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Child labour and climate crisis: A doubly condemned childhood. At this rate of consumption, three Earth planets would be needed.



Although some of the most powerful countries overprotect their children, they are, at the same time, responsible for policies with dire consequences for thousands of children in "poor" countries. In this context of global disproportionality, child labour, which involves more than 160,000,000 children in the world, is another warning sign on all continents.

On 24 May, UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) launched the report Report Card: [Places and Spaces](#), prepared by its Innocenti Research Office in Florence, Italy. This study analyzes and compares the creation of healthy environments for children in 43 member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU).

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Double standards of the developed world

This report uses a wide range of indicators: exposure to harmful pollutants, toxic air, pesticide use, moisture and lead. It also assesses access to light, green spaces and safe roads. Along with all these parameters, Innocenti incorporates the impact of these countries on the global climate crisis, on resource consumption and e-waste disposal.

The result is worrying, as virtually none of the nations assessed manage to provide an environment that respects all benchmarks.

What's more, the impact of some of the richest countries on the global environment, such as Australia, Belgium, Canada and the United States, is severe when considering the CO2 emissions and e-waste they produce, as well as the overall consumption of resources per capita.

These four countries also occupy a not at all prominent position in creating healthy environments for children within their borders. The numbers are staggering. More than 20 million children in the countries tested have high levels of lead, one of the most dangerous environmental toxic substances, in their blood.

Finland, Iceland and Norway are at the top of the list of those who ensure a healthy environment for their children; paradoxically, they are among the most polluting, generating high rates of emissions, electronic waste and consumption.

In Iceland, Latvia, Portugal and the United Kingdom, 1 in 5 children is exposed to high levels of humidity and even mold in their homes, while in Cyprus, Hungary and Turkey 1 in 4 suffer from this problem.

Many children breathe toxic air both outside and inside their homes. Mexico, one of the three Latin American members of the OECD along with Costa Rica, Brazil and Colombia, is one of the countries with the highest number of years of healthy life lost to air pollution: 3.7 years per 1,000 children. At the other end of the pyramid, Finland and Japan record the lowest data, at 0.2 years.

In terms of pesticide contamination, in Belgium, Israel, the Netherlands, Poland, the Czech Republic and Switzerland, 1 in 12 children are exposed to pesticides. This type of pollution is linked to cancer, including childhood leukemia, and can also damage the nervous, cardiovascular, digestive, reproductive, endocrine, blood and immune systems of childhood.



In many countries, children must make enormous sacrifices to go to school. Photo UNICEF

The Earth is exhausted

The disproportionate use of resources for uncontrolled production and consumption appears as a key element of the *Report Card*. If all the inhabitants of the world consumed at the same level as the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the European Union, according to this study the equivalent of 3.3 planets Earth would be needed. And if everyone were to exploit natural resources at the rate that people in Canada, Luxembourg and the United States do, at least five planets would be needed.

On the "crisis" of children, the UNICEF report published the last week of May calls on governments to improve the environment of the child, in particular, of the most vulnerable sectors. "Children from poor families tend to be more exposed to environmental damage than those from richer families," the international organization stresses. Consequently, he proposes to act responsibly and with a vision of the future: "They will be the ones who face the current environmental problems for the longest time; but they are also the ones who can least influence (today) the course of events."



An example not to imitate

Switzerland, with just 8 million inhabitants – and only 41,000 square kilometers – fares very badly in the report due to its unsustainable consumption. Indeed, it ranks 33rd and is almost at the bottom of the ranking of the countries evaluated.

The average Swiss citizen generates 708 kilograms of waste per year and the country ranks sixth among those who produce the most garbage. Mexico oscillates at about 400 kilos per capita per year; Spain, 442 kilos, and Germany more than 600 kilos. The United

States, one of the first on the international scale, accounts for 770 kg of annual waste per capita.

Moreover, the Alpine nation has one of the highest values of CO₂ emissions, ranking seventh in the world. On average, one person in Switzerland produces 13.5 tons of CO₂ per year. The Swiss Confederation is also the third largest producer of electronic waste: each inhabitant generates 23.4 kg of e-waste annually. In its disclaimer, it should be mentioned that it made progress in the field of air pollution and since 1990 has been reducing the values of fine particulate matter PM_{2.5} by almost half, from 18.3 to 10, which has allowed it to improve urban pollution rates.

Inhuman child labour

On 20 May, just four days before the UNICEF *Report Card* was announced, the 5th Global Conference on the Elimination of Child Labour, convened by the International Labour Organization (ILO), ended in Durban, South Africa.

According to the ILO, 160,000,000 children are currently working in the world, of which about 80 million are engaged in a work activity that can be considered dangerous. In the last four years, and partly as a result of the pandemic, the number of working children increased by more than 8,000,000. The largest increase was among those aged five to eleven, who account for more than half of all child labour cases.

The agricultural sector accounts for 70 per cent of child labour (112,000,000), followed by services with 20 per cent (31,400,000) and industry with 10 per cent (16,500,000). Child labour is more prevalent among boys, regardless of age. If household chores performed for 21 hours or more per week are taken into account, the gender gap narrows. In terms of its geographical incidence, it is almost three times more frequent in rural areas (14%) than in urban centers (5%).



Child exploitation. Syrian child. Photo Save The Children

According to the findings of the Durban Conference, working children are at risk of physical and mental harm and their access to school is further threatened. Almost 28% aged five to eleven and 35% aged 12 to 14 do not attend school. This situation "restricts their rights, limits their opportunities in the future, and leads to vicious intergenerational cycles of poverty and more child labour," the ILO explains.

The South African event proposed, as an antidote to this scourge, to promote adequate social protection for all people with universal child benefits, increase resources for free and quality education and stimulate and facilitate the return of children to school, including those who were out of the school system even before the Covid-19 pandemic.

The international body also recommended promoting decent work for adults, with the aim that families no longer have to resort to the help of their children to generate the necessary income. And invest in child protection systems, agricultural sector development, rural public services, infrastructure and livelihoods.



Girls and boys between the ages of 5 and 11 are the majority when it comes to child labour. Photo HebdoLatino

Millions of working children. Many times in conditions of extreme risk because they are dangerous activities, such as mining in sinkholes or textile production in workshops that are real unhealthy hiding places. Generally, without being able to attend a school or exercise their legitimate right to play. At the same time, millions of children and adolescents around the world regardless of hemispheres suffer the dire consequences of the environmental crisis produced, to a large extent, by developed nations. An intricate model of production and waste full of child victims. A present that denies the future.



Child labour often borders slavery. IPS Photo

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