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CLIMATE CHANGE, CHILDREN AND POVERTY: ENGAGING CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN POLICY DEBATE AND ACTION

by Beatrice Mauger, Alberto Minujin and Samantha Cocco-Klein

"We have the moral authority to make a change because we are going to be affected the most and we will be living with the burden of the effects of climate change,"
16 year-old Amanda Cronin, iMatter Youth Council member¹

"Although adults help facilitate action, youth can be the fuel in the engine that make it happen,"
18 year-old Alex Loznak, Our Children's Trust²

Children's vulnerability to climate change can be understood as an intersection of three axes. The first is exposure; the extent to which children live in a physical location that is vulnerable to drought, floods, extreme weather events and sea level rise. Recent estimates by UNICEF indicate that 160 million children live in drought-prone areas, and half a billion more live in zones at risk to high floods and severe storms.³ The second axis is socio-economic, with vulnerability to hazards due to a lack of resources, poverty and marginalization. Families without adequate incomes and assets, protective infrastructure and housing, access to basic services, and inadequate nutrition and clean water, face the greatest risk in a changing climate. The third axis is time, today's children and future generations will bear the brunt of environmental impacts, creating an inter-generational injustice without precedent. All children fall somewhere along these three axes, but it is the children who live in greatest poverty and in the most exposed places that face the greatest risks. More than just passive victims, these young people, often with the support of their caregivers and communities, also represent agents of change and have consistently demonstrated the capacity to devise local solutions, participate in global conversations and contribute to a safe and sustainable future.



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This brief argues that:

- Children and young people, particularly those living in poverty, are among the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change
- Nevertheless, children and youth have shown that they can take an active role in raising awareness and creating innovative solutions
- They must be empowered and supported to project their voice and to be part of the conversation in mitigation and adaptation planning and action
- Including the voice and needs of children at all levels of decision-making will help create a more sustainable, equitable and resilient society

I. Introduction: Issue and conceptual approach

Among the poor, children are particularly at risk to the effects of climate change. As Sheridan Bartlett highlights, "Young children have more rapid metabolisms, immature organs, underdeveloped immune systems, and limited experience and understanding; all of which leave them less well equipped on many fronts to deal with deprivation and stress. Their exposure to hazards in this period of rapid development is also likely to have long-term repercussions. They are more vulnerable to injury, for instance, and more often with enduring effects. Droughts, flooding, and post-disaster conditions all intensify the risk of water and sanitation-related illnesses, which can take more lives than the initial disaster, and young children are by far the most heavily affected."⁴ Child deaths represent 85 percent of the

global mortality attributable to climate change, according to estimates from the World Health Organization.

Despite children's disproportionate presence among those at risk, and their disproportionate vulnerabilities to the impacts of climate change, they are hardly ever mentioned in climate-related policies or programs, and much less invited to engage with climate mitigation and adaptation design or implementation processes.⁵ The Paris Agreement, adopted at the Paris Conference of the Parties (COP21) in early December 2015, only mentions children once in its preamble and not at all in the Agreement's body. The National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) guide for implementation within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which helps least developed countries plan their climate change adaptation, does not specifically mention children's rights.⁶

In this brief, we leverage a human rights approach, based on the Convention of the Rights of the Child's Article 12, which states that children have a right to participation and to be heard. We argue that by engaging children and youth, particularly those from marginalized communities, in the design and implementation of policies and actions to address poverty linked to climate change, policy makers, governments, civil society and the private sector can create more resilient and equitable societies. Within the context of the specific impacts of global warming on children and, separately, on the poor, the brief will discuss firstly, why children and youth should be empowered to take action to address the impacts of climate change, particularly those that exacerbate poverty; and secondly, it will explain how this can be done by highlighting case studies and best practices.

II. Why empower children and young people to take action on climate change

Children have a unique experience of climate change. The displacement of millions of children due to extreme weather disasters places them at a heightened risk of family separation, being orphaned and, in the absence of adult protection, of exploitation, sexual abuse, and trafficking.⁷ Within poor families, the impacts of climate change, such as those stemming from natural disasters,⁸ can make it more difficult for children to stay in school, and significantly affect their ability to lead a fulfilling life down the road.

