

CLIMATE-RELATED HAZARDS, URBANIZATION AND THE FATE OF AFRICA'S CHILD: CHILD SENSITIVE POLICY REFLECTION FROM UGANDA

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Dr. Tumwebaze Jonathan

*PhD, Teaching and Research Faculty/Head Research, Grants and Innovations
School of Social Sciences/ Directorate of Research Partnership and Innovation
Uganda Christian University-Mukon
jtumwebaze@ucu.ac.ug*

Abstract

Climate change and rapid urbanization are increasingly shaping the lived realities of children in Africa, with disproportionate effects on the poorest and most vulnerable. Uganda presents a particularly salient case: it combines one of the fastest urbanization rates in sub-Saharan Africa with escalating climate-related hazards, including rising temperatures, recurrent droughts, flooding, landslides, and water contamination. While the majority of Uganda's population remains rural, urban growth driven largely by internal migration and natural population increase is accelerating, with children and youth constituting a large share of new urban residents.

This paper provides a child-sensitive policy reflection on the intersection of climate-related hazards and urbanization in Uganda, with a particular focus on the Kampala Metropolitan Area. Drawing on a thematic analysis of national and sectoral policy documents published between 2015 and 2025, the study examines how climate shocks and urban pressures affect children's welfare, including health, nutrition, education, protection, and living conditions. The analysis highlights persistent gaps between Uganda's strong normative commitment to children's rights and the limited integration of child-sensitive approaches within climate and urban policy frameworks. The paper argues that without deliberate child-centred planning, climate-resilient urban development risks deepening existing inequalities and exposing urban children to compounded vulnerabilities. It concludes by proposing policy-relevant reflections to strengthen child-sensitive climate adaptation, urban governance, and social protection in Uganda.

Keywords: climate change; urbanization; children; child-sensitive policy; Uganda; urban poverty

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of accelerating climate change and rapid urbanization, Uganda's aspiration to attain middle-income status by 2040 increasingly depends on its ability to safeguard children's rights and wellbeing. Climate change and urbanization are widely recognized as two of the most significant structural challenges affecting children globally and across Africa, particularly those living in poverty and marginal settings. Rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, recurrent floods, and prolonged droughts are reshaping livelihoods and settlement patterns, while rapid urban expansion is placing unprecedented strain on housing, services, and social protection systems.

Uganda exemplifies these intersecting pressures. The country is experiencing both fast-paced urban growth and heightened climate variability, with urban areas increasingly exposed to heat stress, flooding, pollution, and disease outbreaks. Children who constitute more than

half of Uganda's population are especially vulnerable to these compounded risks. Urban children living in informal settlements face heightened exposure to environmental hazards, economic precarity, exploitation, and disruptions to education and health services.

This paper explores how climate-related hazards interact with rapid urbanization to shape children's vulnerabilities in Uganda. It situates the discussion within Uganda's child policy architecture and draws attention to the need for child-sensitive approaches in climate adaptation and urban governance. By focusing on policy reflections rather than primary empirical measurement, the paper contributes to emerging debates on child-centred urban resilience in African cities.

2. UGANDA'S CHILD POLICY CONTEXT

Uganda has established a robust normative and institutional framework for the protection and promotion of children's rights. The country ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1990 and is also a party to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. These commitments are domesticated through national legislation, including Article 34 of the 1995 Constitution and the Children (Amendment) Act of 2016, which affirm children's rights to protection, education, health, and overall wellbeing.

Institutionally, child protection mandates are embedded across government structures, particularly within the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, the Uganda Police Force's Child and Family Protection Unit, and decentralized local government systems. Civil society organizations play a complementary role in service delivery, advocacy, and community-based child protection.

Despite this strong legal foundation, translating rights into practice remains uneven, especially in the context of climate change and urbanization. With children accounting for approximately 57% of the national population, Uganda's demographic profile amplifies the urgency of child-sensitive policy responses. Urban children, in particular, face layered vulnerabilities arising from poverty, inadequate housing, environmental risks, and limited access to quality services. Addressing these challenges requires policy frameworks that explicitly integrate children's needs into climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and urban planning.

3. CLIMATE-RELATED HAZARDS AND CHILDREN'S WELFARE

Climate projections for Uganda indicate continued warming and increasing climate variability over the coming decades. Rising temperatures are expected to intensify heat stress in urban areas, while changes in rainfall patterns increase the likelihood of both droughts and floods. These hazards have direct and indirect consequences for children's health, nutrition, and education.

