

GLOBAL INITIATIVE

Advancing Children's Right to a Healthy Environment



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I. Introduction

The creativity, ideals and courage of the youth of the world should be mobilized to forge a global partnership in order to achieve sustainable development and ensure a better future for all. -- Rio PRINCIPLE 21

Children are among the groups most vulnerable to environmental harm. The numbers are truly shocking. More than 1.5 million children under the age of five lose their lives every year as a result of avoidable environmental impacts, while millions more suffer disease, disability, and an array of other forms of harm, some of which can result in lifelong effects.

Within their homes, where they should feel safe, too many children are exposed to household air pollution, toxic chemicals, and contaminated food and water. And when they leave their homes, they often face ambient air pollution and open waste sites instead of green spaces and access to safe environments. Climate change, unprecedented levels of global biodiversity loss and the depletion of natural resources pose some of the greatest systemic threats to children's rights, and jeopardize the lives of both current and future generations. Marginalized groups of children, including indigenous children, girls, and poor children, often bear a disproportionate burden of environmental impacts, implicating and often violating the principle of non-discrimination.

Numerous studies have found that environmental harm interferes with a host of children's rights including their rights to life, health and development, food, housing, water and sanitation, play and education, and the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.¹ Children are at heightened risk because they are still developing physically and mentally, and because the environmental threats they face are often beyond their control. They are among the least empowered to exercise their rights to information, free expression and to be heard in relation to environmental matters, as well as justice when their rights have been violated. While decision-makers frequently highlight the role of "youth" in sustainable development and their great potential as agents of change, in practice, children's concerns are not sufficiently taken into account.

There are numerous reasons for this oversight, but one of the most fundamental obstacles to the effective protection of children against environmental harm is a general lack of awareness of the many links between a safe and healthy environment on the one hand, and children's rights on the other. Those concerned with children's rights and those who protect the environment often focus on one topic to the exclusion of the other. As a consequence, children's rights tend to be overlooked in decision-making on the environment, which leads to adverse outcomes in terms of their health, development, and opportunities in life.

This state of affairs also fails to acknowledge and fully support the growing movement of child "activists" from around the world who have started providing their own responses by getting involved in nature conservation, reducing pollution, developing ideas for sustainable lifestyles, and raising their voice on climate change.

¹ See [March 2018 report](#) of the Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment, focusing on the principal effects of environmental harm on the rights of the child and the corresponding obligations of States.

Human rights law requires States to take additional steps to protect the rights of those who are especially at risk from environmental harm, including children. A number of initiatives have been undertaken in recent years - including at UN level - to clarify what these heightened obligations towards children mean in practice.² These extend to the obligations of States to protect children's rights against harm from corporations, and to the responsibilities of businesses to respect child rights in their operations, for example by refraining from producing hazardous products or contributing to air and water pollution, deforestation, destruction of ecosystems, rising greenhouse gas emissions and the dumping of hazardous waste.³ In parallel, and complementing this body of work, States, the business sector, civil society, and many other actors have begun to develop a wide range of good practices that serve to protect children's rights against environmental harm.

Yet, despite these positive developments, there is still a lack of both clear normative and practical guidance on applying child rights in the environmental context. Furthermore, there has been no systematic effort to enable knowledge sharing and mutual learning regarding action to promote children's rights in relation to the environment at international, regional, national and local levels, from which all stakeholders could benefit.

II. Objectives and expected outcomes of the initiative

Objectives

The overall aim of the initiative is to build on recent developments and international frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Climate Agreement to and promote the recognition and implementation of children's right to a healthy and sustainable environment. This will be done by:

- **empowering children and youth** in relation to their rights regarding the environment
- **increasing awareness** among national, regional and global decision-makers about the relationship between children's rights and the environment, including State obligations in this respect
- **increasing the capacity** of States and other relevant stakeholders in implementing children's rights relating to the environment, and **contributing to standard-setting and policy development** in this area

² These include, inter alia, the 2016 Day of General Discussion (DGD) of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child that gathered over 250 global experts to discuss the relevance of the Convention on the Rights of the Child for environmental policy, as well as studies by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UNICEF, and the Special Rapporteurs on human rights and the environment (op.cit. note 1), and human rights and hazardous substances respectively, which all examine certain aspects of the relationship between child rights and environmental harm. The initiative is explicitly intended to build on this progress, guided by the DGD and the 2018 report of former UN Special Rapporteur John Knox in particular.

³ Op. cit. note 1. p. 15.

