knowledge and capacities now will lay the foundations for a more prosperous economy and improve outcomes for generations to come.

UNICEF Australia urges the Climate Change Authority to adopt a child-sensitive lens in its recommendations and to champion climate policy making that is inclusive, rights-based, and intergenerational. This means embedding the best interests of the child in climate frameworks, integrating child-specific indicators into risk assessments, and ensuring that mitigation, adaptation and resilience strategies prioritise equity and participation. By investing in the development of green skills, youth engagement, and climate resilience from early years, Australia can build a future that is not only sustainable, but also more equitable. UNICEF Australia stands ready to support the Government in this effort, including through the development of a national framework for children and young people in disaster contexts.