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Climate Justice and the Rights of the Child: Including Children in Environmental Decision-Making

Akshoy Kumar Das Chakravorty¹

Abstract

Climate change is the world's most pressing problem, with potential impacts on human rights, public health, and socio-economic well-being. Children are particularly affected, as they are physically vulnerable, have developing bodies and minds, and rely on environmental and social systems for support. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, insecurity of food and water, pollution, and displacement put children's rights to life, health, education, and protection at risk, as described in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). And yet, children are too often left out of climate policy and environmental governance despite being among the worst-affected. This article explores the convergence of climate justice and child rights, focusing on the need to consider children not just as a susceptible population but also as potential change agents. Focusing on international legal instruments and on youth-led climate campaigns on the international stage and climate-related child advocacy, the article demonstrates the increasing prominence of children as actors in environmental governance. The article outlines major obstacles to substantive participation and suggests approaches for the institutionalisation of child participation through rights-based governance, educational reforms, community development, and policy innovations. To ensure that climate action is fair, sustainable, and forward-looking, it is critical to have a voice for the children in these climate decisions.

Keywords: Climate Justice, Child Rights, Youth Participation, Environmental Governance, Climate Policy, Sustainable Development.

¹ Near Darbar Field, Jyoti Nagar, Bailung Pathar, Mornoikinar, P.O. Sivasagar, Dist Sivasagar, Assam, 785640, akshoykumar92@gmail.com

Introduction

Climate change has negative impacts on the environment, society, and the economy, affecting the world as a whole, including the health, education, and development of children, but they lack power in governance and health care, yet they need to be heard and their rights defended to participate in the solution of the problems they face. Children are not the problem, but rather the solution.²

a) Background: The Interlinkage Between Climate Change and Child Rights

Although climate change undoubtedly affects children, it is not framed as a children's rights issue.³ Extreme weather, heat, food, and water shortages, displacement, and disease all contribute to making children more vulnerable and have long-term effects on their health. The right to health care, education, protection, and to be heard in matters that concern them is recognised in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁴ Nevertheless, the rights of the majority of children, particularly those who are vulnerable and poor, are flouted. Examining climate change and climate justice through children's rights offers a critical lens to interrogate such intergenerational injustice that climate change perpetuates, whereby those who have contributed least to the problem are and will continue to be most affected. In this way, it further humanises the climate change and climate justice debate by drawing on the framework of children's rights.

b) Rationale and Significance of the Study

Children are the most impacted by climate change, yet they hardly ever get to sit at the table in climate policy discussions.⁵ Children are considered to be denied agency in traditional governance structures, and their needs and best interests for the future are neglected in policymaking. Nevertheless, youth-led campaigns such as the School Strike for Climate have proven that children can comprehend multifaceted matters and call for responsibility.⁶ Treating children as co-producers of environmental governance, as this study does, has the

² Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

³ United Nations Children's Fund, *The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis* (UNICEF, 2021).

⁴ Convention on the Rights of the Child, Arts. 12, 24, 28.

⁵ United Nations Environment Programme, *Global Environment Outlook 6* (2019).

⁶ School Strike for Climate, Available at: <https://fridaysforfuture.org>

potential to enhance democratic processes and lead to better policy and more sustainable, intergenerational, just outcomes.

c) Research Objectives

- i) To study the impacts of climate change on children's health, education, emotional well-being, and social stability in a context of inequality.
- ii) To explore connections between climate justice and child rights, in particular child rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).
- iii) To research children and youth as agents in climate action, environmental governance, and public decision-making.
- iv) To determine which institutional, social, and structural barriers constrain potentially impactful child engagement in climate policy-making.
- v) To offer recommendations and address challenges on how to incorporate children's voices and their rights in climate action frameworks at the local, national, and global levels.

d) Methodology and Scope

This research follows a qualitative approach, using secondary sources of information like scholarly articles, reports by the UN and UNICEF, international conventions, and case studies of youth climate activism. It analyses global trends with illustrative examples of both developed and developing countries. It does not include technical climate-mitigation options but examines policies, rights-based frameworks, and participatory mechanisms. The research takes a child-rights and climate justice approach, focusing on the ethical, social, and governance aspects.

