

Impacts of climate change on children and youth in Spain and measures to address them

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The disproportionate impacts of climate change on children and youth

Children and youth are among the most vulnerable to climate change because of their biological development, increased energy and metabolic consumption, their social behavior, their longer life expectancy, and because they are practically absent from the climate change decision-making fora. The article aims at analyzing the impact of climate change on children and youth and to identify the measures (mitigation and adaptation) needed in Spain to address them while their rights are observed.

The impact of climate change on children in Spain

Spain is one of the European countries most vulnerable to climate change. 2016 was the fourth warmest year since it was registered. At the current rate of decreases in greenhouse gas emissions the country could experience temperature increases of 5 °C by 2050. This same year, precipitations were reduced by 20% and the average temperature increased throughout the country. Heat waves, rising temperatures, increasing droughts, rising sea levels and declining water availability are just some of the effects of climate change in Spain. Frequency and intensity of these impacts are expected to increase over the next decades.

The benefits of climate action in children and young people in Spain

Mitigation measures will benefit children's and young people's wellbeing. One of the most important is reducing consumption of fossil fuels in urban areas (most of them linked to use of private vehicles, also building's energy consumption and industries). Since sources of air pollution and climate change coincide, both problems will be reduced if measures are taken to reduce the burning of fossil fuels (oil, gas and coal).

Improving air quality and reducing pollution levels: 98.6% of the Spanish population breathes polluted air every day according to WHO levels (Ecologistas en Acción, 2016). According to the Living Conditions Survey (ECV) for the years 2013, 2014 and 2015 about 10% of households with children in Spain suffer environmental pollution inside their homes (ECODES and UNICEF Spain, 2017) with wide differences among different areas in the country. A recent study estimated that airborne particulate pollution has caused the premature death of 26,830 people in Spain over a decade. According to the study, 75% of these particles in a city is a result of human activities, mainly traffic (Instituto de Salud Carlos III, 2017).

Sustainable food for children and youth: Food production is one of the primary areas linked to the greenhouse gas emissions production in Spain. Each of phase of the food production process (from agriculture, transport and consumption and waste treatment) are sources of GHG

emissions. If food is produced extensively and by farmers near the places of consumption, many greenhouse gas emissions are avoided during transport and refrigeration.

Addressing energy poverty: Climate change has a substantial impact on the heat and cold waves that cause an increase in temperatures. However, 9% of the Spanish population (ACA, 2016) cannot maintain a comfortable temperature in their home. Not all members of the family are equally affected by this problem. Children, adolescents and the elderly are among the most vulnerable population due to physiological reasons. Living in homes at inappropriate temperatures affects school progress and children's emotional well-being, doubles the likelihood of respiratory problems, and even causes the smallest problems to gain weight, higher hospital admissions, and asthmatic symptoms. It is estimated that children living in homes that are too cold are up to twice as likely to suffer from respiratory illnesses as those living in sufficiently hot homes.

Improving health services to address impacts of climate change on children: The fact that children are among the most affected by environmental and climatic problems, places pediatrics at the center of the response. They know the impact of environmental pollution and climate change on children and know the most appropriate measures to reduce these impacts and improve the quality of life. However, in Spain health professionals have limited access to specific training on how to address environmental health problems of children and youth. This lack of training constitutes one of the main barriers to the development