

# **Children's Leadership on Climate Change: What Can We Learn from Child-Led Initiatives in the U.S. and the Pacific Islands?**

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## **Abstract**

*This position paper explores two initiatives, in the U.S. and the Pacific Islands, in which children have held leadership roles on climate change, and explores 1) the motivation behind each initiative, and 2) the contributions the initiatives have made to mitigation and adaptation. We argue that children, as representatives of the "generation most affected," have a unique role in advocating for mitigation policy. At the same time, children's status within families and communities can help facilitate inclusive adaptation. The initiatives provide evidence that children's leadership can be an effective way to engage in policy advocacy and community transformation.*

**Keywords:** climate change, children, leadership, mitigation, adaptation

## Introduction

When signing the *Paris Agreement* in the United Nations, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry carried his young granddaughter to the podium, a reminder of the importance of the treaty to future generations. The symbolism was obvious, as the *Daily Mail* wryly noted in their headline, "OK, Mr. Kerry, We Get It—It's for the Children" (Konstantinides, 2016). The inter-generational dynamics of climate change are well known, and Kerry's granddaughter was among many children who have stood before world leaders as a reminder of adults' moral obligation to preserve the Earth's atmosphere.

Beyond symbolic acts, young people have played far more dynamic roles in serving as a voice for their generation. A few weeks before the signing at the UN, a federal judge confirmed the rights of 21 young people, aged 8 to 19, to sue the U.S. government "for violating their constitutional rights to life, liberty and property, and their right to essential public trust resources" by enabling the continued use of fossil fuels. Far from serving as silent tokens, the young people are playing an instrumental role in what has been called the "most important lawsuit on the planet right now" (Our Children's Trust, 2016). The lawsuit is a potent reminder that children, with the right support from adults, can substantively contribute to confronting climate change and fostering social transformation.

In this position paper, we make the case for children's leadership, focusing on two key dynamics. The first is the reason or rationale for engaging children in leadership role on climate change, asking what motivates social movements or non-governmental organizations to empower children. The second dynamic is pragmatic; we ask whether child-led initiatives can make a measurable contribution to mitigation and adaptation. In answering these questions, we aim to provide evidence that children's participation can be an effective way to engage in policy advocacy and community transformation.

To make our case we draw on the experience of two child-led initiatives. From the U.S., *iMatter Kids Vs. Global Warming* is highlighted as an exceptional initiative, both for the degree to which it has been driven and led by children, and for the ambition of the movement's goals. *iMatter* began as a simple presentation by a 12-year-old boy, Alec Looorz, who wanted to take on climate change denial and engage other young people in demanding action to reduce greenhouse gases. His actions quickly grew from school presentations and community projects to a national campaign, global youth marches and groundbreaking judicial and legal action.

In six Pacific Island Countries,<sup>1</sup> the Child-Centred Climate Change Adaptation (4CA) Program supported communities to adapt to the risks of climate change by actively involving children and youth in building disaster resilience. Part of a wider initiative by Plan International, an international child rights organization, 4CA aimed to address the urgent threat posed by climate change to children's survival and well-being. It is highlighted as one of the few significant initiatives by an international non-

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<sup>1</sup>Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Tuvalu

governmental organization to put young people at the center of climate change adaptation and disaster risk management.

## **The Rationale for Empowering Children as Leaders on Climate Change**

### **The Moral Authority of the Generation Most Affected**

A primary reason for involving children as leaders on climate change is because they will disproportionately bear the brunt of changing weather and environments. This is grounded in the temporal dimension of climate change, with the most significant impacts occurring in the future (Pahl, Sheppard, & Boomsma, 2014). A child born in 2000 will be 50 years old at mid-century, a point in time often used in future climate scenarios. They can expect to experience rapid change projected with global warming. Their children and grandchildren, at the end of the century, will likely live with weather, coastlines and environments vastly different from today.

Linked to temporality is the element of "time-lag" between the cause and effect. Carbon emitted today will contribute to climate change for centuries to come (Pahl, Sheppard, & Boomsma, 2014). This represents an inter-generational transfer of costs, in which current generations enjoy the economic and standard-of-living benefits of carbon usage, while future generations disproportionately bear the costs (Moellendorf, 2009). From a moral and ethical standpoint, a strong argument can be made that it is indefensible that people living in the future, whether children today or still to be born, should be denied the same right to health, safety and a stable environment enjoyed by people currently (Schuppert, 2011)

The temporal and ethical dimensions of climate change are central to iMatter. The movement's founder, Alec Loorz, has described a feeling of betrayal at the inaction of current leaders and a corresponding conviction that is up to the generation that will be most affected to demand accountability (Loorz, 2016). iMatter's initial activities focused on raising awareness among young people and tackling climate change denial using scientific evidence—an important first step in making an ethical case for action. When risks are vague, uncertain, or not supported by evidence, then the urgency of change will necessarily be limited (Gardiner, 2004).