Conceptual Framework

a) Understanding Climate Justice: Principles and Dimensions

"Climate justice" is the sharing of both the burdens and benefits of climate change. In this concept, children, Indigenous peoples, and the poor have the least responsibility and suffer the

most.⁷ The focus is no longer on purely technological solutions but on ethics and politics: human rights and justice. The main concepts of climate justice are intergenerational justice, support of the developed world for threatened communities, and the participation of those affected in decision-making.⁸ Climate change is a justice issue that requires duties to both past and future generations.

b) The Child Rights Perspective under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) is the most comprehensive and legally binding human rights instrument and is regarded as the flexible framework for understanding children's rights.⁹ It contains rights to survival, protection, development and participation, among others. As disasters and climate change threaten children's health, their food security, safe water, and in some cases, even their lives, climate change is eroding many of those rights.¹⁰ Children have the right to be heard and to participate in decisions affecting their lives (Art. 12). But children's voices are still missing when it comes to climate change governance, and they are not recognised as stakeholders. The child rights lens has the potential to strengthen the case for children's involvement in climate-related decision-making and policy.

c) Intersecting Frameworks: Environmental Justice and Child Participation

Environmental justice exposes how poor communities are overburdened by environmental pollution and underserved by environmental infrastructure.¹¹ It underlines that children, as a group particularly at risk from climate impacts, need to be engaged as active participants in decision-making and not simply as "objects" of protection. The convergence of environmental justice and child participation demands policies that go beyond harm

⁷ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

⁸ Simon Caney, "Climate Change and the Duties of the Advantaged", 13 *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 203 (2010).

⁹ Convention on the Rights of the Child.

¹⁰ United Nations Children's Fund, *The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis* (UNICEF, 2021).

¹¹ Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (3rd edn., Routledge, 2000).

reduction toward the enhancement of children's agency to participate, which contributes to developing inclusive, gender equitable climate governance and intergenerational justice.

d) Theoretical Basis for Children's Agency in Environmental Governance

Recognition of children as agents is based on rights to participation, capabilities and constructivist perspectives that conceptualise children as knowledgeable and competent individuals in areas such as environmental knowledge (Sobel, 1996).¹² This agency is epitomised in global youth climate activism, where children play a leading role in advocacy.¹³ To listen to children - an imperative both ethically and in terms of environmental governance as a construct of the child as agent/actor rather than as a dependent is integral to climate justice and a vibrant democracy.

Climate Change and Its Impact On Children

Climate change affects children more severely. They face higher threats to their health, education and welfare than adults.¹⁴

a) Health and Nutrition Vulnerabilities

Risks to Children Climate change has broad consequences for children's health, from increasing insect-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue, to children's vulnerability to heatwaves (which affect their ability to maintain body temperature), among others.¹⁵ Droughts and crop failures associated with climate also bring about hunger and malnutrition, and a contaminated water supply after floods exacerbates diarrheal diseases.¹⁶ Therefore, the right to health and life of children is under threat because of climate change.

b) Education and Displacement Challenges

¹² Roger A. Hart, *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship* (UNICEF, 1992); J. Sobel, "Children's Special Capacities for Environmental Learning", 28 *Environment and Behavior* 223 (1996).

¹³ School Strike for Climate, Available at: <https://fridaysforfuture.org>

¹⁴ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

¹⁵ World Health Organization, *Climate Change and Health* (WHO, 2021).

¹⁶ United Nations Children's Fund, *Unless We Act Now: The Impact of Climate Change on Children* (UNICEF, 2015).

Climate disasters have been known to interrupt education systems through the destruction of school buildings, community displacement, or necessitating families to focus on surviving rather than educating.¹⁷ Children living in areas prone to floods, droughts, or along coastlines often have their schooling interrupted and end up with learning deficits lasting for years. Sea-level rise, storms, and erosion of land may displace people and, at times, even push them across borders, which sacrifices continuity of education and breaks social support systems. At the extreme, children are pressed into child labour or early marriage as coping mechanisms for economic uncertainty, thereby putting at risk their right to education and development.

