

# GROWING UP IN THE CLIMATE CRISIS

The impact of climate change on children and young people in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank



## The Middle East's most vulnerable children are on the frontline of climate change

The Middle East is one of the most volatile and conflict-ridden places in the world. It is also among the regions most exposed to the accelerating effects of climate change. Extreme heat,<sup>1</sup> more frequent and intense sandstorms,<sup>2</sup> droughts, and decreased rainfall, are increasingly affecting the region which suffers from chronic water scarcity and is already warming at twice the global average.<sup>3</sup>

Climate change amplifies existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, impacting the most marginalised and poorest communities first and hardest.<sup>4</sup> In the Middle East, climate shocks' cascading effects worsen complex and overlapping humanitarian, economic, social and political crises. This includes the economic collapse of Lebanon and more than a decade of conflict in Syria. They further erode communities' capacity to access the most basic necessities and their ability to cope and adapt to their changing environment. With increasing frequency, families with no safety nets, decimated livelihoods, and no employment prospects have no choice but to move. In 2022, 39% of internal displacements in the Middle East were triggered by disasters – not conflict – including in Syria and Iraq.<sup>5</sup> Yet climate financing for adaptation in fragile and conflict-affected contexts remains woefully insufficient.<sup>6</sup> As of January 2022, 39 out of 2,775 single-country projects (or less than 1%) approved for climate financing were in the contexts considered in this policy brief.<sup>7</sup> Only three were in Syria and one in the West Bank.

The lives of the most vulnerable children and young people in fragile and conflict settings in the Middle East are profoundly and disproportionately affected by climate shocks. These converge with existing vulnerability factors including displacement, conflict and poverty, to create a devastating crisis for children and young people.

The differentiated impacts of climate change on children and young people have been recognised.<sup>8</sup> However, their voices – especially the perspectives and experiences of the most vulnerable – are largely absent in climate discussions and decision-making. This compounds their invisibility in national and international climate policies, which fail to address their specific needs and ignore their critical leadership role in climate action.

The publication of the landmark General Comment 26 on children's rights and the environment with

a focus on climate change,<sup>9</sup> asserts children's right to be heard on issues and to participate in climate policies. It provides an unprecedented catalyst for decision-makers to engage and include children and young people in conversations and decisions that directly affect them now, and in the future.

On the eve of COP 28, World Vision Middle East and Eastern Europe region (WV MEER) is highlighting children and young people's perceptions and experiences of how climate change is affecting their daily lives and their communities in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank. We also highlight their potential role as climate champions in their respective countries and the main barriers that prevent them from taking action.

The research presented in this policy brief builds on World Vision's extensive experience in engaging with children and young people on climate change and supporting their participation in climate action as agents of change. We believe that, as rights holders, and because they are disproportionately affected by the effects of climate change, children and young people should be part of the solutions. We are therefore committed to ensuring that they can contribute and shape climate action in their communities and beyond.

### Background to this policy brief

This policy brief is informed by WV MEER's multi-country research which explored the impact of climate change on children and young people in the Middle East,<sup>10</sup> specifically their perceptions and experiences. The study focused on the effects of climate shocks on specific vulnerable communities and critical areas of children and young people's well-being and development, such as mental health, protection and education.

The research took place from May to June 2023 in five climate hotspots of the Middle East: Iraq (Ninewa Governate), Jordan (Azraq Refugee Camp), Lebanon (Akkar District), Northeastern Syria, and the West Bank. It combined both quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (key informant interviews) data collection methods. A total of 1,095 girls, boys, young women, and young men participated in the research.

## Summary of Key Findings

### 1. Children and young people in the Middle East are exposed to multiple climate shocks:

The highest number of children and young people who reported being exposed to heatwaves (99.5%) and dust storms (87.8%) in their communities live in Syria, while nearly all children and young people in Iraq are exposed to higher temperatures.

### 2. Climate change is affecting communities' access to nutritious food and other essential services:

The vast majority of children and young people across contexts reported observing a decrease in crop yields, livestock productivity or failure of crops, including 92.4% in Lebanon, 89.6% in Iraq, 97.1% in Syria and 95.9% in the West Bank. Loss of access to fuel, electricity and water is also prevalent across countries, with communities in Lebanon and Syria the most severely impacted.

### 3. Climate change wreaks havoc on children and young people's lives by:



**Increasing food insecurity:** The prevalence of children and young people receiving less food than they require is a staggering 96.7% in Syria and 94% in Lebanon, followed by Iraq (71.6%) and the West Bank (68.4%).



**Hampering access to water:** Across all contexts, an average of 94% of respondents reported that their community had less access to water due to the impact of droughts or floods. In Syria, 100% of children and young people reported their community is getting less water.



**Taking a toll on children and young people's mental health:** Across all contexts, children and young people are generally worried about climate change, with Iraq (92.9%), the West Bank (89.6%), Jordan (75.6%) and Syria (75%) having the highest percentages of respondents who are most concerned about climate change impacts.



**Disrupting access to learning:** Across all five countries, children and young people consistently cited extreme weather events – primarily floods – as the most common reason preventing or reducing the school attendance. A large majority of children and young people in Jordan (77.5%), Iraq (70%) and Syria (76.2%) believe that girls' school attendance is more disrupted by extreme climate events than boys'.

### 4. Climate change amplifies inequality and discrimination against girls

In Syria and Jordan, 75.8% and 65.7% of respondents respectively believed that girls are more vulnerable to climate change than boys. In those same countries as well as in Lebanon, respondents also acknowledged that girls are more likely to leave school to help the family, skip meals when food is limited, collect water, and be affected by poor sanitation and hygiene.

### Key takeaways:



Despite living in some of the most difficult places and precarious conditions, children and young people's motivation to make a difference is inspiring.



We must empower and support them in becoming the agents of change they aspire to be when it comes to climate action.



It is critical that children and young people living in fragile and conflict-affected contexts in the region are included and heard across all international climate policy and decision-making frameworks.

## How does climate change disrupt children and young people's lives?

While climate change impacts all children and young people, its effects are not felt and experienced uniformly and equally by all of them. Intersecting factors of vulnerabilities and marginalisation, such as gender, disability, and being displaced,<sup>11</sup> heighten climate-related risks for some groups of children and young people.

