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# Why sexual and reproductive health matters when tackling climate change

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**W**e are more than halfway through a crucial year for Britain on the global stage, culminating with Glasgow's COP26 in November. Despite the aid cuts, Britain can still show leadership and help the world's most marginalised.

By using existing climate funding, the UK can remove barriers to family planning services, helping women and girls become more resilient to the climate crisis and adapt to its effects.

We know we need urgent climate action now. What's less well known is that we already have many of the cost-effective solutions that can protect those most at risk from environmental catastrophe.

But we are not implementing those solutions and women and girls – often the most affected by climate change – are being side-lined. We cannot build climate resilience when they are denied their rights.

The UK had been a leader in sexual and reproductive health and rights for years, until the recent aid cuts to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the largest provider of contraception to some of the world's lowest income countries.

That's why I am working with a coalition of 66 local and global charities drawing connections between human and environmental health and calling on the UK government to make the connections too.

And while the government's commitments on girls' education globally are laudable, a lack of joined up thinking means that four million girls may drop out of school due to barriers to family planning.

Barriers to women and girls accessing sexual and reproductive health services also impacts their ability to respond to the impacts of climate change. For instance, of the 26 million people estimated to have been displaced by the climate crisis, the UN Development Programme estimates that 80 per cent are women.

These women and girls are at higher risk of abuse and exploitation, with one in five facing sexual violence. Yet often during a crisis, while the need for reproductive choice grows, access falls.

Organisations like MSI Reproductive Choices and the Margaret Pyke Trust, and the communities they work with and serve, are on the frontline of the climate crisis. They are seeing first-hand the impacts of environmental breakdown on women's ability to access sexual and reproductive health services.

Building resilient communities able to respond to the climate crisis, conflict and resource depletion needs the contribution and participation of women. That's why ensuring that women are able to decide for themselves whether and when they have children by supporting access to family planning, is critical.

The UK can still lead on the global stage and add to its recent G7 commitments by making the connections between climate resilience and investing in women and girls' reproductive health. We must therefore focus on innovative, cost-effective ways to integrate development and climate programming.

At a time when the Treasury is loathe to increase expenditure, we have been careful to ensure our request would not cost UK taxpayers a penny more to implement.

We call merely for a change to the eligibility criteria and focus of existing "climate" funding pots. By recognising the connections between reproductive health and climate, the UK can regain leadership lost over the past year.

And it's not just the coalition of 66 organisations making this point. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and UN Environment Programme have recognised the value of family planning too.

But, despite this growing consensus, we are failing to join the dots and, more importantly, failing to empower women and girls to build their communities' resilience to climate change. While 2021 remains a crucial year in restoring Britain's leadership on the global stage, we are failing to show such leadership.

One way to do so, is to invest in women and girls' reproductive health to build resilience to climate change. COP26 in Glasgow can be the moment for the UK to show leadership on this once more.

**Andrew Mitchell is MP for Sutton Coldfield and former international development secretary**