Yet, because climate change affects children in specific ways, they have a unique capacity to perceive risks that are particular to their age and circumstances, and to propose child-friendly ways to understand and address them.⁹ Although young people cannot vote, they are stakeholders in the fight against climate change who can provide a moral voice to highlight issues and potential interventions and persuasively argue for immediate action.¹⁰ For example, in 1992, 43 children, acting as representatives of succeeding generations, petitioned the Federal Constitutional Court of the Philippines for failing 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, while the case was on appeal.¹¹

The Government of the People's Republic of China, through its climate camps initiative launched in 2009 in partnership with UNICEF and further discussed below, made deliberate attempts to change attitudes and behaviors within the country, with children and youth contributing from the outset and seen as central to this effort.¹² As a still developing country, China is in the position of having to tackle climate change mitigation and adaptation for a large population of vulnerable poor at the same time.¹³ The team of specialists working on climate change within the country's Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) recognized early on that scientific evidence on its own was not enough to bring about change. Attitudes needed to shift as well. Young people, as the most affected generation, could lend urgency and energy to this effort.¹⁴

Children are extremely efficient in creating a strong personal connection to the issue of climate change and can urge behavior change in the lives of grown-ups who care for them in a way that other adults cannot.¹⁵ Roshni Chand, Program Manager for the 'ChildCentred Climate Change Adaptation' initiative (4CA) in the Pacific Islands, highlights that children are able to "innocently challenge the mindsets of the adults in their communities and are great communicators of climate change."¹⁶ Children are also particularly good at raising awareness among their peers. Youth talk to youth, therefore having youth climate change advocates speaking at the local, national and international level can be a powerful educational and outreach tool.¹⁷

III. How to integrate the voice of children and youth in policy debate and actions to reduce climate-related poverty and create more equitable, resilient and sustainable societies

1. Give children and youth a voice and a role

The 4CA program is one example of how including children and youth and giving them a voice in climate change planning can help build more resilient communities. The program helped train and raise climate awareness among children in primary schools and out-of-school youth in communities facing high levels of risk in the Pacific Islands. Young people became advocates for Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) actions within their families and communities.¹⁸ In addition, the initiative engaged local leaders from the beginning in helping to establish inclusive Village Disaster Committees and create adaptation plans. Specific roles and responsibilities were created and assigned for children and youth as well as for other groups typically left out of adaptation projects.¹⁹ In Papua New Guinea, for example, child participants in 4CA documented coastal erosion in their community, and

thanks to the pictures and stories collected, convinced the District Office to provide them with funds to build a sea wall. Previous attempts to obtain resources by adult members of the community had been repeatedly rejected.²⁰ Through these actions, 4CA was able to successfully demonstrate that by putting children at the center of adaptation, broader community resilience can be achieved.

2. Build capacity among children and youth and educate them on climate change

As the 4CA initiative highlights, education and information provide the basis for effective and sustainable child participation. Integrating climate change education into national curricula, is an effective way to provide a foundation of knowledge for larger numbers of children, and should be complemented by hands-on projects, such as school-yard greening.

Further, building children's capacities to work together in cooperative, creative and flexible ways is also important for the creation of resilience.²¹ By collaborating with UNICEF in organizing climate camps, the Government of China recognized the value of children's involvement and leadership on climate change and the need for them to learn to work both individually and collectively toward solutions.²² This initiative has empowered a generation of young leaders in China, providing them with knowledge and skills to act locally and network globally.²³

In the U.S., iMatter, an organization established by children for children and highlighted in an Equity for Children case study of youth-led and youth-targeting initiatives, developed innovative ways to empower young people in the fight against climate change.²⁴ A Youth Council, composed of children 11 to 18 years old, provides its core governing structure and a 'holacracy' approach to governance, puts planning and decision-making in the hands of self-organizing teams of youths, providing each team with considerable autonomy, while one representative serves as a liaison with the Advisory Council and iMatter leadership.²⁵ iMatter provides training and mentoring so that young people can serve as effective speakers and organizers. Youth activists are also encouraged to meet with local and national leaders to advocate the need for legislative action.²⁶

3. Leverage adults while keeping the voice of children intact

As Sheridan Bartlett points out, "When adults are also engaged in identifying and debating the issues, the results are more likely to put down roots, and a serious engagement with local authorities is more likely to follow."²⁷ A 2014 UNICEF report highlights that youth leaders point to significant supportive adults in their formative years as well as organizations that offered additional peer support and mentoring as the reason for becoming successful advocates. All young citizens will benefit from being mentored by competent, experienced peers or adults and having the opportunity to share ideas, make mistakes,

and communicate with others to build social networks of trusting relationships in communities where decision-making is inclusive and transparent.²⁸ By the same token, the caregivers of the youngest children need access to similar support to voice their needs and perspectives about climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies.²⁹

Youth engagement must be part of a wider culture of participation and be linked to larger priorities locally and nationally.³⁰ Non-government actors can reach children who do not go to school. In Kiribati and Vanuatu, they have been crucial in engaging communities and younger people on environmental issues.³¹ Informed, educated, well-resourced networks can help provide children with access to resources (financial, material and human) and skills needed to challenge vested interests.³²

In the U.S., Our Children's Trust's 18 year-old Alex Loznak, who participated in an all-youth panel organized by Equity for Children in November 2015, filed a lawsuit against the U.S. government for its failure to act on climate change, along with 20 other young people all below the age of 19. Leveraging the help of pro bono lawyers and Our Children's Trust resources, the youths were able to make their argument and move their case forward, when in April 2016, a U.S. federal judge ruled against an attempt by the government and the fossil fuel industry for a dismissal.³³

IV. Conclusion

While children suffer in very specific ways from the effects of climate change (and their plight is exacerbated by poverty and inequality), their voices and perspectives are seldom sought or heard on this issue. However, they bring a unique perspective and innovative solutions to addressing this phenomenon. It is therefore crucial that they be given a voice and fully engaged in helping to design and implement actions to fight climate change, by leveraging their unique viewpoint, experiences and creativeness. The suggestions and analysis in this note leverage a human rights approach, based on the Convention of the Rights of the Child's Article 12, which states that children have a right to participation and to be heard. This brief seeks to foster a more just, equitable, resilient and sustainable society that takes into account the voices of a variety of actors, including the poorest and most marginalized.