### (1) Children and young people are exposed to multiple climate shocks

All children and young people across the region are exposed to multiple extreme climate events, whether they live in rural communities or urban areas. Soaring temperatures, heatwaves and dust storms are the main consequences of climate change experienced by almost all children and young people, regardless of where they live. The highest number of children and young people who reported being exposed to heatwaves (99.5%) and dust storms (87.8%) in their communities live in Syria, while nearly all children and young people in Iraq are exposed to higher temperatures.



Dry ground in the front of reaching the Hatra's historic gate in Iraq.  
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However, some contextual differences are noticeable in terms of drought, wildfires, floods, heavy rainfall and land degradation. In Lebanon in particular, fewer children and young people reported experiencing drought (39.9%) than in other contexts (61.8% in both Jordan and Syria, 67.8% in the West Bank and 84% in Iraq) but were more likely to report instances of floods (70.5%), heavy rainfall (92.8%), land degradation (75.2%) and wildfires (18.6%) than other countries.

*The findings underline the need for context-specific and localised climate change risk assessments and local adaptation programming. These are essential to better understand communities' levels and types of exposure to reduce the vulnerability of the most disadvantaged groups and communities to multiple climate shocks.*

### (2) Climate change is affecting communities' access to nutritious food and other essential services

“When the elements turn against us, it's not just about losing power. Our entire way of life, especially farming, is under siege due to these dwindling resources.”  
(17-year-old boy, West Bank)

Climate shocks are putting additional pressure on the poorest communities, as most rely on agriculture and pastoralism for survival and livelihoods and live in areas with limited access to or under-resourced infrastructure.

“Drought and extreme weather conditions significantly affect crops, impacting the community and our access to food and resources.” (15-year-old girl, Akkar, Lebanon)

- The vast majority of children and young people across contexts reported observing a decrease in crop yields, livestock productivity or failure of crops (92.4% in Lebanon, 89.6% in Iraq, 97.1% in Syria and 95.9% in the West Bank), although this was significantly lower (almost halved) in Jordan with only 45.2% of respondents reporting a decrease in crop yields and other related impacts. Almost all children and young people (97.1%) in Syria reported

a decline in food and livestock production or crop failure.

- Loss of access to fuel, electricity and water is also prevalent across countries, with communities in Lebanon and Syria the most severely impacted. In Syria, nearly 100% of respondents reported loss of access to electricity, 93.4% to fuel and 84.2% to water.
- A high percentage of children and young people in Syria (86%), Lebanon (77.2%) and the West Bank (76.2%) reported their homes being damaged and needing repairs, and that people must spend time cleaning after extreme weather events.
- The percentage of children and young people reporting lost access to sanitation in their communities was the highest (72.9%) in the West Bank, in contrast with 18.6% of respondents in Jordan.

“Global warming is the most significant issue we face in our region, as its tangible and visible effects are evident to most farmers due to the loss of their crops.”  
(20-year-old-men, Northeastern Syria)

Unsurprisingly, across locations, over 60% of children and young people believe that the consequences of climate shocks have negative or very negative effects on people’s lives in their communities. A large majority of respondents in Syria (95%), Lebanon (89%), and the West Bank (81%) reported that the impact of climate shocks on people’s lives was overwhelmingly negative.

*The consequences of climate shocks increase humanitarian needs,<sup>12</sup> amplifying the challenges the most disadvantaged communities must endure and overcome. It is therefore essential that humanitarian planning and action be adapted to the consequences*

of climate change, including through financing and programmes to strengthen the adaptive capacity of the poorest and most vulnerable groups.

### (3) Climate change wreaks havoc on children and young people’s lives

Climate change is compounding and amplifying children and young people’s existing inequalities and vulnerabilities brought upon by years of conflict, instability, marginalisation, and displacement. The findings of our research are alarming and show the negative effects of climate change on children and young people.

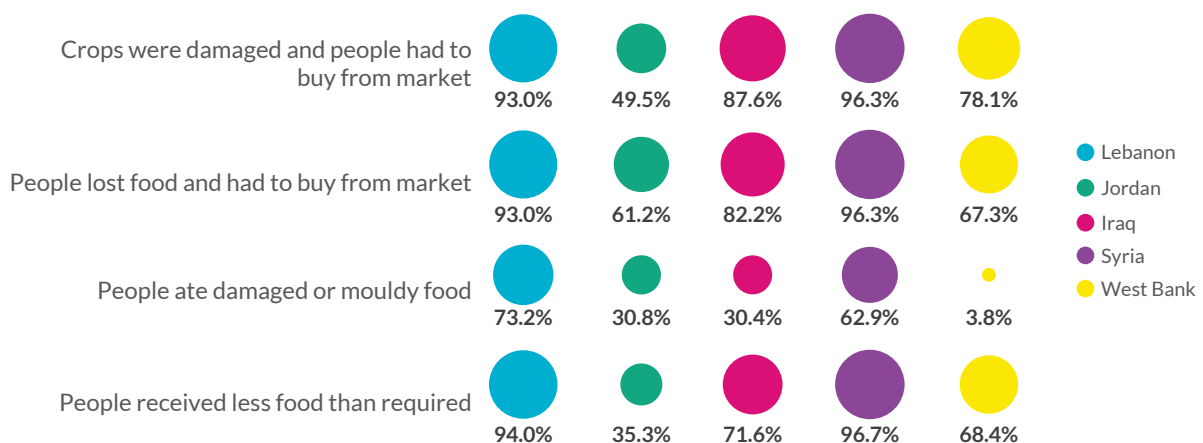
#### 3.1. Empty stomachs: Climate change is worsening food insecurity and child hunger

The devastating consequences of climate shocks on crop yield and livestock production are severely affecting children and young people’s access to nutritious and diverse foods.

The prevalence of children and young people receiving less food than they require is a staggering 96.7% in Syria and 94% in Lebanon, followed by Iraq (71.6%) and the West Bank (68.4%). This is due to households losing food and substantial crop damage from climate shocks. Communities in Lebanon and Syria must also resort to eating mouldy or damaged food, most likely due to power outages resulting from electricity loss.

As a result, a significant majority of surveyed children and young people reported that people are forced to purchase foods from the market, with communities in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq the most severely affected.

**Figure 1: Children and young people’s perceptions of climate change’s impact on food security**



However, skyrocketing market prices, combined with existing financial constraints, chronic food insecurity and income loss are pushing people to make hard choices about the quality, quantity and diversity of the foods they buy, which may severely impact children and adolescents' nutrition.

