

Schools on the front line

Investing in Climate Anticipation Ahead of El Niño





An Irrefutable Demand

Donors and recipient countries alike must recognise the public school as the first line of education, protection, nutrition and health in the face of El Niño. They should therefore allocate a specific, predictable and multi-year funding line to climate anticipation in schools, rather than confining themselves to a response once disaster has already struck. This is not solely a matter of human rights and children's rights: it is also a measure with substantial economic returns and savings for countries.

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El Niño 2026–2027:

An Already Predictable Risk of a Magnitude Comparable to the Worst Precedents on Record

With a 97% probability that El Niño will persist until spring 2027, models indicate that the event is intensifying faster than the 1997–98 episode and **could reach a magnitude equal to or greater than that of the three “Super El Niño”** recorded since 1950 (1982–83, 1997–98 and 2015–16), with potentially devastating human, social and economic consequences¹. These effects could amplify the overall impact still further, given that the peak of the Oceanic Niño Index (ONI), which measures sea surface temperature variations in the Pacific Ocean, could even exceed 3°C, [a figure never before recorded](#).

El Niño Is Already in the Classroom

El Niño is driving a pattern that is repeating with growing intensity: droughts and floods striking Bolivia, Central America and Bangladesh alike, with children and schools at the centre of the impact. Globally, 242 million students in 85 countries had their education disrupted by extreme weather events in 2024, according to UNICEF — a figure set to rise for as long as prevention remains underfunded relative to the risk.

The Educational Precedent: Peru, 1997–2017

Peru, with three documented episodes (1982–83, 1997–98 and the 2017 “Niño Costero” [Coastal El Niño]), offers the most complete record of the specific educational cost of El Niño. In the 1997–98 episode, an estimated one hundred thousand schoolchildren were affected by the disaster. In 2017, nearly 2,000 educational facilities were left unusable.

Nearly five years after 2017, of the 1,508 works planned for the education sector, only 484 had been completed — barely 32%. **Reconstruction, in addition to being more costly than prevention, is also systematically slower.**

¹ The 1997–98 event caused approximately 22,000 deaths, together with global economic losses of US\$2.1–5.7 billion and a poverty increase of more than 10 percentage points in the case of Ecuador.



The School:

First Line of Education, Protection, Nutrition and Health

Evidence gathered by Educo across three regions (South America, Southeast Asia and the Sahel) confirms that when El Niño strikes, the school ceases to fulfil a single function. It becomes, simultaneously, the first institution to protect and the first to be damaged:

- **Education:** droughts, wildfires and heatwaves close schools, damage infrastructure and increase school dropout, particularly among children in situations of greater vulnerability.
- **Protection:** the loss of harvests and income pushes families towards child labour, an increased care burden on girls, and a higher risk of early unions, as reported by country teams themselves.
- **Nutrition:** the suspension of classes halts school meal programmes, cutting off, for a large share of pupils, their only regular source of nutritious food.
- **Health:** smoke from wildfires, unsafe drinking water and extreme heat trigger respiratory and gastrointestinal illness among pupils and teaching staff alike. The 1997-98 precedent shows that such episodes can lead to simultaneous outbreaks of cholera, dengue or malaria across several regions.

Where the school is resilient and safe, education can continue, protection systems are maintained, food provision continues, and access to basic hygiene is guaranteed.

Good practice

With funding from the European Union, Educo Bolivia is already implementing two of the measures this brief calls for scaling up: water storage and harvesting systems in schools to guarantee water security in the face of drought, and the upgrading of sanitation systems, alongside school contingency plans specific to fires, landslides and floods. This is proof that the model called for replication in other regions is already working, is EU-funded, and is delivering results on the ground.

Why Disaster Risk Reduction Delivers Savings, and How It Should Be Implemented

The Economic Case

The United Nations estimates a return of six dollars for every dollar invested in climate-resilient infrastructure, including schools. Despite this, only around 2% of international aid is currently directed towards disaster risk reduction, according to the [UNDRR Global Assessment Report \(GAR 2025\)](#).



How It Should Be Implemented

- Vulnerability assessments and school contingency plans drawn up before the climate episode occurs, not as a response after the damage has been done.
- Triggers and early-warning mechanisms specific to the education sector, integrated into the anticipatory action mechanisms already funded by the European Commission itself through DG ECHO.
- Multi-year, flexible funding, not conditional on a specific emergency, for school water security, resilient infrastructure and educational continuity protocols.
- Adoption of the Comprehensive School Safety framework as a common reference standard for donor investment in the region.



Lessons from Educo

Bangladesh: school awareness sessions on anticipated risks and disaster risk reduction activities led directly by the educational institution itself.

Benin: identifying pupils at risk of dropping out of school in collaboration with Monitoring Committees, through awareness-raising and protection programmes carried out with communities.

Bolivia: developing school contingency plans specific to fires, landslides and floods; integrating climate education and adaptation into school education projects; and conducting school vulnerability assessments.

El Salvador: anticipatory humanitarian assistance (multipurpose cash cards and hygiene kits) activated ahead of peak impact, school protection plans, and guidance for teachers on maintaining educational continuity during crises.

Philippines: developing accessible materials, such as audiovisual content and posters, to help children, families, schools and communities understand risks and adopt appropriate preparedness measures as early as possible.

Nicaragua: raising awareness among schools and communities of the impact of climate change and the importance of water conservation; and water harvesting and storage activities to improve schools' water capacity.



The Specific Ask

Schools are the first line of protection for girls, boys and adolescents. Investing in climate-resilient schools means investing in education, protection, health and disaster risk reduction.

- **Explicitly recognise the public school as the first line of protection, nutrition and health,** and not solely of education, within anticipatory action and disaster risk reduction frameworks.
- **Create or expand anticipatory action funding lines specific to the education sector,** with their own triggers and early-warning mechanisms, within the preparedness and anticipatory action pillar already funded by the EU.
- **Guarantee multi-year, flexible funding for resilient infrastructure and educational continuity,** rather than allocations tied exclusively to a specific emergency.
- **Adopt the Comprehensive School Safety framework** as a common standard, incorporating permanent risk-management budget lines into ordinary sectoral funding, and conditioning part of the funding on its formal endorsement
- **Explicitly integrate education into national climate adaptation plans and facilitate access to climate funds, such as the Green Climate Fund,** through co-financing with existing education grants, rather than relying solely on ad hoc humanitarian budgets.
- **Fund the generation of evidence and cost data on the climate impact on education,** currently one of the sector's most widely recognised gaps.
- **Open formal spaces for the participation of children and young people** from climate-vulnerable contexts in national and international climate negotiations, where they are currently almost entirely absent.



**We are Educo, an NGO that works in more than 18 countries
for the wellbeing and rights of children, specially the right
to receive a quality education.**

We stand with children all over the world, especially those who
live in situations of vulnerability, poverty, or lack of opportunities.
Whatever happens, nothing can stop us: in any crisis, armed conflict
or emergency, education cannot stop. Because education is urgent:
it heals, empowers, and protects.



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