c) Psychological and Emotional Impacts

Climate change is physically biting into not only children but also their mental well-being and emotions. Stress, trauma, depression, and a newly recognised condition called eco-anxiety—fear and helplessness over environmental collapse—can be triggered by exposure to disasters, loss of homes, family strain, and uncertainty about the future.¹⁸ Children witnessing the desolation of their home surroundings may have similar experiences of disorientation and loss of self. Prolonged emotional distress for a child can negatively affect the child's ability to learn, play with friends, and believe in himself. So kids are at risk for their mental and emotional health because they are the ones who are feeling the effects of climate change.

d) Disproportionate Effects on Marginalised and Indigenous Children

Climate effects are not concentrated in a specific area. Marginalised children, including those living in rural areas or tribal and indigenous children, are more at risk as they have less access to resources, healthcare, and social protection systems.¹⁹ When indigenous communities—who normally tie their cultural identity to the land and environment—have their ecosystems disrupted by climate change, they suffer cultural loss. A lot of marginalised kids are concentrated in climate-susceptible areas, and they have less capacity to adapt there,

¹⁷ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Education Under Threat from Climate Change* (2019).

¹⁸ American Psychological Association, *Mental Health and Our Changing Climate* (2017).

¹⁹ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2020* (UNDP, 2020).

so bouncing back is slow and hard. Consequently, climate change exacerbates existing inequality and poverty cycles.

e) Intergenerational Equity and Future Generations

The effects of climate change on children are real but not expressed through a children's rights lens. Children live under the shadow of severe weather events, heat, hunger and thirst, displacement and disease. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is a binding agreement that recognises that every child has the right to healthcare, education, protection, and to have a say in decisions that impact them.²⁰ But these rights are being violated more and more, especially for poor and vulnerable children. A framing children's rights analysis on climate change illustrates that the worst off in terms of climate change impacts are also the least responsible for climate change, and is this socially relevant and inclusive?

International And National Legal Frameworks

Several international and regional instruments recognise the rights of children in all aspects:

a) The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and General Comment No. 26 on the Environment

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) includes the rights to life, health, education, development and participation of children, as well as protection from environmental damage.²¹ In 2023, the right to the environment has been further enhanced by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in General Comment no. 26.²² It encourages states to prevent environmental harm, to regulate pollution, and to consider children in environmental issues. This is a huge shift, holding that states have legal obligations to protect children from climate harm, and that failures are breaches of children's rights.

b) The Paris Agreement and the Role of Youth and Children

²⁰ Convention on the Rights of the Child.

²¹ Convention on the Rights of the Child.

²² UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No. 26 on Children's Rights and the Environment* (2023).

The Paris Agreement (2015) aims to contain global warming and enhance climate resilience based on intergenerational equity and public participation.²³ While children are not specifically mentioned, education, public awareness, and participation are identified as focal elements of Article 12, which allows for children to be viewed as significant stakeholders in the environment surrounding the convention. Youth climate movements and global platforms such as the UN Youth Climate Summit and UNICEF's Children's Climate Risk Index have further elevated this recognition; however, formal avenues for children's participation in climate negotiations are still scarce.

c) Latest ICJ References, UN Instruments, and the Child Rights Perspective

Recent advances in international law treat climate change as a matter of human rights and intergenerational justice, at least as linked to the right of the child.

i) The Obligation of States Concerning Climate Change (Advisory Opinion, 2025)

The ICJ, at the request of the UNGA, gave (Jul 2025) an opinion that states have a duty not to inflict climate damage, to protect human rights and the current and future generations of the inhabitants of the world. Reaffirms the obligations of states and the principles of intergenerational justice, and the right of the child.²⁴

ii) ICJ Public Hearings on Climate Change (2024)

Public hearings in December 2024, while advancing the proceedings of the advisory, stressed a duty of states to take action and cooperate internationally to avoid climatic harm, linking the duty with the protection of human rights and environmental justice in the 2025 advisory opinion.³) Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons (1996).

iii) The Gabcikovo-Nagymaros Project (Hungary v Slovakia) (1997)

This important decision confirms that sustainable development is a legal obligation that States are required to comply with by pursuing development which is compatible with

²³ Paris Agreement, Art. 12.

²⁴ Obligations of States Concerning Climate Change.

environmental protection.²⁵ “It reinforces a long-standing principle that contemplates long-term exposure to vulnerable populations, including children, within climate governance.”

iv) Pulp Mills on the river Uruguay (Argentina v. Uruguay, 2010)

The ICJ has highlighted the challenge to the environment across national borders and reinforced states’ duty not to engage in acts that may imperil human rights.²⁶ Although not a climate case as such, it sets out legal principles concerning state responsibility and protection of vulnerable groups.