**“Our primary source of income is agriculture, so when frost damages our crops, we are left with no choice but to purchase pricier food items like vegetables and fruits from commercial stores. This strain on our finances forces us to cut back on our usual purchases, creating significant financial pressures within our families.”** (17-year-old boy, Northeastern Syria)

There was relative consistency in the perceived impact of climate change on food security in the community across the five contexts. However, higher proportions of children and young people in Lebanon and Syria in particular, reported consuming less of some specific food groups such as fruits, meat, oils and fats – all of which are critical to a nutritious and diverse diet – due to climate-change-related food insecurity.

**“As the climate changes, so does the price of food. The limited variety of available products forces us to switch brands, leading to increased expenses. We find ourselves compelled to consume things we don't necessarily enjoy, simply to ensure our survival.”** (11-year-old girl, Azraq Refugee Camp, Jordan)

*These findings are especially worrying given the strong correlation between increased food insecurity, low dietary diversity, and nutrition, and the existing and significant food access issues in the contexts surveyed. This includes Northeast Syria<sup>13</sup> and the Akkar District<sup>14</sup> in Lebanon where food insecurity has been worsening due to the food crisis. Because they are interconnected crises, climate change and food insecurity must be tackled together, including through climate-sensitive food security and nutrition programming, and targeted efforts to implement sustainable solutions for food systems.*

### **WV MEER's response: Working together with displaced Iraqis and host communities to promote climate-smart agriculture<sup>15</sup> and food security**

World Vision's Safe Return Project in the Ninewa Governorate of Northern Iraq is supporting returnees, internally displaced people, and host communities by fostering inclusive economic development, and improving climate change resilience and social cohesion for sustainable livelihoods. The project includes the creation of 36 farmer field groups that focus on best practices for climate-smart agriculture; the training of 615 participating farmers in nature-based solutions (e.g., water-efficient irrigation and drought management); and the distribution and planting of over 7,000 drought-resistant trees in the community. The project has successfully increased households' capacity to cope and recover from climate shocks through the production of drought-resilient crops and more efficient irrigation systems.

### **3.2. The price of water scarcity: Climate change increases children's health risks**

**“There is a significant problem with water in our community as it is contaminated. Some people are compelled to buy water, while others cannot afford it, resulting in the consumption of contaminated water.”** (16-year-old boy, Akkar District, Lebanon)

Health-related climate shocks have a significant impact on water resources across the region which hosts some of the most water-stressed countries. Communities are currently experiencing unprecedented water scarcity<sup>16</sup> that is compounded by poorly managed systems, decaying or damaged water infrastructure, such as the Alouk water station in Northeast Syria, and rationed amounts of water in Azraq Refugee Camp.<sup>17</sup>

Across all contexts, an average of 94% of respondents reported that their community had less access to water due to the impact of droughts or



Ahmad imagines a spacious pool to offer relief from the scorching summers. © World Vision

floods. In Syria, all children and young people (100%) reported their community is getting less water.

Households have no choice but to purchase water or use contaminated water. The highest percentages of children and young people reporting that households must buy water after a climate event live in Iraq and Syria, followed by Lebanon. All (100%) of respondents in Syria and 95.3% in Iraq reported that people must now buy water from water tanks and purchase water bottles.

For those who cannot afford to buy water or cannot meet their water needs, households have to collect water from untreated sources, with a majority of respondents in Lebanon (68.6%) and Jordan (51%) reporting this coping strategy being used in the community. Children and young people in Lebanon also reported that families consume water with a bad smell (50%), a bad colour (68.6 %) and a bad taste (66.7%) after a climate shock.

**“The lack of enough water in our homes really affects our personal hygiene and well-being in general. As climate change alters rainfall patterns, lack of water becomes a constant challenge, leaving us with limited resources to meet our basic needs.” (10-year-old girl, Iraq)**

*Communities' reduced access to safe water exposes children – primarily under five years of age – to potentially fatal water-borne diseases such as cholera and diarrhoea. This risk is further aggravated in displacement camps due to the lack of clean drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure and services. The link between water, displacement and climate change in fragile contexts underlines the urgent need to invest in lifesaving climate-resilient WASH as a critical component of humanitarian and climate action.*

### Box: Environmental sanitation and waste management

While most of the research focused on climate shocks, it also explored environmental sanitation, in particular waste management.

In different settings, children and young people showed varied perceptions of waste in their living environments, reflecting diverse levels of waste management, including recycling practices in various locations. For example, in Iraq and Syria, over half (53.8% and 56.6% respectively) felt that their areas were mostly free from rubbish. However, in Lebanon 70.6% of children and young people reported that the area where they live is always full of rubbish.

Waste-related health risks are of particular concern for children and young people. In Lebanon, where 70% of children and young people reported having lots of rubbish where they live, 93.1% felt anxious because of being at risk of disease. This compared to only 30.3% of respondents in Jordan where effective recycling was reported by a majority of children and young people. However, the link between waste management and anxiety is not always clear. In Iraq, while a majority of respondents report areas mostly free or occasionally free from rubbish, 79% feel anxious about diseases.

Poor waste management practices and infrastructure have a significant impact on environmental sanitation and heighten children's health risks, including respiratory and waterborne diseases such as cholera. This is even more so in fragile contexts, where climate change exacerbates risks for sanitation and waste management and sanitation systems that are generally poor,<sup>18</sup> under-resourced, damaged or destroyed by conflict.<sup>19</sup>

### 3.3. Too much to bear: Climate change is worsening children and young people's mental health crisis

Climate change has a significant psychological toll on children and young people. Children and young people in fragile contexts experience a wide spectrum of worries and a complex combination of climate-related feelings. These are likely to worsen existing mental and emotional distress, and their capacity to cope with and recover from a multi-faceted crisis.

**“I feel concerned when I imagine the potential escalation of climate change, such as increased droughts leading to poverty, as our livelihoods depend on water for agriculture and survival.”**  
(19-year-old woman, Syria)

- Across all contexts, children and young people are generally worried about climate change, although Iraq (92.9%), the West Bank (89.6%), Jordan (75.6%) and Syria (75%) have the highest percentages of respondents who are most concerned about climate change impacts.<sup>20</sup>

- Children and young people's main anxieties tend to be consistent across contexts with access to education and poverty being the most common issues highlighted by respondents across age ranges, followed by air pollution, climate-related diseases, lack of clean water and lack of food.

