

How climate change is shaping young people's livelihoods and educational opportunities

Population Council & Women Deliver

Background

The climate crisis is threatening global gains made to date on increasing access to education and creating future livelihood and/or economic opportunities for adolescents and young people (AYP). According to Malala Fund, climate change prevents over 12.5 million girls from completing their education each year, and this is projected to increase. There are several different ways that climate change threatens education, such as:

- Closing of schools and roads during extreme weather events
- Creating economic uncertainty that raises the cost of school, and also increases care burden and domestic work, particularly for girls
- Increased absence from school if young people are needed for other tasks, such as rebuilding damaged homes, salvaging crops, diversifying livelihoods and bringing in additional income, or shifting time to 'drudgery', like gathering water or firewood collected from miles away
- Decreased attention and ability to learn if climate events increase food insecurity

Younger generations are disproportionately threatened by climate change. There are [intergenerational inequities](#) in exposure to climate extremes; a child born in 2020 will face an up to sevenfold increase in extreme climate events compared to one born in 1960. These events will have cascading harms and impacts on the life trajectories of the next generation. This includes impacting their health, their economic prospects, and well-being, disproportionately for adolescent girls and young women who face additional gender-related harms. At the same time, AYP are not only victims of climate change, they can also [contribute to climate action](#). The best way to understand how AYP are experiencing, perceiving, and acting on climate change is to ask them directly.

Methods

The Population Council and Women Deliver conducted participatory, AYP co-led focus group discussions in three countries (Bangladesh, Guatemala, and Nigeria). In each country, a participant in the [Women Deliver Young Leaders](#) program teamed up with Population Council researchers to talk to AYP (ages 12–25 years with variation across the three countries) about how climate change is affecting their lives across a range of topics from health to education to ways that young people are taking action. Each country added a focus group to talk to marginalized sub-groups, for example trans AYP in Bangladesh and Indigenous AYP in Guatemala. A total of 196 AYP were interviewed across the settings. Focus groups discussed a range of topics regarding how climate change is affecting their lives and futures.

Preliminary Findings

This brief summarizes responses from the focus group discussions regarding how climate change is harming their access to school, contributing to dropout, and loss of livelihood opportunities in their communities.

Inaccessible schools

In all three countries young people reported major structural and operational challenges for formal schools. Buildings were described as dilapidated or collapsed, in some settings converted temporarily into shelters and other purposes, and difficult to reach with washed out roads (including for teachers). In Bangladesh, AYP reported during flooding they sometimes had to temporarily report to school in other buildings, creating additional transportation challenges if the new location was inconvenient. In Nigeria, youth reported the school structures were so dilapidated it caused physical safety concerns, either forcing the schools to close or impeding students' learning experience and ability. In Guatemala, the rainy season is very stressful with young people feeling 'trapped' in their community due to extreme rainfall resulting in damaged roads, lack of public transport, and conditions that severely restrict mobility and ability to reach schools.

“Several times flood has destroyed a whole community, such usually happens in the villages in this state... whenever such floods happen, schooling activities are usually shut down for sometimes over three weeks... And this you know can lead to dropout.”

–Young man, Kano (Nigeria)

Rising costs and trade-offs of education

In all three countries young people reported that climate change increased their families' economic insecurity, making school more expensive. In Bangladesh, students reported costs incurred if floods destroyed books they had to replace, or the increased cost of transportation (or time spent in transit) when schools relocated, making their parents reluctant to cover the costs. With irregular attendance and falling behind on the curriculum, coupled with high financial cost, respondents reported that young people could not catch up and their parents decided to no longer prioritize school. In all three countries, young people reported trade-offs of wanting to continue their education but also being expected to work and contribute to their household's income. In Guatemala, young people reported that climate change is reducing land productivity and making it difficult to find jobs, resulting in households that cannot afford school fees. In Nigeria, young people reported parents are seeking Islamic schools or alternative, informal education opportunities that are more affordable and ensure some kind of education despite financial hardship; however, they are perceived as less able to equip AYP with relevant skills. In all three countries young people perceive that climate change is harming livelihoods and employment options for themselves and their families.