However, Loorz and the other members of iMatter found that an approach based on awareness-raising and science did not generate the necessary political will to end the climate crisis. This realization led to a partnership with Our Children's Trust to pursue inter-generational justice through the courts. Alec Loorz and other members of iMatter joined legal proceedings at federal and state levels in the U.S. (Cocco-Klein, 2015b). Initially, the cases focused on the public trust responsibility of the federal government to protect the atmosphere for future generations. Subsequent cases have expanded to include freedom from the dangers and harm that greenhouse gas pollution will cause (Our Children's Trust, 2016).

A precedent for inter-generational justice can be found in the Philippines. In 1992, 43 children, acting as representatives of succeeding generations, petitioned the

Federal Constitutional Court of the Philippines for the government's failure to prevent the destruction of the country's rainforests. The government subsequently passed a law to declare the remaining forests to be a national protected area (Stone & Lofts, 2009; Gibbons, 2014). Nevertheless, similar legal approaches to inter-generational climate justice face significant hurdles, not the least because the effects are still in the future. The young defendants must also demonstrate "standing"; in other words, that they have personally been injured and a causal link can be drawn back to the government's inaction (Jamieson, 2015; Nguyen, 2017).

An alternative approach is engaging directly with elected governments on policy, shifting from inter-generational justice to inter-generational accountability. Recently, iMatter has re-focused their campaign on mobilizing young people to advocate with city councils to enact carbon reduction plans (Cocco-Klein, 2015b). As the young people do not directly vote for city council members, they rely on their "moral authority" to shift decision-making away from a focus on the present to one in which the interests of future generations are also given consideration (Beckman, 2008; Flora & Rosier-Renouf, 2014). The primary reason cited by iMatter for this shift is that it enables more children to be involved in climate activism than the court cases, and as such, adheres to the original vision of a child-led movement to end the climate crisis.

### **The Pragmatic Reasons for Children's Activism**

The temporal case for children's activism is grounded in morality, but also overlaps with more pragmatic arguments. iMatter argues that because young people have the most at risk, they will bring more passion and urgency to finding solutions (Loorz, 2016). But is this necessarily the case?

Survey results from the U.S. indicate that teenagers are no more likely than adults to view climate change as an urgent problem, and do not view themselves as being at greater risk (Flora & Rosier-Renouf, 2014). Likewise, the young people polled globally on development priorities for the MYWorld 2015 survey ranked "action on climate change" dead last, giving much greater weight to education, health and jobs (United Nations, 2013). Since young people are no more likely to be climate activists than adults, what a younger generation possibly can bring is the energy that comes from working on their first campaigns and discovering for themselves the power of collective action. iMatter's founders believe that young people "don't take no for an answer" and expect faster change than more seasoned activists (Cocco-Klein, 2015b).

Beyond motivation, there is the effect that children potentially have on adults. For iMatter,

*the value of child- and youth-led communication is based on the principal that love of and concern for children is something everyone shares. When children and young people discuss climate change it brings an emotional appeal to 'do the right thing.' Children can urge behavior change in the lives of grown-ups who care for them in a way that other adults cannot (Cocco-Klein, 2015b).*

This rationale also emerges with the 4CA in the Pacific Islands. The 4CA project coordinator noted that children are able to “innocently challenge the mindsets of the adults in their communities” (Cocco-Klein, 2015a).

These pragmatic reasons for engaging children in advocacy align with the recognition that decisions about climate change are rarely driven by rational choice alone. Instead, human cognition and motivation have a strong role to play (Weber, 2015). Behaviorally, humans are primed to prioritize current risks over more distant threats, (Pahl, Sheppard, & Boomsma, 2014) and likewise, political decision-making is more focused on present concerns than future problems (Beckman, 2008). Children can play an important role in motivating action by adults, by making the issue more immediate and personally relevant, the strategy used by iMatter in their new city-based approach (Cocco-Klein, 2015b). Risks to one's own children are more likely to elicit action than appeals for generalized and hazy “future generations” (Weber, 2015).