The findings for children and young people in Syria are especially striking and speak to the emotional and psychological burden they already bear. All (100%) of young adults worry about climate-related forced displacement and more than 90% of them report worrying over all presented impacts. All (100%) of children and young people also worry about poverty and nearly 100% (99.4%) about not having enough food. Across all age ranges, a large majority of respondents in Syria also worry about inequality (86.3%) and exacerbation of violence (83.9%).

**“We had to find another house in a different province to escape the changing conditions in our area.”**  
(17-year-old boy, Northeastern Syria)

Children and young people across contexts also share similar and wide-ranging emotional responses



Children are enjoying their time in picking olives with their family. Olive trees are considered nature's climate saviors. © World Vision





Children standing before a powerful mural at their school, embracing the Earth, and conveying a message of unity and responsibility in the face of climate change. © World Vision

to the consequences of climate change, pointing to the complexities of their mental health needs.

Overall, feeling anxious, sad, afraid, helpless, down, and angry are the top climate-related emotions felt by children and young people. In Lebanon, more than 90% of respondents feel anxious (90.8%) and sad (90.5%), while in Iraq, Syria, and the West Bank, anxiety is the top climate-related emotion experienced by children and young people (82.6%, 85% and 81.9% respectively). Interestingly, fewer respondents across most countries feel powerless, which may reflect them knowing that they potentially can and want to engage in climate action. In Jordan, Iraq, and the West Bank primarily, children and young people also display a lack of concern, which may stem from their lack of knowledge and understanding on climate change, or from dealing with other issues.

“Every glimpse of the melting Arctic ice is not just an environmental tragedy; it’s a dagger to the heart, a reminder of a world we’re on the brink of losing.” (Young man, West Bank)

*In crisis contexts, climate-related emotions do not happen in a vacuum; they feed on the existing mental and emotional distress from suffering, trauma, violence and deprivation they have been enduring for years, and for many, from the moment they were born. Investing in the mental health of children and young people*

*is therefore paramount to addressing the impact of climate change and preventing major short and long-term disruptions to their development and well-being.*

### 3.4. Interrupted learning: Climate change affects children’s ability to go to or stay in school

The direct and indirect impacts of climate change on education are well-known.<sup>21</sup> In fragile and conflict-affected contexts,<sup>22</sup> where education systems are frail, under-resourced and not properly equipped (e.g., no cooling or heating systems),<sup>23</sup> climate shocks increase learning deprivation. They do so by damaging or destroying schools and other key infrastructure such as roads, which interrupts education by preventing children and young people from attending classes.

“Children’s school attendance is reduced because of dust storms and heavy rains occurring in the area”. (10-year-old girl, Iraq)

Across all five countries, children and young people consistently cited extreme weather events – primarily floods – as the most common reason preventing or reducing the attendance of both girls and boys at school. A large majority of children and young people in Jordan (77.5%), Iraq (70%) and Syria (76.2%) believe that girls’ school attendance is more disrupted by extreme climate events than boys’.

**“Our families rely on agriculture, so if our crops are damaged by severe frost, for example, there won’t be enough income to support the education of girls. They might be directed towards different jobs or forced into early marriages to ease the financial burden.”** (16-year-old girl, Northeastern Syria)

Across contexts, children and young people also highlighted a strong link between drought, forced displacement and a drop in school attendance. Syria stands out as the country where children and young people reported the highest perceived levels of displacement and discontinuation of education for girls and boys directly attributed to climate change, with boys and girls missing around five school days per month.

**“During the drought in 2020, our parents couldn’t afford to send our daughters to school, resulting in a decrease in the number of educated girls in the region.”** (19-year-old woman, Northeastern Syria)

### WV MEER’s Response: Equipping schools in Jordan for a greener future<sup>24</sup>

In 2023, World Vision concluded a two-year water conservation project in 13 schools across the five governorates of Irbid, Al Balqa, Jerash, Al Mafraq and Ajloun where vulnerable host and refugee communities live. The project targeted schools, teachers and students and prioritised awareness raising and provision of equipment to ensure its sustainability. As part of the initiative, 13 schools were equipped with upgraded greywater and wastewater systems; 70 water-saving devices were installed on the taps in kitchens and bathrooms to reduce water waste; and nearly 400 students attended awareness-raising sessions on climate change, water, and global warming and basic knowledge of the water treatment systems installed in their schools. The project increased boys’ and girls’ knowledge of climate change and was instrumental in reducing children’s vulnerability to waterborne diseases and heat-related extreme weather events.

Disrupted learning has immediate and long-term negative consequences on the most vulnerable children, especially as it increases their exposure to violence and traps them in poverty. Education is also key in building the resilience of children and young people to climate shocks and empowering them as agents of change. The intersecting crises of education and climate change in the contexts considered must be tackled together. Key strategies should include investments in inclusive and climate-resilient school infrastructure and the provision of climate change education and training for children and young people, ensuring that the most at risk – especially girls, displaced children and children with disabilities – are not left behind.

### 3.5. Job Challenges: Climate change reduces young adults’ opportunities for work and livelihoods

Young adults are also significantly impacted by climate shocks that add pressure and stress on them to earn a living for their families despite already limited livelihoods and work opportunities. Across contexts, respondents emphasised the detrimental consequences of climate change on work opportunities and earnings for young adults as a direct consequence of climate change. They include reduced employment options for skilled and unskilled labour, as well as climate change’s negative impact on key employment sectors, reduced income and tougher working conditions. Across contexts, a majority of respondents reported that young adults experience high levels of stress, compounding climate-related anxiety, and unfavourable working conditions.

**“Young women in our community face unique challenges as they endeavour to reach their workplaces, largely situated on their own lands. In instances of climate shifts, such as soaring temperatures, these women find themselves in a predicament where they have no choice but to continue working, regardless of the severe weather conditions.”** (19-year-old woman, Syria)

As in other areas, young adults in Syria are reported by the respondents to be the most affected by the consequences of climate change on employment. Nearly 94% reported increased stress and unfavourable work conditions, 91.5% reported negative impacts on important employment sectors such as agriculture, fisheries and forestry, and nearly 90% said they had reduced income.

**Figure 2: Young adults’ perception of climate change on employment**



Climate change is increasing young adults’ challenges in accessing and keeping employment. This is even more so for those working in the informal sector and lacking skills. Supporting nature-based income-generating opportunities and providing young people with the skills and knowledge they need to diversify their livelihoods and increase employment opportunities in the green economy are prerequisites to enable them to succeed in future employment opportunities and decent work.