Livelihood opportunities, competing interests and time use

In all three countries, young people reported that climate change was making it difficult to prioritize education: in Bangladesh, young people needed to fix damage to their homes, were forced to move, or to earn money to supplement their families' incomes; in Bangladesh and Guatemala, girls and young women are compelled to travel longer and longer distances to collect water, longer distances

that mean more opportunity for harassment and potential violence and less opportunity to be in school. In Nigeria, young men from rural communities are more likely to drop out of school to contribute to their family income through employment in handyman services, construction, or baking, though extreme rainfall is resulting in fewer job opportunities. In both Bangladesh and Nigeria, young people mentioned child labor was increasing as families became more desperate.

“Child labor is on the rise. When the dams get damaged, nothing can be done to prevent the loss due to water logging. Usual livelihood got affected. In this situation, parents do not allow them to go to madrasa or school, due to which they have to work in various brick factories or garages.”

—Adolescent girl, Shaymngar, Satkhira (Bangladesh)

Young people also may migrate to urban areas with hopes of better job prospects, as in all three countries young people perceive fewer and fewer jobs not just in agriculture but other sectors as well.

“Regarding career or income generating opportunities, there will be a significant decline, particularly in our Kurigram district. If natural disasters increase, nobody will invest in this area. Consequently, employment in the region will decline. Employment should be arranged by going outside.”

—Adolescent girl, Kurigram (Bangladesh)

GENDER

In all three countries, respondents discussed how disruptions impacted school for both girls and boys, but that boys would drop out to seek work while girls were given in marriage or left home to live with boyfriends. Seeking work or early marriage were linked to migration and ways to access opportunities outside of climate impacted communities. In all three countries, respondents discussed that women are working more both in agricultural (often male dominated) roles, and jobs outside of the home to diversify household incomes.

Policy Implications

Across all three countries respondents discussed how climate events, mainly floods or storms, were damaging school structures, causing disruptions, and making transportation difficult. In all three countries, rural respondents felt that agricultural losses were creating a need for diversified livelihoods, sometimes meaning they dropped out of school to seek work or migrate, but that overall high-quality jobs were less available. In Bangladesh, respondents talked about generational poverty, and how despite aspirations to finish school they would likely not be able to do better than their parents and that climate change was reinforcing this cycle. They also noted that without completing school, they would be stuck with less desirable jobs. In Nigeria, new agricultural methods including seeds, new organic fertilizers, approaches to irrigation to manage climate related harms are emerging but are expensive and often out of reach. In Guatemala, Indigenous AYP discussed their communities' loss of land rights and traditional agricultural methods as palm oil plantations took over, resulting in less access to fertile land and clean bodies of water.

“From now on we no longer have money, we no longer have a crop, it is no longer growing. Sometimes we have a little, but we sell because we don't have our own land, since we lend and harvest a little, we sell to buy other products.”

—Adolescent girl, El Esfuerzo Community, Chisec (Guatemala)



CLIMATE ACTION

In all three countries young people reported they were taking local action against climate change, planting trees, and cleaning up waste in their community. They discussed a lack of financial and structural support for youth-led organizations or actions, and disappointment with local government efforts. In Nigeria, young people mentioned the potential to harness social media, while in Guatemala they discussed embracing Mayan ancestral solutions to combat climate change, and in Bangladesh young people were starting and joining climate groups but needed funds and support to make them sustainable. Though understanding of *climate change* as a concept was mixed, all participants could see the harms to their local community and voiced a desire to take action.

Looking Ahead

Overall, addressing barriers to school access and infrastructure are needed, and adapting curricula to include new livelihood skills is needed to compete in shifting job markets. Potentially testing and developing informal education channels may create new economic opportunities for out-of-school AYP. Steps to address safe migration are important, if young people increasingly decide to migrate in search of opportunities. Social protection and other programs to connect them with resources and services upon arrival will be key to prevent harms such as trafficking or child labor. Overall, climate action and mitigation measures in high emissions countries will be required to slow the destruction of infrastructure and livelihoods that young people in these regions are experiencing—meanwhile, [loss and damage](#) efforts are required to pursue climate justice.

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