They are hinged on the following critical UN instruments that define the vulnerability and rights of the child in the context of climate change:

- i) The Right to a Healthy Environment is described in UNCRC GC No. 26 (2023)
- ii) Children at highest risk are described in the UNICEF Climate Risk Index (2023):
- iii) Child-centred climate impacts are described in IPCC AR6 (2023)
- iv) Paris Agreement (Art. 12, 2015): Youth participation in education and awareness
- v) Children-focused climate initiatives are described in SDGs (3, 4, 6, 13)

The rulings and precedents of the ICJ and UN are extremely persuasive herein and serve as a guiding basis within the issuing UN instruments for advancing those rights of the child in relation to climate change governance.

d) SDGs and child-specific climate action

Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (2016–2030) aligns climate action with social justice, and a number of the targets pertain directly to children, including SDG 3 on health, SDG 4 on education, SDG 6 on clean water, and SDG 13 on climate action.²⁷ SDG 13 highlights the importance of education and youth in climate actions. Being child-sensitive in pursuing the SDGs entails advancing agendas like the integration of the climate agenda in

²⁵ Gabcikovo-Nagymaros Project (Hungary v Slovakia).

²⁶ Pulp Mills on the River Uruguay (Argentina v Uruguay).

²⁷ United Nations, *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2015).

education, health, and disaster risk instruments. Most national plans typically did not include explicit references to children's participation in decision-making nor to children's rights to be heard.

e) Regional Instruments and National Child Rights Policies

Regional human rights systems play an important role in child-relevant climate governance because:

- i) The African Charter related to the Rights and Welfare of the Child acknowledges the socio-environmental aspects of child well-being.
- ii) The European Court of Human Rights is starting to be seized with climate cases from youth and children.
- iii) The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has established the link between environmental protection and human rights, in general.²⁸

Dustbin India has focused on judgments related to environmental protection and child rights. Here is a selection of major cases:

- i) **Ridhima Pandey v. Union of India**:- “Minor contends that failure to act on environmental concerns is a violation of constitutional rights as well as international law”.
- ii) **M.C. Mehta v. Union of India**:- “Right to environment and article 21”.
- iii) **Subhash Kumar v State of Bihar**:- “Right to a healthy environment”.
- iv) **Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India**, “Polluter Pays & Precautionary Principles Tie Children to Environmental Protection”.
- v) **T.N. GodavarmanThirumulpad v. Union of India**, “Forests Committees (“for the people” and children) to protect forests and ecosystems”.²⁹

Various legislative measures such as the Provisions of the **Environment Protection Act, 1986; Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981; Water (Prevention and Control of**

²⁸ Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Advisory Opinion OC-23/17 on Environment and Human Rights (2017); European Court of Human Rights jurisprudence on climate litigation.

²⁹ *M.C. Mehta v. Union of India*, AIR 1987 SC 1086; *Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar*, AIR 1991 SC 420; *Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India*, (1996) 5 SCC 647.

Pollution) Act, 1974, The National Green Tribunal Act, 2010 providing for prompt justice and the **National Policy for Children, 2013** are invoked for protection of children from harm and associating child development with environmental health.

In certain parliaments, children's rights are emerging in climate change, education and environmental laws. However, these gaps need to be filled with resources, political will, and the participation of children.³⁰

Children as Agents of Change

To empower Children is to acknowledge their abilities, to facilitate their participation in climate governance, and to remove impediments to their participation.

a) Evolving Capacities and Environmental Citizenship

The UNCRC acknowledges that the evolving capacities of children depend on their age, maturity, life experience, and context, and affirms that children can act as agents of change in addressing climate change.³¹ Environmental citizenship is cultivated through education, environmental issue consciousness, and community involvement. The community of educators and parents needs to work together to create this awareness. Promoting critical thinking and involvement in local environmental decisions among children gives them the confidence to speak out for climate justice on the larger stage.

b) World Youth Climate Movements and Litigation (e.g., Greta Thunberg, Fridays for Future)

The children and young people are in a disaster. For example, in recent times, take steps to save Earth from climate change. The Greta Thunberg-led movement, known as '**Fridays for Future**', began in 2018 and has since swept across the globe, with millions of children striking and demanding immediate measures.³² Children are also litigating:

³⁰ Environment (Protection) Act; Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981; Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974; National Green Tribunal Act, 2010; National Policy for Children, 2013.