**3.6. Increasing Risk: Climate change is driving violence against the most disadvantaged children, with girls particularly at risk**

“The most vulnerable groups to violence during periods of climate change are children in general, girls, and individuals with special needs.” (16-year-old girl, Ninewa, Iraq)

Climate change is well-recognised as a threat multiplier for violence<sup>25</sup> against the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people, including girls, adolescent girls, children with disabilities and those forcibly displaced. This is

because they are already more likely to experience violence due to a combination of factors, such as widespread poverty, socio-gender norms, financial stress, family separation, and loss of education. The risk of violence against children is also severely amplified by weak and under-resourced national child protection delivery systems.

“Children and girls are more susceptible to violence because they are physically weaker.” (14-year-old boy, Akkar, Lebanon).

Across all contexts but to varying degrees, children and young people experience physical, emotional/verbal and sexual abuse as a result of climate shocks. Yet, despite the well-known gendered impacts of climate change, children and young people in most contexts do not perceive climate change to have varying impacts on physical and emotional violence against girls, except in Syria where children reported that climate change affects more girls than boys both in terms of physical and emotional/verbal abuse. This trend is also generally reflected in young adults’ perceptions of the impacts of climate shocks on sexual violence against boys and girls.

- Jordan, Iraq and Syria stand out as the main countries where respondents believe that boys and girls experience physical and emotional/verbal violence when collecting water and during periods of food and water scarcity, with emotional/verbal abuse being slightly more prevalent than physical abuse.
- Syria however is the country where physical, emotional/verbal and sexual abuse against boys and girls is most prevalent. 64.2% and 52.3% of respondents reported that girls and boys experience emotional abuse, and around 21% of girls and boys are subjected to sexual violence when water and food are scarce. Similarly, it is the country where more girls and boys are reported to have to leave school because of climate change by 77.6% and 76.1% of respondents respectively.

**“Violence increases during periods of climate change, especially as unemployment rates rise and cases of poverty become more prevalent... Some people even resort to marrying off their underage daughters.” (16-year-old girl, Ninewa, Iraq)**



An internally displaced Syrian living in a displacement camp World Vision Syria Response provided water in. © World Vision Syria Response, Hand in Hand for Aid

However, across contexts, early marriage is generally perceived by children and young people as affecting more girls than boys due to climate shocks placing additional strains on vulnerable households. In Syria, according to nearly 60% of respondents (58.1%), climate change contributes to the early marriage of girls, compared to 30.9% for boys.

*Climate change is increasing the already unmet protection needs of the most vulnerable children including girls and refugee children. Yet, because of a lack of child-sensitive climate policies and a gap in cross-sectoral integration and coordination, child protection and climate change sectors continue to operate in silos. This means that child protection risks remain largely absent from climate-related policies, while climate-induced risks fail to be integrated into child protection programming.*

#### **(4) Climate change amplifies inequality and discrimination against girls**

**“Girls and women, whether from minorities or majorities, all face violence because we are oppressed by men in the family, who force us to bear responsibilities beyond our capacity, like fetching water or caring for animals simultaneously.” (11-year-old girl, Northeastern Syria)**

The effects of climate change are not gender-neutral.<sup>26</sup> Like in other crises, climate shocks magnify gender inequalities and disproportionately affect women and girls, especially those living in the most marginalised communities where social and cultural norms heavily dictate gender roles and responsibilities.

Girls' greater vulnerability to adverse climate change impacts compared with boys was recognised by children and young people. In Syria and Jordan, 75.8% and 65.7% of respondents respectively believed that girls are more vulnerable to climate change than boys. In those same countries as well as Lebanon, respondents also acknowledged that girls are more likely to leave school to help the family, skip meals when food is limited, collect water, and be affected by poor sanitation and hygiene.

Syria is the country where a large majority of children and young people reported the



Hazim and his little grandchildren are showing us the products that have been fruited in their farm. © World Vision

disproportionate consequences of climate change on girls, including education and nutrition. A shocking 75% believed that girls and women are more likely to skip meals when food is less available, while nearly 80% said that pregnant women face increased risks during climate change.

The gendered impacts of climate change also heavily affect women's vulnerability to economic violence. Compounded by existing gender-specific barriers, climate change further limits women's access to income-generating activities, which in turn not only hinders their financial independence and their ability to control resources and support their families but also undermines their ability to adapt, cope and recover from climate shocks.

Speaking to this point, a substantial majority of young adults in Syria reported that climate change keeps women from accessing financial resources (77.6%) or from benefiting from livelihood opportunities and earning income (81.6%).

The research also surfaced the potential impact of gender socialisation that children are exposed to in

their communities from early childhood, and their perception and experience of gender vulnerability to climate change, including how boys and girls experience it. For example, a majority of respondents in Lebanon, Iraq, and the West Bank do not generally perceive girls as being more vulnerable to climate change than boys. Respondents were more likely, however, to highlight discrimination against girls when provided with specific scenarios, which may point to a lack of awareness and understanding of what gender vulnerability is. The contrast in responses in some countries also suggests that several factors, such as socio-economic status, shape children's gendered bias and self-awareness as they get older.<sup>27</sup>

*In the region, where the prevalence of harmful gender norms and practices is the primary driver of gender inequalities, extreme weather events converge with other shocks to further deprive women and girls of learning and economic opportunities, and worsen their health and nutrition. While the disproportionate impact of climate change on women and girls is well known, more needs to be done to integrate climate risks into gender-based programming and to foster gender-sensitive climate action.*

# Striving for a safer and greener future: children and young people want action

The children and young people we spoke to give us a glimpse of how the multiple effects of climate change are creeping into all aspects of their lives, creating a crisis within crises. But they also gave us unique insights into their motivations, the challenges they face in responding to climate change, and their verdict on their governments’ actions to fix the climate emergency where they live.

## (1) We can’t change a thing alone: Children and young people are motivated to act, but they need support from adults

“As children, we need the support of our parents, community, and organisations to make a difference in fighting climate change. It’s important to have knowledgeable individuals who can guide and supervise us in our efforts.” (13-year-old girl, Azraq Camp, Jordan)

Despite strong climate-related negative emotions, across contexts, children and young people are motivated to take action to reduce environmental degradation. The highest proportion of “strongly motivated” respondents live in Lebanon (50.1%) and Jordan (59.2%).

