

# IDS IN FOCUS POLICY BRIEFING

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CHILDREN IN A CHANGING CLIMATE:  
LESSONS FROM RESEARCH AND PRACTICE  
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## Participation and Protection: Children's Involvement in Climate Change Debates

Children are not only interested in being part of decisions that affect their future, it is also their right to be involved. Despite sceptics' accusations of 'tokenism' and adult 'manipulation', when they are well-informed about climate change and appropriately supported, children can meaningfully participate in global debates. Organisations that support children's participation must provide appropriate knowledge and support mechanisms to make this participation effective whilst also addressing concerns of safety and wellbeing. This briefing explains how children's contributions to global climate change decision-making is achievable and can benefit everyone, not just children.

The case for children's involvement in climate change debates is a strong one. They have the right to be involved in decisions about their future, and they are also effective agents for adaptation and mitigation.

Including children's views now, and in the roll-out of the new global agreement, will tangibly improve the implementation plans of national governments and civil society working to realise the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It will make particular improvements within the homes, schools and communities where the impact of climate change is already a reality.

Provisions must be made to ensure that the best interests of the child are met against ethical and practical concerns with their participation. These concerns can be addressed by exploring the wide range of strategic opportunities for children's direct or indirect involvement.

Global child-centred organisations including Plan International, UNICEF, and Save the Children offer suitable expertise for facilitating children's engagement.

### Child advocates at international meetings

At the 2009 Global Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction, and the 2007 COP13 meeting, Plan International supported the participation of child advocates Rhee and Hezel, both from the Philippines.

Their successful participation was based on their personal convictions, experiences and capacities. Yet they remained vulnerable to the overwhelming nature of the events, and diminished self-confidence. Plan ensured that they had access to relevant and accessible information; ongoing support; and the opportunity to feedback on their experiences. This dispelled feelings of pressure arising from excessive adult attention, as well as their own determination to succeed on behalf of their peers.

### Child-led advocacy

Children's global advocacy can take many forms and there are many direct and indirect opportunities for them to influence climate change policies. These include consultations and contributions to international discussions; attendance at international events – such as meetings under the United Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – and influence through media engagement or monitoring and evaluation.

The variety of existing options, together with young advocates' innovative campaigning ideas, mean it is possible to meet standards of ethical integrity and child protection without compromising children's ability to participate.

### The best interest of the child

For children's participation to be ethical the children must first have an interest in and understanding of the implications of the global-level decisions being made, and

# Children's Participation and Protection in Climate Change Debates

of the potential impacts decisions can have on their lives. It is crucial that child participants are briefed about the issues, and the events they will participate in, in a way they can fully comprehend.

It is important to remember that, like adults, some children are enthusiastic about getting involved in public debates and some are not. Children are not a homogenous group with regards to climate change impacts. The context, views and capacities of all affected children must be systematically represented by those taking part.

Children should also be informed of all the options for participation so that they can decide how they wish to take part. Children's interests and abilities vary considerably. As such, psychosocial, health and safety risks, and child protection concerns must be addressed by exploring the whole range of potential 'entry points' for influence.

It is also important to take financial and time-related costs into account. Likely outcomes of participation must justify the personal education or income lost if children take time out of school or work.

## Ensuring input in the adult arena

Different arenas of engagement present different opportunities at the global level. Separate children's forums on climate change are thought to be conducive to children's needs, and can provide a forum for learning and the consolidation of their collective voice and un-channelled views. However direct input in adult discussion (i.e. UNFCCC) is an important way to secure and generate much needed dialogue between children and adults at the global level. For this to work, children need both the support of receptive adult facilitators and child-friendly adult institutions. Ultimately, children's views must be heard in the adult decision-making arena if they are to be integrated into decision-making.

## Hearing and respecting children's voices

Potential risks of both 'tokenism', and the manipulation of child participants, can undermine the value of children's agency. To facilitate true interaction, genuine, consultative and child-friendly processes must be in place – which ensure that children's voices are heard and respected. A receptive attitude among adults is a prerequisite for constructive dialogue. Institutional and personal efforts to generate a child-friendly or 'enabling' environment will provide the appropriate space for children's active and insightful engagement.

The successful institutionalisation of children's participation in the long-term depends on the success of participation efforts in the immediate future as key decisions are being made (e.g. international climate change negotiations – particularly COP15).

## Policy implications

- Ensuring transparency in children's interaction with adult actors helps preclude accusations of 'tokenism' and 'manipulation' of children in policy-making. Organisations that support children's participation need to follow accepted standards (e.g. Inter-Agency Working Group on Children's Participation's *Operations Manual on Children's Participation in Consultations*) to address children's rights to protection and their right to participation.
- Governments and civil society should establish and support lasting, child-friendly dialogues on climate change between children's groups and adult actors in the climate change context. Children are already engaging in climate change policy-making and implementation at local and national levels and in many cases existing procedures can be replicated and adapted for the global context.

Children must have access to relevant information so that they can:

- retain and exercise control of the level and extent of their involvement. This requires knowing their options, and knowing where to go for advice;
- stay informed about the topic they are discussing, and the mechanisms and workings of the arena in which they are discussing it;
- understand all potential outputs and outcomes, both positive and negative;
- understand the intricacies of climate change debates and the associated jargon. Information provided must be sensitive to children's 'absorptive capacity' (including language barriers, education and social norms).

## Further reading

For other briefs in this series see:  
[www.ids.ac.uk/go/infocus13](http://www.ids.ac.uk/go/infocus13)

Plan (2009) 'Children and Young People's Participation in Climate Change Decision-making at the Global Level' Discussion Paper, *In Press*

Save the Children (2004) '12 Lessons Learned from Children's participation in the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children' London: Save the Children [www.savethechildren.net/alliance/resources/publications.html#participation](http://www.savethechildren.net/alliance/resources/publications.html#participation)

Lansdown G (2001) 'Promoting Children's Participation in Democratic Decision-making', Rome: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre [www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/insight6.pdf](http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/insight6.pdf)

Inter-Agency Working Group on Children's Participation (IAWGCP) (2007), *Operations Manual on Children's Participation in Consultations*, Bangkok: IAWGCP [www.plan-international.org/files/global/publications/participation/operationsmanual2.pdf](http://www.plan-international.org/files/global/publications/participation/operationsmanual2.pdf)

## Credits

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