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## SPECIAL NEWSLETTER EDITION: Climate change & child protection

### GENERAL CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The intersection between the climate crisis and its impact on care and adoption systems warrants further exploration and detailed guidance. The complexities introduced by climate change and environmental crises call for a more robust global conversation and reflection. ISS believes it is crucial to prioritise and expand these discussions to ensure that child protection and adoption frameworks effectively adapt to and address the evolving needs and vulnerabilities of children and families in a changing world.

To advance this critical dialogue, the ISS team is eager to delve deeper into this thematic issue. We invite international, regional, national, and local organisations, as well as professionals and practitioners working in the fields of child protection, alternative care, and adoption to collaborate with us. If you are interested in joining forces (and minds) to reflect together and develop comprehensive solutions, please contact ISS/IRC at [irc-cir@iss-ssi.org](mailto:irc-cir@iss-ssi.org).

### EDITORIAL

#### Alternative care and adoption in a changing climate: Navigating the intersection of subsidiarity and climate change

*In previous editions of our newsletter (see [ISS/IRC Newsletter N. 268](#)), contributing to the dissemination and effective implementation of [General Comment No. 26 on Children's Rights and the Environment with a Special Focus on Climate \(GC26\)](#) we have explored the connections between child protection, alternative care and climate change. Building on this foundation, the ISS/IRC team has continued its reflection and presents new perspectives on this topic in this edition. Given the undeniable impact of climate change on child protection systems in many countries, ISS/IRC believes it is crucial to engage on further dialogue on the intersection between climate change, adoption, and the application of the principle of subsidiarity.*

As child protection and adoption professionals, we understand that the principle of subsidiarity<sup>1</sup> is central to ensuring the rights of children who are deprived of their families or at risk of being so. But are existing international standards and guidance in the field of alternative care and adoption adequately addressing the structural impact of climate change on children? In particular, can we effectively implement the two levels of the principle of subsidiarity in the context of climate change?

These questions become even more pressing when considering other critical challenges related to the subsidiarity principle. For instance, can we truly respect this principle when certain highly discriminated profiles of children, such as those with disabilities or from ethnic minorities, face barriers to domestic adoption or lack access to family support

<sup>1</sup> You can read more on the principle of subsidiarity on [ISS/IRC Intercountry Adoption Fact Sheet N° 35](#), [Manifesto for Ethical Intercountry Adoption](#) and [ISS/IRC comparative working paper 1: Spotlight on solutions](#)

from the outset? How can we address the structural issues that prevent these children from accessing the same opportunities as others?

### **Challenges and potential impacts of climate change on care and adoption systems**

We live in an era of polycrisis (see our [ISS/IRC Special Edition Newsletter N. 269](#)) marked by overlapping structural issues such as COVID-19, violent conflicts, rising poverty and social exclusion. Environmental degradation and climate change compound these crises, exacerbating vulnerabilities, especially for children (UNGA, 2022, [A/RES/76/300](#)).

Climate hazards disrupt children's health, development, and family stability, often leading to displacement, abuse and exploitation and adversely affect the full enjoyment of their rights ([UNICEF, 2021](#); [UNICEF, 2023](#); [GC26](#), para. 8). For children without parental care or at risk of being so, these impacts are even more severe. As climate-related challenges escalate, so does the risk of family separation as well as a decrease in the quality of care available to children.

The increased frequency and intensity of environmental disasters may overwhelm child protection systems, impairing their ability to provide timely and effective responses to safeguard children's rights and well-being. These disasters not only strain resources but also erode family and community protective capacities, reducing the availability of social safety nets and other protective and preventive services. Consequently, the effective application of the subsidiarity principle is compromised or distorted, resulting in rushed and inadequate care solutions for affected children.

Strained resources, compromised operational capacity and increased demands on child protection systems in general and adoption systems in particular, may lead to less safeguards in adoption processes, weakening procedures for evaluating the suitability of adoption as a child protection measure.

For instance, weakened child protection systems may struggle with assessing and determining the adoptability of children. This could lead to two opposite trends: on the one hand, some children who could benefit from adoption may be overlooked and remain in unsuitable care arrangements. On the other hand, migration and displacement caused by environmental disasters may complicate efforts to trace and reunify families, increasing reliance on adoption as a solution without fully exploring all possible family preservation or reunification options. Similarly, this scenario could lead to inadequacies in assessing the suitability of prospective adoptive parents (PAPs). Further, in the aftermath of climate disasters, limited resources and competing priorities may diminish funding and support for adoption services. This can hinder efforts to provide comprehensive pre-adoption preparation, post-adoption support, and ongoing monitoring of adoptions.