### **Children's Right to Participate**

Children's vulnerability to climate change is not limited to future generations. With climate change already underway (IPCC, 2013), children are experiencing its effects now, directly through increased mortality and morbidity, and through a host of knock-on effects, from malnutrition to displacement (Bartlett, 2008; UNICEF, 2015). Children living in poverty face the greatest levels of risk, and climate change is increasingly recognized as a direct threat to the fulfillment of their rights to survival, development and protection (Guillemot & Burgess, 2014; Gibbons, 2014).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes universal standards for the treatment and protection of children, and also commits countries to uphold children's right to participation. The serious risks posed by climate change, coupled with a commitment to children's rights, motivate “child-centered” approaches to adaptation (Cabot Venton, 2014). The 4CA program exemplifies this child-centered approach. Plan International, working with the Foundation for Peoples of the South Pacific International (FSPI) funded education and community-based projects in communities at risk of extreme weather events and rising sea levels. Primary school students and out-of-school adolescents received training on climate change and local impacts, and then worked with their communities to develop locally appropriate solutions (Cocco-Klein, 2015a).

The 4CA project moved children away from being passive victims in the face of natural disasters and a changing environment to being active participants in building resilience. However, the right to participate on its own may not be enough to secure children's rights in a changing climate. None of the 4CA community projects addressed the needs of children aged 0 to 5, who face the most severe threats to survival and well-being. An inter-sectional approach, which looks at the differing needs and resources of children alongside mothers of young children and other marginalized groups, may be more effective for community-based adaptation (Bartlett, 2011; Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014).

In addition to community-based approaches to children's participation, international organizations have promoted children's right to participate in international climate meetings and negotiations. The first major forum for children was in 2009 at COP 15.<sup>2</sup> The Children's Climate Forum, organized by UNICEF, brought young people from developed countries and at-risk countries to meet and work together for the first time (UNICEF, 2009). Among them was Alex Looz from iMatter, who while in Copenhagen, hatched the idea to organize a march by kids on Washington, D.C. The single march on the capitol became 200 marches in 42 countries (Cocco-Klein, 2015b).

Since COP 15, children have participated in almost all UNFCCC negotiations, sometimes joining national delegations as youth representatives (Gibbons, 2014), at other times participating in side events and briefings with decision-makers (Joint Framework Initiative, 2014). This approach has helped to lift young people's voice on the world stage and empowered an international cohort of young activists. Children's engagement also supports trans-localism: linking young people's actions and building solidarity across countries (Di Chiro, 1997).

However, the number of children who are able to participate in international negotiations and national leadership programs remains limited, and their influence on policies and plans is unclear. With the breakthrough Paris Agreement, agreed at COP 21, state parties were formally asked to consider children's rights and inter-generational equity when taking action (UNFCCC, 2015).<sup>3</sup> Regrettably, it is in the non-binding portion of the agreement and stops short of holding states accountable for the protection of these rights (CRIN, 2015). Nor does the historic agreement provide any specific mention of children's potential to contribute to national mitigation and adaptation, indicating there is still some distance to go before the value of children's participation on climate change is recognized at a global level.

In summary, the two case studies present a range of reasons for empowering children as leaders on climate change. Some of these reasons are normative and legal. Others are guided by the belief that as the "generation most affected," children should have a stake in policy discussions. What is striking is that both of the initiatives also cited pragmatic rationales, from children's intrinsic energy and interest to their influence on adults. This dual approach, both normative and practical, likely reflects the unspoken concern that children's participation is seen as "nice but not necessary." In other words, children's contributions are valued, but ultimately adults are seen as more effective agents of change. The following section goes to the heart of this concern, critically examining the extent to which children have achieved change.

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<sup>2</sup> The Conference of Parties (COP) is comprised of all state parties that have ratified the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

<sup>3</sup> Acknowledging that climate change is a common concern of humankind, Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity.

## **What Contributions Have Child-Led Initiatives Made to Mitigation and Adaptation?**

### **The Mitigation Learning Curve: From Riding Bikes to Policy Advocacy**

iMatter has focused largely on the challenge of mitigating climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The movement's initial actions were geared towards raising awareness about the climate crisis and encouraging lifestyle changes by children and adults. Alec Loorz and the other children in iMatter advocated for voluntary measures such as using less electricity at home and riding bikes instead of using cars (Cocco-Klein, 2016). However, as monitoring was not incorporated into the activities of iMatter, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which the young people were able to foster behavior change and substantively reduce carbon emissions.