“I may be physically disabled in my legs, but I will continue to try my best to help, to mitigate or stop climate change.” (23-year-old woman, Northeastern Syria)

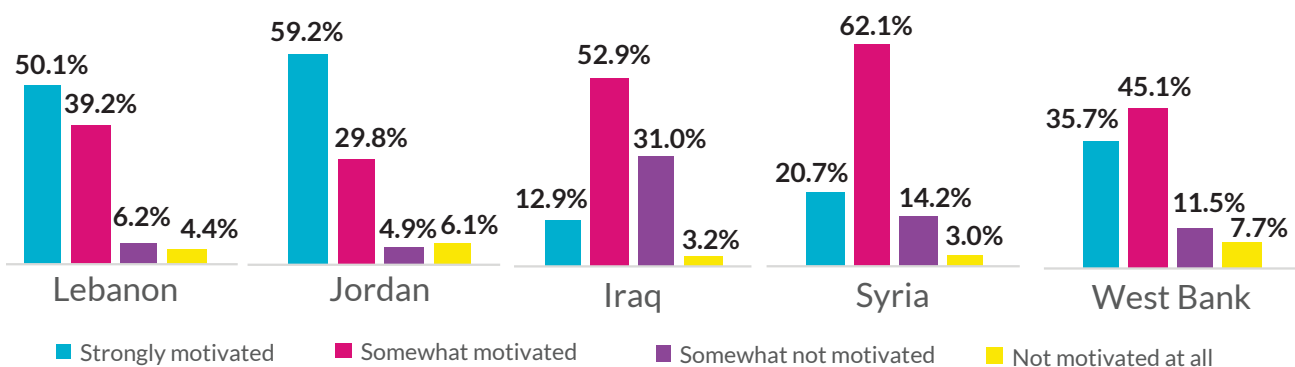
Several factors drive children and young people’s motivation, with upgrading personal knowledge, securing a better life for future generations, personal beliefs, solving an issue and love for biodiversity being the most common reasons for them wanting to engage in environmental activities.

However, they face several barriers that demotivate them, especially believing they cannot change a thing on their own. This is because they lack knowledge, financial means, community support or maturity of understanding. Across most contexts, however, a large majority of children and young people believe it is not their job or their responsibility to take action. This is the main source of demotivation for respondents in Iraq (86.8%), Syria (90%) and the West Bank (91.1%). Being too busy with school and/or family responsibilities is also a common reason mentioned by respondents, primarily in Lebanon (82.9%), Iraq (83%), and the West Bank (75.6%).

“There are so many steps I take to reduce climate impact other than not littering randomly. The only hindrance is the lack of complete knowledge about the subject. The culture of dealing with climate change is not present in us at the moment.” (10-year-old girl, Akkar, Lebanon)

Interviews with children also spotlighted gender-specific barriers to girls’ engaging in environmental action due to social norms and their status in the community.

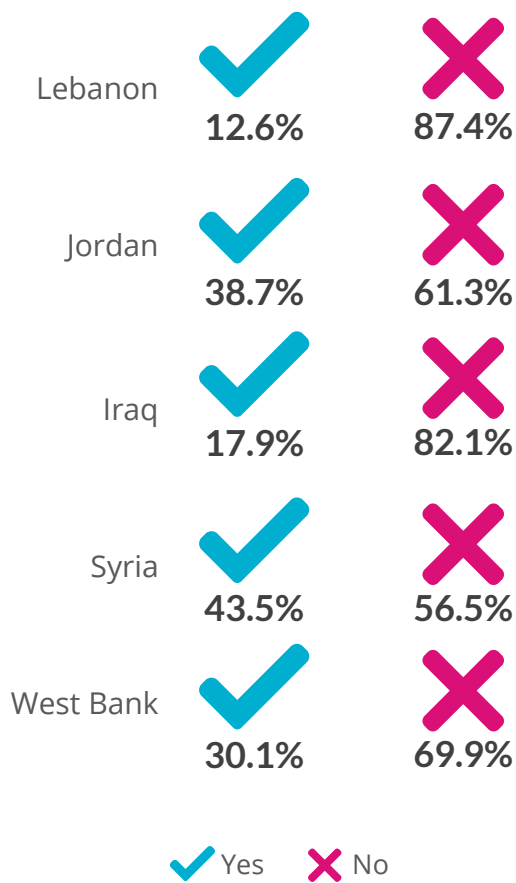
Figure 3: Children and young people’s motivation to engage in environmental activities.



“Young women do not have the same rights as young men to leave the house and work. Most young women’s work is limited to their family’s lands. We, as young women in the area, do not have sufficient information about this topic, but we hope to be educated to help reduce climate impacts.” (19-year-old woman, Northeastern Syria)

As a result, despite being motivated, few children and young people take action, or they are limited in what they can do. Across all countries, a large majority of respondents are not engaged in environmental activities, including in Lebanon (87.4%) and Iraq (82.1%) which have the highest proportion of children and young people who do not adopt environmentally friendly practices.

Figure 4: Activities undertaken by children and young people to protect the environment.



When engaging in environmental activities, children and young people focus on daily actions, such as walking, which is practised by nearly

all respondents regardless of where they live. Increased financial stress and reduced access to basic utilities encourage more than 70% of children and young people across contexts to pay attention to water and electricity consumption. The leadership of children and young people on environmental action is also reflected in their talking about ecology with friends and family to raise awareness and understanding, especially in Lebanon (71%) and Iraq (80.9%).

Children and young people’s motivation to make a difference is inspiring. Despite living in some of the most difficult places and precarious conditions, they show commitment to supporting their communities to be safer and greener. However, more needs to be done to empower and support them in becoming the agents of change they aspire to be.