³¹ Convention on the Rights of the Child.

³² United Nations Environment Programme, *Global Environment Outlook 6* (2019).

- i) **In Juliana v. United States**, actions of the U.S. government infringe on the children's rights to life and liberty.³³
- ii) Youth petitions submitted to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child argue that a state's inaction on change breaches the CRC.³⁴

Children's climate litigation has also started to gain ground in India. There are many Cases have evolved the notion that safeguarding the environment is safeguarding children's rights:

- **Ridhima Pandey v. Union of India**
- **M.C. Mehta v. Union of India, Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar,**
- **Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India**
- **T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India**

All have evolved the notion that safeguarding the environment is safeguarding children's rights.³⁵

c) Case Studies: Child-Led Environmental Initiatives

Worldwide, kids and teens have led community environmental initiatives that have real ecological and social results:

- i) **India:** In parts of Rajasthan, "Bal Panchayats" (children's councils) have campaigned for water conservation and sustainable community resource management.
- ii) **Philippines:** School-based "Eco-Clubs" spearhead tree planting and coastal cleanup, impacting municipal environmental planning.
- iii) **Kenya:** The Children's Government provides a framework for students to have a say in matters of school sanitation, water use, and waste management.
- iv) **Brazil and Colombia:** Groups of indigenous youth defend forests and cultural ecosystems from illegal logging and mining.

³³ Juliana v. United States.

³⁴ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, Communications under the Optional Protocol (2021).

³⁵ *M.C. Mehta v. Union of India*, AIR 1987 SC 1086; *Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar*, AIR 1991 SC 420; *Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India*, (1996) 5 SCC 647.

These are just some examples showing that with institutional backing, children can have a direct impact on environmental outcomes on the local as well as the regional scale.³⁶

d) Barriers to Meaningful Participation

- i) Non-existence of Institutional Framework:** The majority of national/regional as well as international platforms of climate policy do not possess instruments to integrate children in the process of decision-making or outcomes. Thus, children are very much absent from climate politics and climate governance.
- ii) Adultism and Societal Perceptions:** Many adults are convinced children are “too young,” “inexperienced,” and “uninformed” to contribute. And that means children’s perspectives either are ignored or become tokenistic rather than genuinely influential.
- iii) Incomplete Information and Limited Platforms:** Children may be deprived of scientific knowledge, climate data, discussions of policy, and tools of communication. Technical jargon, no access to the Internet, or restrictions on curriculum in schools sometimes limit participation.
- iv) Social and Economic Disparities:** Children from marginalised communities (Indigenous, rural, or impoverished) will find going even more uphill with fewer resources, less access to education, and systemic discrimination. These groups are the most vulnerable to climate change, but they have the least say in making policy.
- v) Psychological and Emotional Strain:** Climate disasters, uncertainty for the future, and bad environmental reports are linked to a feeling of worry and emotional strain. Children may also struggle to pace themselves in climate activism if they lack emotional support from people around them.³⁷

Policy Gaps And Institutional Challenges

There are many challenges to the significance of children’s involvement in climate action.

a) Inadequate Child Representation in Environmental Policy-Making

³⁶ United Nations Children's Fund, *Engaging Children in Climate Action* (2020).

³⁷ American Psychological Association, *Mental Health and Our Changing Climate* (2017).

From the perspective of state systems of environmental governance, children have not been institutionalised as a stakeholder. The machinery of climate negotiations, its advisory bodies, and policy planning institutions rarely count children or youth among those on the rostrum.³⁸ At best, when channels for dialogue are opened, the involvement of groups can be reduced to tokenism or symbolism or be used to sensitise without really participating in decision-making. This lack of representation leads to climate policies that fail to consider the unique needs, rights, and perspectives of children, though they are the greatest victims of environmental change.