Even if measurement had been incorporated, it is widely recognized that voluntary actions are not sufficient to address climate change. As a "global commons problem," government regulation is required to ensure that everyone, and not just the highly committed, reduces emissions (Edenhofer et al., 2014; Giddens, 2011). For the young activists in iMatter, it became apparent that they needed to shift their advocacy away from individuals and towards elected officials. In short, they needed to become politically active (Cocco-Klein, 2015b). However, policy advocacy and political lobbying is a role not often associated with children. As they cannot legally vote or hold office, children generally are treated as "political actors in waiting" who can be educated about issues but not engaged as activists in their own right (Skelton, 2010). Reflecting this preconception, Alec Loorz's initial request to be trained by Vice-President Gore's Climate Reality Project was turned down.

Eventually, as his activism gained prominence, Alec received training and resources, and iMatter's advocacy shifted from local awareness and behavior change to marches and meetings with elected officials urging legislative action on climate change. However, the slow pace of political change was a source of frustration to the young activists. A meeting with Our Children's Trust in 2011 led to a dramatic shift in strategy. Alec Loorz and the other young activists, working with pro-bono lawyers, brought landmark lawsuits in all 50 states. In June 2015, the young plaintiffs had their first victory when a judge in Washington State ordered the Department of Ecology to consider the most current science on climate change when regulating carbon dioxide emissions (Our Children's Trust, 2015). The legal cases are evidence that even without formal political rights, children can play a critical role in policy advocacy, potentially achieving outcomes that adult activists working on their own have struggled to achieve.

A new campaign, iMatterNow, was launched in 2015, which shifts the focus of advocacy away from federal and state levels to the municipal level. This shift is motivated by the belief that children are more effective advocates at the local level, and their impact is greatest when appealing to adults responsible for their well-being (Cocco-Klein, 2015b). This shifting, referred to as "venue shopping," is a recognized tactic of political actors looking to find an arena where their interests will have the greatest traction (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991; Stone, 2012). In each city,

young people design and lead their campaigns. At the national level, adults and youth provide mentoring to the city teams (Cocco-Klein, 2015b).

In many ways, the new campaign mirrors the evolution of mainstream climate advocacy groups, such as 350.org and the Citizens Climate Lobby, which are being increasingly called upon by donors to “move the needle on climate change” (Cocco-Klein, 2015b)—that is, to demonstrate measurable results. This requires a degree of formalization and standardization that has not traditionally been the norm for NGOs and social movements (Giddens, 2011). Each step of iMatterNow is organized around specific actions that children can take, culminating in the use of Climate Report Cards. Developed with input from ICLEI and national experts, the report cards enable children to review and rate their municipalities' efforts to reduce carbon emissions. Once completed, the report cards are presented at press events to mayors and councils, who, in turn, are asked to pass Climate Inheritance Resolutions. As of the end of 2016, the iMatter campaign was working with youth teams in 17 states and two Canadian provinces (Cocco-Klein, 2015b). By early 2018, city councils in Illinois, Indiana and Minnesota had committed to drastically reducing their carbon emissions (iMatter, 2018).

It is still too early to tell the impact that iMatterNow will have on local mitigation policy at scale, but by all indications they are meeting many of the criteria for successful political advocacy on the issue. The movement has a distinctly non-partisan approach that aims to bypass the political polarization that has stymied progress on climate change in the U.S. (Giddens, 2011). At the same time, the young activists are not just advancing their interests, but actively working to redefine the ideas and definitions around costs and benefits of mitigation, using not just arguments based on numbers and efficiency, but also through appeals to emotions and moral intuitions, a cornerstone of policy advocacy (Stone, 2012).

### **Adaptation: The Value of an Inclusive Approach**

With human-induced climate change already underway in regions around the world, there is an increasing focus on preparing for and responding to its impacts. In contrast with mitigation, which requires coordinated policies, adaptation is often more local in nature. It involves building the capacity of communities to deal with the current and future impacts of climate change (Rumbach & Kudva, 2011; Field, Barros, Dokken, Mach, & Mastrandrea, 2014). The 4CA program in the Pacific Islands provides a way for children to contribute to these processes, while reducing their own vulnerability. This approach is rare. A review of adaptation actions around the world found that only 3 percent specifically mentioned vulnerable groups such as children, women and the elderly (Berrang-Ford, Ford, & Paterson, 2011).

What does a child-led adaptation action entail? Given the complex interplay of normal climate variability, long-term climate change and varying hazards across geographical sites, any adaptation actions need to start with a clear understanding of these dynamics (Field et al., 2014). A key element of 4CA was to provide significant education and training for young people. 4CA translated relatively new and complex climate science concepts into accessible materials for use in classrooms and in community-based settings (Cocco-Klein, 2015a).