Additionally, while current trends (see ISS annual ICA statistical analyses) show an increasing number of children with special needs entering adoption systems, climate change is likely to exacerbate this trend. The anticipated rise in children with special needs due to climate-related health impacts<sup>2</sup> will present new challenges. Can existing child protection and adoption systems adequately meet the increased demands and address the specific needs of these children? Likewise, one might wonder whether this situation might lead to a decrease in domestic adoptions in certain contexts. These questions remain critical and surely require further data collection and analyses as we evaluate how well current frameworks can adapt to these evolving challenges.

Another significant challenge arises from the coordination and collaboration among State authorities and other stakeholders in ICA, which may be hindered by the diversity of impacts and responses to climate change and the different capacities of child protection and adoption systems across regions and countries. Such diversity may lead to inconsistent policies and practices concerning firstly the tracing efforts to locate existing family members, and secondly the assessments of children's adoptability, of adoptive families' suitability, and the recognition of environmental impacts on child protection. In such a scenario, how can countries of origin and receiving States effectively collaborate and adopt coordinated homogeneous approaches? This might also call for regional approaches and climate-related adaptations of existing initiatives.

### **Strengthening care and adoption systems as a response**

The above presented challenges, along with others that may emerge in the future, underscore first and foremost the need for a critical reassessment of the subsidiarity principle. It is essential for international standards to be dynamic and responsive, capable of adapting flexibly to evolving circumstances and complex realities. So, just as poverty is

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance Lancet (2021). *Climate change and child health: a scoping review and an expanded conceptual framework*; WHO (2024).

recognised as a signal for the need for appropriate support rather than a sole justification for removing a child from parental care ([UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children](#), §15), how can we develop similar adaptive standards to address the impact of climate change on child protection? This approach would ensure that the principle of subsidiarity remains effective and relevant, even in the face of emerging global challenges.

The concrete implementation of the principle of subsidiarity involves strengthening national child protection contexts and systems ([HCCH Guide to Good Practice No. 1](#)). This means that enhancing funding and resources is not just about immediate response capabilities but also about building resilient, sustainable frameworks that can uphold children's rights and well-being in the long term.

Amid a broader global crisis where children's rights are increasingly deprioritised and families, especially women, face increasing burdens, it is crucial that child protection and adoption systems adapt to the challenges posed by climate change. To uphold robust protections and maintain ethical practices, states must develop and implement adaptive policies that enhance the resilience of these systems against environmental changes. This includes integrating climate change considerations into child protection frameworks and ensuring that adoption procedures remain ethical and effective under shifting environmental conditions.

Conducting regular and tailored reviews of ongoing collaborations and child protection frameworks is essential. These reviews should assess the climate change situation and the corresponding responses in countries of origin. Drawing on expertise and ongoing State review processes in many contexts, such as [Flanders](#), ISS advocates for the development of assessment frameworks which include climate change considerations to ensure that child protection strategies are responsive to environmental impacts. In the context of such regular review process, due consideration should be given to those most affected, children, youth and adults with lived experiences, and gather their views on necessary responses and policies.

States have the obligation to respect, protect and promote human rights, including in all actions undertaken to address environmental challenges, and to take measures to protect the human rights of all, as recognised in different international instruments ([UNGA Resolution on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment](#), the [UN Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) and [GC 26](#), just to name a few). Yet, what concrete measures are being implemented by States to raise awareness of these responsibilities? In the care and adoption landscape, this would include targeted awareness-raising efforts among child protection professionals and adoption practitioners, in general, and Central Adoption Authorities in particular, to ensure that they are well-informed about the implications of climate change on children's rights and the necessary protective measures. Targeted efforts to educate these stakeholders are essential for addressing the specific impacts of environmental crises on children in care and adoption systems, particularly for those living in disaster-prone or climate-vulnerable areas.

In extreme cases where the impacts of climate change severely undermine the capacity to ensure ethical and safe adoption practices, a moratorium on adoption may be necessary. For instance, in contexts like [Haiti](#) and Turkey, where environmental disasters have extensively damaged infrastructure and social systems, halting adoption processes can prevent decisions that do not align with the best interests of the child and fail to respect their fundamental rights. Indeed, as commonly known, such situations create a breeding ground for illicit practices due to the breakdown of transparency, proper control, and oversight. According to international guidance, priority should be given to children's safety as well as to family tracing and reunification efforts.

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