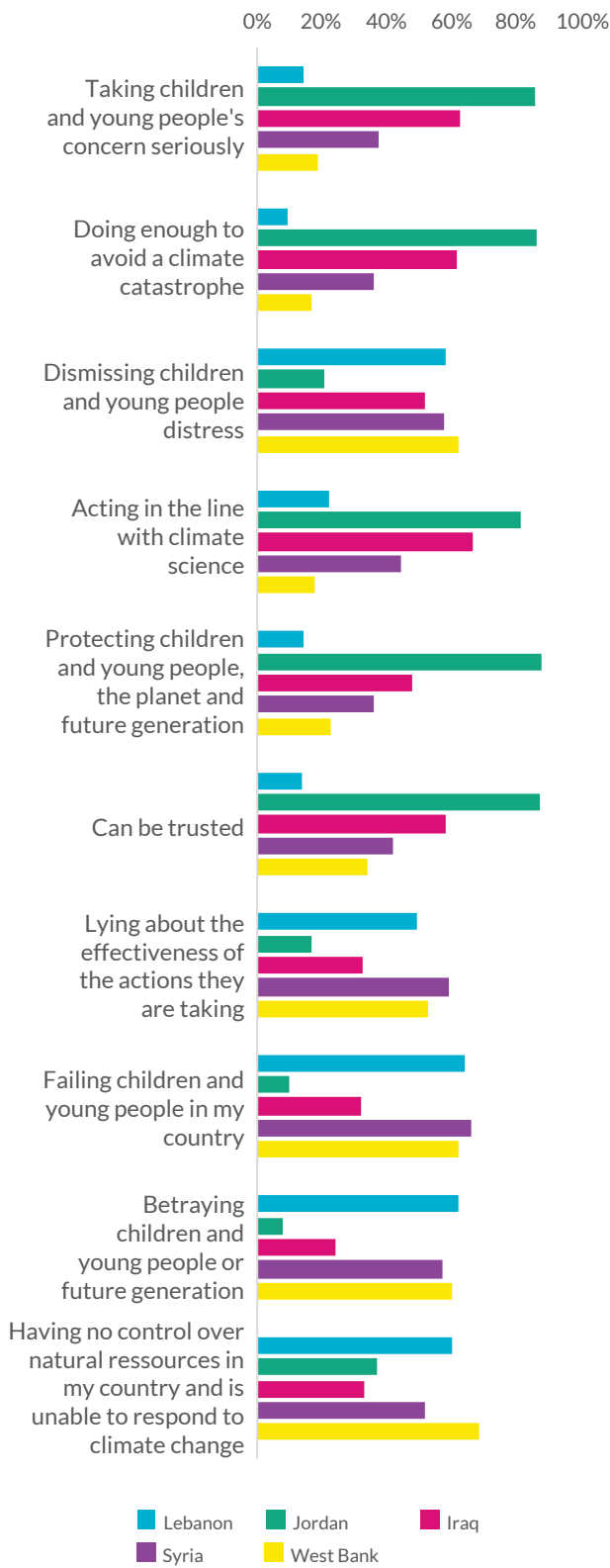
## (2) Do more: Children and young people do not think their governments do enough for them

“I want the government to take decisive actions to address climate change, provide financial support to facilitate alternative energy and water solutions in households, and launch extensive afforestation campaigns.” (23-year-old woman, Northeastern Syria)

Children’s and young people’s perceptions of their governments’ responses are mostly negative and distrustful across countries. More than 50% of respondents in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and the West Bank think that their government dismisses children’s and young people’s distress, while a majority of respondents in Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank believe their governments are failing or betraying children and young people.

A notable exception is Jordan where a vast majority of Syrian refugee children living in a displacement camp in the desert feel confident about how the Jordanian government is dealing with climate change. In particular, they feel the government is doing enough to avoid a climate crisis (85.5%) and is acting in line with climate science (80%). They also believe that it is taking their concerns seriously (85.3%) and protecting children and the planet (87%). These views may be explained by positive climate change adaptation in the camp, such as clean energy and hydroponics projects.<sup>28</sup>

**Figure 5: Children and young people’s perceptions of their government’s responses.**



Across countries, children and young people are clear in their demands to their governments. They call for concrete responses, such as climate education, awareness-raising activities, afforestation and financial support to households for the use of renewable energy, which are the most common actions mentioned by respondents.

**“The government must prioritise raising awareness as people suffer from complete lack of knowledge about this issue.” (24-year-old woman, Akkar, Lebanon)**



Enas planted the crops by her hands in the small garden of her home. © World Vision



## Children and Young People are the blind spot of most countries' key climate policies

Despite the multiple climate risks and challenges faced by children and young people in the contexts considered, a quick analysis of the main climate policy frameworks shows that climate policies in the countries included in this report do not address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of children and young people. While some acknowledge children and young people as a vulnerable group, the recognition of their role as agents of change – especially children – and the importance of their participation in climate policy remains negligible. Climate policies also do not adopt an intersectional approach to climate vulnerability, categorising children as a homogeneous group, including in Jordan, which has the most child-sensitive policies out of the five countries.

Country	Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) <sup>29</sup>	National Adaptation Plan <sup>30</sup>
Iraq	<p>Child sensitivity: Category C<sup>31</sup></p> <p>The <a href="#">NDC (2020)</a> includes commitments on education, training and public awareness, and considers children's rights in some sectoral commitments – mainly health.</p> <p>It does not include child-sensitive commitments on training, public awareness, access to information, public participation, and ensuring the participation of children, adolescents and young people in climate decision-making.</p> <p>The NDC makes references to children and young people, but they are not identified as agents of change.</p>	Iraq's NAP has not been completed.
Jordan	<p>Child sensitivity: Category A<sup>32</sup></p> <p>The updated <a href="#">NDC(2020)</a> includes child-sensitive commitments on Action for Climate Empowerment, public awareness, access to information, the inclusion of children and youth in public participation including in UNFCCC dialogues, references to children and young people, the rights of children and youth in some sectoral commitments, and on ensuring youth participation in climate action.</p> <p>It does not include child-sensitive commitments on training. Young people are identified as agents of change but children are not.</p>	The NAP (2021) articulates children as a vulnerable group and the importance of engaging children. It includes plans for their active participation across sectors.
Lebanon	<p>Child sensitivity: Category C<sup>33</sup></p> <p>The updated <a href="#">NDC(2020)</a> includes child-sensitive commitments to engaging youth in climate policy processes.</p> <p>It does not include child-sensitive commitments on training, public awareness, access to education, and addressing child-specific risks and vulnerabilities in its sectoral commitments. It makes references to youth but contains no references to children specifically or to child rights.</p> <p>Young people are identified as agents of change but children are not.</p>	Lebanon is in the process of developing its NAP. <sup>34</sup> The consultation process did not include youth or youth representatives.
Syria	<p>Child sensitivity: Not available</p> <p>The <a href="#">NDC (2018)</a><sup>35</sup> does not contain any mention of children or young people.</p>	Syria has no NAP.
Palestine	<p>Child sensitivity: Not available</p> <p>The <a href="#">NDC (2021)</a><sup>36</sup> includes child-sensitive commitments to Action for Climate Empowerment as an opportunity to engage youth in NDC implementation.</p> <p>It includes commitments to raising awareness and supporting access to information among youth; addressing the rights of children in some sectoral commitments; engaging youth in climate policy processes; and ensuring equitable protection of children.</p> <p>Children and young people are not identified as agents of change.</p>	The NAP (2016) <sup>37</sup> recognises children's vulnerability to waterborne diseases.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

**“In the face of adversity, our generation has learned the power of collective action. Every small step, from conserving water to supporting sustainable farming matters. We’re not just passive spectators, we’re agents of change.”**  
(Young person, West Bank)

The lived realities of some of the most vulnerable children and young people in the Middle East in the face of climate change are daunting and worrying. The climate crisis is making children’s and young people’s lives even harder and forcing them out of their homes – some of them for the second time.