Notably, these materials were also used by adult community members, who appreciated the simplification of often abstract climate science, and the tying of this science with specific, local impacts. For the Pacific Island communities, baseline knowledge was often low to begin with. For example, in the Solomon Islands, 90 percent of the community members at the outset of the project were not aware of climate change's link to disasters, even as they lived with the impacts (Cocco-Klein, 2015).

By facilitating access to scientific evidence and creating local knowledge, the child-centered initiatives contributed to empowering disadvantaged communities, an approach shared with the environmental justice movements (Di Chiro, 1997). A focus on education and local knowledge also contributes to "adaptive capacity," the ability to learn from and adapt to environmental shocks and hazards (Smit, Burton, Klein, & Wandel, 2000). To do this requires learning, but also "reflexivity," the ability to reflect on previous experiences, question assumptions and explore a wide range of potential solutions (Matyas & Pelling, 2014).

Adaptive capacity also requires inclusion in learning and decision-making by a diverse range of stakeholders (Turner, et al., 2003; O'Brien, Hayward, & Berkes, 2009). In facilitating a leadership position for children, 4CA also opened the door to the wider participation of other vulnerable community members including the elderly and the disabled. In Fiji and Tonga, partnerships with organizations for the disabled led to their active involvement in drills and other practical activities to prepare for disasters (Cocco-Klein, 2015a). This indicates a depth of inclusivity and not often seen in mainstream adaptation and resilience initiatives (Adger, 2006).

The education provided by 4CA laid the foundation for local adaptation actions by children. Projects ranged from improved water collection and storage at schools on islands experiencing drought, to mangrove restoration and sea walls in communities dealing with rising sea levels and more intense cyclones. The small-scale projects are characteristic of "incremental adaptation"—investments that enable people and institutions to withstand the effects of a changing climate (Field et al., 2014). In line with most adaptation initiatives, these projects address not just the long-term effects of climate change, but also more immediate environmental concerns (Smit & Wandel, 2006).

There is a risk, however, that small projects may only make a dent in reducing the overall vulnerability experienced by children. To have a true impact, adaptation and resilience initiatives need to go beyond the school or household level and address the wider socio-environmental context in which children live (Smit & Wandel, 2006). 4CA nested the child-led projects within community development plans, which in turn were linked with the goals and targets of the National Adaptation Plans of Action (Cocco-Klein, 2015a). By connecting with community and national strategies, the child-led projects contributed to broader societal adaptation.

In summary, including children in broader community-based adaptation has benefits for both children and adults. At a pragmatic level, education and

information on climate change developed for children and adolescents will be more accessible to adults with low levels of education. This contributes to local knowledge and adaptive capacity. From a more transformative perspective, when community participation is opened up to girls and boys, other vulnerable groups such as the disabled and elderly can also find it easier to participate. This type of broad-based and inclusive approach is needed if there is to be equitable adaptation to climate change (Adger, 2006). Through connections with national adaptation plans or by linking with environmental networks, even small-scale child-led projects can make real contributions to a sustainable future.

## **Conclusion**

With the impacts of climate change already underway, and global progress potentially stalling with the decision by the U.S. to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement, it is critically important that we rethink how we communicate about and address this global threat. As Giddens notes in *The Politics of Climate Change*, "We do not as yet have a developed analysis of the political innovations that have yet to be made if our aspirations to limit global warming are to be made real" (Giddens, 2011, p. 4). Bringing in the fresh perspective and energy of young people is an innovation that has proven to bear results, as the experience of iMatter and 4CA illustrate. Children's participation and leadership is an effective strategy that can contribute to limiting global warming and spur adaptation.

A review of the reasons for engaging children as leaders on climate change shows that children have a unique voice in mitigation and adaptation efforts. As representatives of the "generation most-affected" and of "future generations," child advocates can exert moral pressure on political leaders and defend their interests in court. Along similar lines, human rights-based approaches emphasize children's right to contribute to the decisions that will affect their lives. At the community level, enabling children's participation also helps to open the door to other groups who are disproportionately at-risk in a changing climate, including the disabled and elderly. Children's participation fosters adaptive capacity through education and local knowledge on climate science that is widely accessible.

In addition to their unique voice, children have a unique status within families and society. This status can help to overcome the steep psychological and sociological barriers to changing beliefs and behaviors linked with climate change. Likewise, children can reframe policy arguments, away from the focus on nature and environment that characterized the early green movements, towards a focus on the human costs (Giddens, 2011). This is particularly the case at local level, where children can make appeals to the adults directly responsible for their well-being. Public policy debates at their heart are about defining costs and benefits; how big are the costs or benefits, and who wins and who loses? (Stone, 2012) By including children in these debates, it becomes more difficult to discount the future costs of inaction.

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