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- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid., 3.
- 15 Samantha Cocco-Klein, "Case Study: iMatter Kids vs. Global Warming", commissioned by Equity for Children, 2015, 1-2.
- 16 Samantha Cocco-Klein, "Case Study: Child Centered Climate Change Adaptation (4CA) in the Pacific Islands", commissioned by Equity for Children, 2015, 4.
- 17 Climate Change & Development (CCD) Community of the Pacific Solution Exchange, "Consolidated Reply – Query: Children and Climate Change Issues in the Pacific – Experiences; Examples", October 8, 2012, 3.
- 18 Cocco-Klein, "Case Study: Child Centered Climate Change Adaptation (4CA) in the Pacific Islands", 2.
- 19 Ibid. Thirty-eight communities created adaptation plans, actively engaging children in identifying adaptation priorities for their communities.
- 20 Ibid., 3.
- 21 Roger Hart, Scott Fisher and Bijan Kimiagar, "Beyond Projects: Involving Children in Community Governance as a Fundamental Strategy for Facing Climate Change", in UNICEF Office of Research, "The Challenges of Climate Change: Children on the front line", *Innocenti Insight*, Florence: UNICEF Office of Research, 2014, 93.
- 22 Cocco-Klein, "China: Children's Climate Camps", 1-4. The first climate camp in 2009 was organized in the run-up to COP 15 to educate young people about climate change and encourage individual and collective actions. Selected high school students, who had led a team of their peers to find innovative ways to mitigate climate change at their school, took part in a two week workshop, organized with UNICEF and the Department of Climate Change under the National Reform and Development Council (NRDC), learning about climate change and leadership. While the workshop focused primarily on fostering skills and knowledge among young climate leaders, it also provided an opportunity to select five young people to represent China at the Children's Climate Forum in Copenhagen. These young Climate Change Ambassadors met with other young climate activists from around the world and contributed to the 'Children's Declaration' presented to world leaders at COP15.
- 23 Cocco-Klein, "China: Children's Climate Camps", 5.
- 24 Cocco-Klein, "Case Study: iMatter Kids vs. Global Warming", 2-5.
- 25 Ibid., 5. Holacracy is a way of running an organization that removes power from a management hierarchy and distributes it across clear roles. The work can then be executed autonomously without micromanagement. There is a clear set of rules, and processes for how a team breaks up its work and defines roles with clear responsibilities. Teams are self-organized: they are given a purpose, but they decide internally how to best reach it (source: <http://www.holacracy.org/how-it-works/>).
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- 33 For more information visit www.equityforchildren.org and <http://bit.ly/1s049Xx>

Notes

- 1 Climate Change, Cities and Youth Engagement" event organized by Equity for Children and held on November 19, 2015 at The New School.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 UNICEF, "Unless we act now: The impact of climate change on children", November 2015.
- 4 Sheridan Bartlett, "Children and the Culture of Climate Change", *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, V 4.3 (Fall 2011), 498.
- 5 Ibid., 499.
- 6 NAPAs provide a process for the Least Developed Countries to identify priority activities that respond to their urgent and immediate needs with regard to adaptation to climate change (Source: http://unfccc.int/adaptation/workstreams/national_adaptation_programmes_of_action/items/7567.php) and Donovan Burton, Johanna Mustelin, and Peter Ulrich, "Climate change impacts on children in the Pacific: Kiribati and Vanuatu technical report", commissioned by UNICEF, Bangkok, 2011, 32.
- 7 Elizabeth D. Gibbons, "Climate Change, Children's Rights, and the Pursuit of Intergenerational Climate Justice", *Health and Human Rights*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (June 2014), 22.
- 8 IPCC, 2014: Summary for policymakers. In: *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects*. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Field, C.B., V.R. Barros, D.J. Dokken, K.J. Mach, M.D. Mastrandrea, T.E. Bilir, M. Chatterjee, K.L. Ebi, Y.O. Estrada, R.C. Genova, B. Girma, E.S. Kissel, A.N. Levy, S. MacCracken, P.R. Mastrandrea, and L.L. White (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA, 5.
- 9 Gibbons, "Climate Change, Children's Rights, and the Pursuit of Intergenerational Climate Justice", 25.

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