b) Fragmented Governance and Lack of Cross-Sectoral Coordination

The impacts of climate change are cross-sectoral: health, education, environment, disaster risk reduction, social protection, and others are involved. But “**climate governance is normally split up into sectors.**”³⁹ This absence of cross-sector coordination leads to gaps in planning and disjointed delivery of child-specific climate interventions. For instance, a health-oriented climate change policy may contain elements addressing disease prevention but none dealing with impacts on the education or child protection systems. Without integrated strategies, children are assisted in a piecemeal and reactive fashion as opposed to through coordinated, anticipatory ones.

c) Economic and Political Barriers to Child Participation

Governments tend to focus on short-term economic growth, industrialisation, or political stability rather than investing in inclusive climate schemes. Consequently, there is a scarcity of resources to support activities of child participation, education for the environment, or youth-led climate programs.⁴⁰ Politicians may also be reluctant to acknowledge young people as stakeholders, as doing so might question existing hierarchies of power or policy priorities. Furthermore, in poor and climate-sensitive nations, economic limitations could hinder the ability to develop and execute child-centred climate policies even if there is a political will.

³⁸ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, *Youth Participation in Climate Governance Reports* (2023).

³⁹ United Nations Environment Programme, *Emissions Gap Report* (2022).

⁴⁰ World Bank, *World Development Report: Learning to Realize Education's Promise* (2018).

d) Limitations of Education Systems in Promoting Climate Awareness

The impact of education systems on raising environmental consciousness and active citizenship is unquestionable. But too many school curricula don't include climate education, sustainability skills, or pathways for active learning. In many areas, environmental education is still either theoretical and disconnected from local environmental issues or pushed aside by instruction that's focused on exams.⁴¹ Furthermore, schools might lack the trained teachers, educational materials, or extracurricular programs necessary to make students climate literate. Without a robust education, children are unable to understand environmental issues or find the voice they need to speak up about the climate.

Towards Inclusive Environmental Decision-Making

Policies need to be built on rights, underpinned by robust institutions, climate education, and engagement with civil society to facilitate the real participation of children.

a) Rights-Based Approach to Climate Governance

A rights-based approach means that climate policies explicitly acknowledge and protect the basic rights of children as laid out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁴² This is a shift in emphasis from considering children simply as the objects of protection to treating them as holders of rights who have the legal and moral authority to take part in decisions that impact their lives. It also asks governments to assess climate measures with child impact assessments, respect equity and justice, and maintain standards of justice and accountability. This attitude will augment both the moral and the legal pillars of climate governance.

b) Institutionalising Child Participation Mechanisms

To counter the tendency for tokenistic engagement, child participation needs to be institutionalised within systems of decision-making. This may range from the formation of youth advisory boards and child representation on climate committees to mandatory

⁴¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Education for Sustainable Development: A Roadmap* (2020).

⁴² Convention on the Rights of the Child.

consultation mechanisms at the local, national, and international levels. Safe, accessible, and age-appropriate platforms such as children's parliaments, school councils, or digital climate forums enable children to have their say and take part in environmental planning.⁴³ The institutionalisation process also includes the establishment of clear regulations guiding the inclusion of children's contributions in policy results and anchoring their participation as meaningful rather than symbolic.

c) Integrating Environmental Education and Empowerment

The education system needs to be strengthened to cultivate children's environmental awareness, critical thinking, and civic responsibility. Education on climate change has to be integrated cross-curricularly, through experiential learning methodologies – including local context studies and community-based environmental work.⁴⁴ But agency is also about getting leadership training, debate and dialogue in our classrooms, and mentoring opportunities through youth clubs, eco-groups, and subject-based co-curricular activities. These sorts of teaching practices equip youth with knowledge and a sense of efficacy to act on climate justice.

d) Functions of Civil Society, NGOs and International Organisations

Activities related to environmental justice by children have been made possible by NGOs and international bodies. The NGOs educate and advocate for children, and transport them to local and international meetings on climate change. Examples of international organisations are **UNICEF**, **UNEP** and the **UN Committee on the Rights of the Child**. They guide, fund and support capacity building to enable children's participation. The collaboration of states, society and international organisations can create permeable structures for children to participate directly in environmental activism.

e) Policy Innovations: Child Climate Councils and Participatory Frameworks

⁴³ United Nations, *Guidelines on Child Participation in Decision-Making* (2021).

⁴⁴ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Education for Sustainable Development: A Roadmap* (2020).

