We fight here in Paris not only for the future of our planet. We fight for the future of our children — and their children.

Sadly, we are failing them. I repeat, failing. Because today’s children are disproportionately bearing the brunt of the effects of our changing climate. They are paying for our failure with their health and safety. With their futures. And too often, with their lives.

Over half a billion children live in extremely high flood-risk zones…nearly 160 million live in high or extremely high drought-risk zones…and half of the world’s children live in urban areas, where air pollution is at its worst.

Flooods…droughts…severe weather…air pollution — these environmental realities shape children’s realities.
As escalating droughts and flooding degrade food production, it is children — who eat more per unit of body weight than adults — that will suffer the most from hunger and malnourishment.

As air pollution worsens, it is children — who breathe at twice the rate as adults — that are most at risk of respiratory disease.

As the bulk of the global burden of diseases like malaria, dengue fever, diarrhoea, meningitis and pneumonia falls on their shoulders, it is children whose cognitive and physical development is most at risk.

As this year’s El Niño warms surface waters, it is children — an estimated 11 million in eastern and southern Africa alone — who are most at risk of hunger, disease and lack of water because of flooding, droughts, crop failures and even forest fires.
As extreme weather expands the number of humanitarian crises, it is children who will be most at risk — fleeing for their lives, making dangerous, uncertain voyages to faraway refugee camps, risking violence, exploitation and abuse along the way.

And as children are disproportionately affected, it is the most disadvantaged children who will fare the worst of all.

These children are trapped in a vicious cycle.

They live in areas already grappling with poverty and poor access to essential services like water, sanitation and health care. Areas that are, often, also flood and drought zones.

They live in areas already lacking basic infrastructure, making development, let alone post-disaster recovery, extraordinarily difficult.
They live in regions that are more reliant on traditional agriculture — which is especially vulnerable to climate change.

And increasingly, they will be African — by mid-century, one in three children globally will live in Africa, a region highly exposed to climate change.

With the effects of climate change worsening each year, we must ask ourselves: How can these children, their families and their communities manage the cumulative shocks of disaster after disaster? How can they rebuild homes, schools, hospitals or agricultural economies following an earthquake or a flood? What will their communities look like in the future if disasters continually erase progress and development?
Especially when the world faces a future marked by more droughts, more disasters, more competition — even more conflicts — for dwindling resources. And thus more inequalities and more communities unable to support the health and education of their citizens. Which will mean more families desperate to escape and build better lives for their children — more refugees, more migration, more vulnerable children put at risk of exploitation and abuse.

As a global community, we can no longer fail these communities — these families, these children.

We can no longer allow our collective inaction on climate change to perpetuate a vicious cycle that condemns the most disadvantaged children to lives with little hope, at the mercy of disasters beyond their control.

The time for action is now. The path the world chooses here in Paris will indelibly mark humanity’s future.
We must cut greenhouse gas emissions so that the average rise in temperature is limited to a maximum two degrees Celsius — or better, 1.5 degrees.

And more, we must take steps to reduce inequities among children today — specifically by investing in the resilience of the most vulnerable, disadvantaged communities. In infrastructure that can withstand climate-related disasters. In community health-care facilities, schools, and water and sanitation systems that not only strengthen communities before disasters strike — but can maintain basic support services during and after a crisis.

And by investing in programmes that anticipate and address the effects of climate change — from preparing health workers to monitor and address malaria caused by changes in rainfall and increasing temperatures…to helping communities protect water sources in the event of floods…to maintaining education for children in disaster-resilient schools.
All to give tomorrow’s citizens the best possible start in life, armed with the health and skills they need to make their communities — and their countries — better in the future.

The world is watching for real progress here in Paris.

**History** will judge us.

And most importantly, our children will — and should — judge us for our stewardship of the planet they will inherit.

What will their judgment be? That is up to us.

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