The children and young people we spoke to did not cause climate change. Yet, they inspire us with their motivation and willingness to tackle an adult-made climate crisis. Our research shows that they want to channel their negative feelings about climate change into solution-focused and collective actions to help their communities and create a better, greener and safer world for themselves and future generations.

We must now empower and support them in their potential role as agents of change. We must listen to them, ensuring that their views, experiences, ideas and concerns are part of climate discussions and decision-making.

### The Call



**We are calling on the international community (donor governments, multilateral organisations and UN agencies) to:**

- Ensure that children and young people living in fragile and conflict-affected contexts in the region are included and participate in international climate policy and decision-making, including the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change processes, and the governance structure of the Loss and Damage Finance Fund.
- Prioritise climate adaptation in fragile and conflict-affected contexts in the MENA region. In particular:
  - Scale up investments in inclusive and shock-resilient child services and systems to minimise disruptions after climate shocks.

These include child protection, water and sanitation, education, health and food security.

- Treat the climate crisis as a humanitarian crisis and ensure the integration of climate change and environmental degradation across all areas of humanitarian programming.
- As part of the Sustainable Development Goals and Paris Agreement commitments, strengthen the resilience and preparedness to climate shocks of the most vulnerable communities in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, working together with national governments, local actors, humanitarian and civil society organisations, and affected communities. In particular:
  - Urgently increase financing for climate adaptation and anticipatory action to address the specific needs of the most vulnerable communities and prevent climate displacement.
  - Ensure that climate adaptation funding and programming reaches and addresses structural and intersecting inequalities faced by the most vulnerable groups including women, girls, children with disabilities, and the forcibly displaced living in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.
  - Address the interconnected conflict and climate crises in the MENA region by investing in peacebuilding and conflict resolution support; fostering stability, cooperation and resource management; and prioritising community-led adaptation programmes that can co-benefit peacebuilding efforts.
  - Ensure effective delivery platforms for Loss and Damage funds directly to local organisations, including women’s organisations, working on climate change adaptation in conflict-affected nations.



**We are calling on MENA governments to:**

- Demand decisive action on the region’s fragile and conflict-affected contexts adaptation financing needs and the looming climate displacement crisis. This includes:

- o Mainstreaming climate action as part of the humanitarian response, building long-term climate resilience and climate security in the region and increasing efforts to promote inclusive development, peace and stability.
- Develop child and gender-responsive climate policies and cross-sectoral governance structures. This includes:
  - o For countries that have not yet fulfilled or renewed their NAPs and NDCs (Iraq, Lebanon, Syria), formulating climate change policies and setting up institutional arrangements that support and promote child-sensitive climate adaptation, and adopt an intersectional and cross-sectoral approach to climate change adaptation and disaster risk management.
  - o Ensuring the participation of children, young people and affected communities in the development of climate and disaster risk reduction policies including the forthcoming updated NDCs for Iraq, Syria and Palestine, and NAPs in Iraq and Lebanon. Ensure that those policies are child and gender-sensitive, multi-sectoral, inclusive of all children. Ensure that they prioritise strengthening the climate resilience of critical child services and vital community infrastructure (education, healthcare and psychosocial support) to minimise disruptions for displaced children during and after extreme climate events.
  - o Investing in collecting child-centred climate-related disaggregated data, including for displaced children in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.
- Empower and foster children and youth leadership and action by updating school curricula to include climate education, support opportunities for children to engage in local climate actions and climate-proof educational services.
- Invest in bottom-up and locally-led climate and environmental programmes that meet the needs and priorities of displaced communities with a

focus on green solutions. These should include:

- o Alleviating climate-induced rural-to-urban migration by increasing community resilience and adaptability to climate shocks through sustainable agriculture systems, and enhancing rural development and inclusive livelihood opportunities.
- o Investing in renewable and resilient systems for water and electricity access.
- o Improving waste management practices.



### **We are calling on Humanitarian and Civil Society Organisations to:**

- Integrate climate adaptation into existing and future sectoral humanitarian programmes and projects.
- Promote the use and widely disseminate General Comment No. 26 to their partners and in their programmes, and advocate for its implementation at the local level.
- Ensure the meaningful participation and contribution of children and young people in climate actions at all levels, in line with the Action for Climate Empowerment set out by the Paris Agreement.
- Address harmful social and cultural norms, such as gender bias, since gender equality is essential for lasting and holistic behavioural change in affected communities.
- Increase the capacity of community-based and youth organisations to engage in climate and policy discussions, and spearhead community-led adaptation projects with children, young people and women.
- Increase child and youth climate empowerment through localised environmental and climate education, awareness-raising, and capacity-building initiatives.
- Amplify local communities, children and young people's voices, needs and priorities at all levels.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>17</sup> Jordan Red Crescent, Climate fact sheet, Jordan, 2022.
- <sup>18</sup> See for example, REACH and WASH Working Group Northeast Syria, Sewage Management in Northeast Syria, February 2023.
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- <sup>23</sup> Source: key informant interviews.
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- <sup>32</sup> Source: [Climatewatch: Jordan](#)
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## **About WV MEER:**

World Vision has been working in the Middle East and Eastern Europe region (MEER) for more than 45 years with a focus on child protection, education, gender equity and climate change prevention. We currently have both emergency and longer-term programmes in 16 countries across the region. The four largest UN humanitarian appeals and operations in the world also fall under WV MEER's area of operations and include Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine and Yemen. Serving the most vulnerable girls and boys in the toughest of places, World Vision is leading the way in contexts of high fragility and gender disparity, where children continue to be impacted by the ongoing hunger crisis and climate change.

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