Emerging mechanisms of participatory governance consider children as co-decision-makers, like the Child Climate Council, which offers recommendations on local and national climate policies. Through structured discussions, public hearings and youth congresses, the child's participation in the school community, at the local and national level, is encouraged. This is evidence that proves the strength of institutionalised child participation.⁴⁵ The taking-up of such innovations at a global scale can guide policy making that upholds the very principles of intergenerational equity, including the voices of youths in environmental policy making.

Case Studies And Best Practices

a) Scandinavia: Involving Children in Local Climate Policy through Participation

In **Sweden, Norway, and Denmark**, children participate in climate planning at the local level via local and municipal climate councils and school programs centred on sustainability.⁴⁶ Children can contribute to urban planning, transport, and carbon reduction through hands-on learning, children's rights activism, and participatory local government. This example demonstrates how robust welfare systems and democratic participation facilitate meaningful child engagement.

b) India: Grassroots Youth Movements and Judicial Interventions

In India, youth activism on the climate crisis is growing in forms like public interest litigations, eco-clubs, tribal forest protection groups, and clean-up campaigns. Cases like **Ridhima Pandey v. Union of India** bring attention to children denouncing insufficient climate action.⁴⁷ Yet they are children who remain constrained by weak institutions and centralised decision-making in environmental governance.

c) Pacific Islands: Children's Voices in Climate Adaptation Strategies

Children are now more involved in adaptation planning in Pacific Island communities, as they are highly vulnerable to climate change. Schools and youth councils involve children in

⁴⁵ United Nations Environment Programme, *Youth Engagement in Environmental Governance Report* (2022).

⁴⁶ Nordic Council of Ministers, *Youth Participation in Climate Governance in Scandinavia* (2021).

⁴⁷ *Ridhima Pandey v. Union of India*, National Green Tribunal (India), 2017.

disaster preparedness, sustainable housing design, and relocation planning.⁴⁸ Sharing cultural knowledge and community participation creates stronger resilience and provides emotional support.

d) Africa: Education and Advocacy for Environmental Rights

Africa's child-led climate campaigns focus on education about the environment, tree planting, and youth lobbying for clean energy. Programs are often implemented through NGOs as a result of weak government capacity.⁴⁹ Education and community mobilisation, however, help to educate young leaders who, against the odds, are environmentally conscious and resilient.

Recommendations

a) Governments and Policy Makers

Governments should formalise child participation through the establishment of Nuclear Climate Councils and youth advisory positions. Climate strategies need to be rights-based in accordance with the UNCRC and should focus on vulnerable areas by providing climate-resilient infrastructure. There should be transparency in reporting on how children's views influence decisions and strong linkages between environment, education, health, welfare, and disaster management.

b) Schools and Universities

Schools have to mainstream climate literacy and sustainability across the curriculum and facilitate experiential learning through structures like e-clubs, waste management, or biodiversity projects. Climate justice and environmental care need to be taught in teacher education. Student civic engagement will be enhanced through partnerships with local organisations.

c) Civil Society and Youth Networks

⁴⁸ United Nations Children's Fund, *Children and Climate Change in the Pacific* (2020).

⁴⁹ United Nations Environment Programme, *Africa's Youth and Environmental Sustainability Report* (2022).

Advocacy and policy engagement in youth leadership training should be supported by civil society, and children should have safe spaces in which to express their concerns about climate. Action should also involve the excluded and support community-based climate action with a focus on intergenerational engagement.

d) International Organizations

International organisations need to establish global standards for child-inclusive climate governance and offer developing countries financial and technical assistance. Robust monitoring systems, youth exchanges, and research undergirding these efforts are critical to enhance accountability and the sharing of global knowledge.

e) Future of research

Future studies need to explore the long-term effects of climate change on children and evaluate the child participation models. This should involve consideration of intersecting identities along with ethical, child-centred research methods, including those related to gender, disability, and socio-economic status. Evaluating child-led projects may add to our insight into the extent to which youth agency may contribute to community resilience.

Conclusion

Children are very vulnerable to climate change, but they are not being heard in decisions that will determine their future. Children's health, education and chances of survival are at risk from climate change – but children are leading the fight. Children need to be seen as active agents in the climate change fight, in terms of their engagement and education, and in advocating for future generations. Children's voices and perspectives are crucial to achieving a just, sustainable and resilient future.

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