

## **Expert Response to Climate Change, An Unwelcome Legacy: The Need to Support Children's Rights to Participate in Global Conversations**

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"Climate Change, an Unwelcome Legacy" highlights the lack of child representation in climate change-related policies and decision-making since the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was established in 1989. The CRC treats as core principles children's right to participate and to be heard. It is one of the most rapidly and widely ratified international human rights treaties in history. The CRC depicts children as agents with independent minds and ideas; they are subjects, not objects, of rights.

Child participation is an important step towards climate justice, safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable age group, and emphasizing the need for intergenerational and international equity. As children are at a defenseless stage of human development, they are at a higher risk of being negatively impacted by climate change. Important negative impacts resulting from climate change include malnutrition, health hazards, health, violence, migration and exploitation. These impacts are interconnected and CRC Article 6 acknowledges how climate change threatens children's rights to life and survival.

The paper highlights effective efforts to improve child engagement and participation that are centered on the four conditions of Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence as suggested by the Lundy Model to fully implement Article 12 of the CRC. Successful models of child participation described in the paper include national-level children's parliaments and youth councils, such as the National Congress of Children and Young People in Bolivia, as well as local-level decision-making processes, such as children's ability to officially vote in a school-relocation referendum in the Philippines. Child participation can clearly impact climate change-related policies from the local to the global scale. Further, children are able to engage families,

schools, and societies and connect them with regional, national and global authorities to help minimize the effects of climate change.

Nonetheless, child participation in ratifying countries is still limited. The paper emphasized that there was little to no mention of or participation by young people in three major climate-change related global events, namely the 1992 Rio Summit; the 2008 UN Joint Framework Initiative on Children, Youth, and Climate Change; or the 2013 Conference of Parties that ratified the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Consequently, the paper argues that the authorities responding to global climate crises are violating children's rights by not acknowledging their right to express their opinion (CRC Article 13), not hearing them, and not including them in decision making (CRC Article 12).

Collins (2016) points out that the important question to be answered is: how is children's participation understood? Shedding light onto the ways that young people's participation is interpreted and incorporated into decision making will help explain—among other things—why the UN Joint Framework Initiative on Children, Youth, and Climate Change and other efforts have consistently failed to influence the Conference of Parties.

To make significant progress toward honoring children's rights and meaningfully involving them in climate-change policy, it is essential to more fully understand the variations in children's participatory opportunities, as well as the causes of those disparities. First, it is important to understand the variation in participation between countries. For example, in some countries, long-standing practices and attitudes (e.g., it is adults' responsibility to make decisions on children's behalf), as well as political and economic realities, create major barriers to child participation in government decision making. Moreover, in some countries more than others, a lack of funding and staffing, lack of recognition, and adult-dominated forums are cited as common concerns. Further, structuring an analysis of participation disparities in terms of developed versus developing countries, regional differences, countries with varying population trends, and the like, could add nuance to our understanding of variations in child participation. It would also help us understand the extent to which such barriers are applicable to all CRC-ratifying countries.

Additionally, researchers should collect data about the age, gender, relative disadvantage, and location of children who participate in decisions regarding the impact of climate change and disaster (CIEL & GI-ESCR, 2017). This is relevant because the CRC acknowledges that certain groups of children, including younger boys and girls, as well as children belonging to marginalized and disadvantaged groups, face particular barriers in the realization of their rights.

Another valuable research contribution would be to provide clarity on the role of agencies, from the global to local scale. Gaining perspective on their successes, failures, or lack of effort in specific contexts would provide valuable lessons. The efforts by non-governmental organizations to include children in decision making should also be taken into consideration. In addition, gaining context-based understanding of how climate change-related decisions are actually made would

help reveal opportunities to include children, as well as challenges that contribute to their current lack of participation, at the local level.

Successful approaches to children's meaningful participation, such as those included in the paper, can provide clues as to how children, families, schools, and societies can be represented in global events connecting participation and protection. Using such examples as a reference, connections as well as gaps between local, regional, national, and global efforts and agencies could be identified, built upon, or filled, and opportunities for meaningful child participation developed. However, expecting other countries to change because of these success stories could be considered idealistic. Lessons learned must be shared in ways that take local institutional, political, and bureaucratic landscapes into consideration.

Children's participation advocates should also investigate the connection between specific regional climate change issues and young people's relationship to them. Recognizing regional variations in climate change threats, as well as the ways children perceive those impacts and what sparks their interests in the issues, can lead to the development of creative approaches to teach them about relevant causes and solutions, and expand their meaningful participation in decision-making.

Further, sharing success stories from participating countries on new ways they are improving participation could be useful. For example, access to the internet and smart phones have increased dramatically in several nations, and social media and technology provide many opportunities to improve child participation. These rapidly growing networking and learning tools may help overcome local institutional or bureaucratic barriers by making it simpler, faster, and less expensive to hear children's voices, register their opinions, and use their suggestions to inform decision making.

According to UNICEF (2017), children and youth have increasingly been participating in their communities, cities and countries, particularly through advances in mobile technology and social media, while it exposes them to new risks. They are also actively taking a role in developmental efforts that affect them, from local projects such as peer education and child-friendly cities, to international children's congresses, parliaments, special sessions of the United Nations General Assembly, and dialogues with world leaders at G8 Summits. While these are encouraging signs, moving from tokenistic representation to meaningful participation remains a challenge.

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