Evidence from Uganda and comparable contexts suggests that climate shocks undermine household livelihoods, particularly among poor families dependent on climate-sensitive income sources. In response to droughts or floods, households may adopt coping strategies such as reducing food consumption, selling productive assets, or withdrawing children from school. Such responses have long-term implications for children's human capital development, reinforcing intergenerational poverty.

Climate-related health risks also disproportionately affect children. Flooding and heavy rainfall increase exposure to waterborne diseases, while changing temperature and precipitation patterns influence malaria transmission dynamics. Malnutrition, stunting, and wasting are closely linked to both drought-induced food insecurity and disease burdens

exacerbated by climate change. In urban contexts, these risks are compounded by overcrowding, poor sanitation, and limited access to clean water.

Educational outcomes are similarly affected. Climate shocks can disrupt school attendance directly through infrastructure damage or indirectly by increasing household demand for child labour. Evidence from East Africa indicates that older children, particularly girls, are more likely to experience interrupted schooling during periods of economic stress linked to climate variability. In urban Uganda, children from poor households may engage in informal and often hazardous economic activities such as street vending or waste picking during extreme weather events, further undermining educational attainment.

4. URBAN POVERTY AND CHILD VULNERABILITY

Although urban areas are often assumed to offer better opportunities, urban poverty remains a significant challenge in Uganda. Recent national estimates indicate that urban poverty rates, while lower than rural poverty, still affect a substantial proportion of urban residents. Children are overrepresented among the urban poor, particularly in informal settlements characterized by insecure tenure, inadequate housing, and limited access to basic services.

Kampala, Uganda's largest urban centre, concentrates both economic opportunity and deep inequality. Many urban poor households reside in single-room dwellings, often shared by multiple family members and used for both residential and commercial purposes. Overcrowding, poor sanitation, and environmental pollution heighten children's exposure to communicable diseases and psychosocial stress.

Urban poverty also intersects with heightened risks of violence, exploitation, and neglect. Children living or working on the streets face exposure to abuse, hazardous labour, and criminal exploitation. Adolescent girls in urban settings are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence, early pregnancy, and HIV infection. These risks are intensified by weak enforcement of child protection regulations and limited access to adolescent-friendly services in informal urban settlements.

5. URBANIZATION, INEQUALITY, AND THE CHILD

Uganda's urban population is projected to continue growing rapidly over the coming decades, with children and youth forming the largest share of new urban residents. While urbanization can potentially expand access to services and economic opportunities, it also amplifies inequalities within cities. Aggregate urban averages often mask stark disparities between affluent neighbourhoods and informal settlements where poor children live.

Income inequality has increased more rapidly in urban than rural areas, limiting upward mobility for children from poor households. Research suggests that growing inequality reduces educational aspirations and increases dropout rates among disadvantaged children, particularly boys. In Uganda's urban context, limited access to affordable housing and secure livelihoods further constrains families' capacity to buffer children against climate and economic shocks.

Climate change intensifies these dynamics by disproportionately affecting low-income urban residents who lack adaptive capacity. Informal settlements are frequently located in flood-prone or environmentally degraded areas, exposing children to recurrent hazards. Without child-sensitive urban planning and climate adaptation, urbanization risks reproducing and deepening cycles of deprivation.

6. CONCLUSION

Climate change and urbanization constitute mutually reinforcing challenges for children's wellbeing in Uganda. While the country has made significant normative commitments to children's rights, existing policy frameworks insufficiently integrate child-sensitive perspectives into climate and urban governance. Urban children particularly those living in poverty face compounded vulnerabilities arising from environmental hazards, inadequate services, and social inequality.

Addressing these challenges requires a deliberate shift toward child-centred climate adaptation and urban development. Without such an approach, Uganda's rapid urban transformation risks undermining the rights and future prospects of its largest demographic group.

7. CHILD-SENSITIVE POLICY REFLECTIONS

To strengthen child-sensitive responses to climate change and urbanization, the following policy reflections are proposed:

- Prioritize households with young children in climate-related food security and social protection interventions, with particular attention to families where caregivers have low levels of formal education.
- Integrate child-sensitive lenses into climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and urban planning frameworks at national and municipal levels.
- Address gendered vulnerabilities by designing interventions that specifically protect girls from climate-related and urban risks, including violence and school dropout.
- Invest in education and skills development that enhance resilience and livelihood opportunities for urban adolescents and young adults.
- Strengthen child-centred research methodologies that engage children as active participants in policy-relevant knowledge generation.
- Promote equitable urban development through investments in affordable housing, sanitation, education, and health services in informal settlements.

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