- **convening key stakeholders and facilitating dialogue and stronger cooperation** in relation to child and environmental protection
- **gathering good practices** relating to tangible policies and measures which have proven effective within a national context and which could be replicated elsewhere, as well as lessons learned and challenges to effective implementation
- **promoting children’s right to live in a healthy and sustainable environment**, including efforts to gain greater recognition of this fundamental human right in relevant international, regional and national processes and fora.

[How will this be achieved?](#)

The main “vehicle” for achieving these objectives is a series of consultations that will be organized in five to six world regions over a period of 2-3 years (contingent on funding availability). Each consultation will provide a forum of exchange for a diverse range of key stakeholders (see Section IV). Interaction with a group of children and youth activists will be a core component of each consultation. A public segment at each consultation will allow for wider outreach.

The organizing partners will facilitate communication on central issues across workshops, and each consultation will be tailored to region-specific needs and priorities. To support this process, a website will be set up to communicate the mission statement, provide information on the workshops, timelines, outcomes and planning, along with other useful resources. It will also serve as a virtual office for organizers and participants.

[Expected outcomes at regional level](#)

The consultations are expected to produce a number of concrete outcomes, including:

- **An opportunity for children and youth** to convene, build capacity and be heard directly by key decision-makers on their environmental concerns and ideas, demonstrating the benefit that could result from establishing consultation mechanisms more generally
- **A set of general recommendations/principles** that contribute towards more universal standard-setting in relation to the right of the child to grow up in a healthy and sustainable environment
- **Regional actions/commitments** agreed by participants to facilitate future collaboration and follow-up⁴
- **A collection of region-specific examples of good laws, policies and practices**
- **An outcome report**

[Expected outcomes at global level](#)

⁴ As a concrete follow-up activity to the first consultation for Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, the organizers have agreed with the regional UN commission (ECLAC) to produce a child friendly version of the recently adopted regional “Escazu” - Agreement on environmental rights.

The initiative will conclude with a global experts meeting to synthesize the results of the regional workshops and build towards longer-term outcomes that aim to secure respect for children’s rights in the environmental context, including:

- A **“Declaration on Children’s Rights and the Environment”** or similar statement that delivers a strong message and inspires further action to set and/or implement relevant standards at the international and national levels.⁵ Work on the outcome document will start with the first consultation and evolve based on contributions from participants and other relevant stakeholders throughout the initiative.
- A **knowledge portal** on children’s rights and the environment that comprises a compendium of good practices in the protection and promotion of child rights and the environment; an accessible overview of relevant documents and other relevant materials, as well as information on upcoming events and activities; a database with relevant laws and jurisprudence related to children’s rights and the environment; child-friendly resources where possible.
- A **consolidated network of experts across regions** on issues related to children’s rights and the environment.
- **Outreach and provision of expertise to relevant international actors, processes, initiatives and fora in favour of children’s right to a healthy environment**⁶
- **Further results-oriented projects based on the consultations’ findings.** This could include a call for “global” studies to close gaps in the understanding of the relationship between children’s rights and the environment or concrete action to improve the environment for children in law, policy and practice.

III. Consultations and timelines

[Regional groupings may change and an additional consultation may be incorporated, contingent on funding]

2018

7 November: Preparatory workshop of group of core partners

2019

2-3 May: Regional consultation for Latin America (Colombia, Bogotá)

22-24 October: Regional consultation For South East Asia and Pacific (Indonesia, Bogor)

2020

⁵ For the international level this may include e.g. a new General Comment or 4th Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, a Human Rights Council Resolution, an adaptation to children’s rights of the Framework Principles on Human Rights and the Environment developed by the former UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment.

⁶ Including e.g. the work of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment (tasked with embedding a gender perspective in his mandate, including the rights of girls); Human Rights Council resolutions and debates (March 2019 resolution on environmental rights defenders, and the next annual full-day discussion on children’s rights and a healthy environment in 2020); key events: a session on children’s rights and the environment at the conference on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (2019), UN Climate Summit (2019), the SDGs (Rio+20+10) Summit (2022); and other environment-related instruments, including the Paris Agreement/UNFCCC, the Global Pact for the Environment, the Global Deal for Nature etc.); UN Environment and World Health Assembly decisions.

June/July: First regional consultation for Northern Africa and Middle East
November: Second regional consultation for Southern Africa or regional consultation for Western Europe and North America

2021

May: Second regional consultation for Southern Africa or regional consultation for Western Europe and North America
September/October: Regional consultation for Eastern Europe and West Asia (South Asia)

2022

Global expert consultation

Where possible, efforts will be made to align with regional CRC events and/or other relevant ongoing national and international events/processes, in order to amplify awareness, facilitate participation, capitalize on potential synergies, and minimize our carbon footprint.

IV. Stakeholders and participation

The discussions on the relationship between children's rights and the environment, and on ways to strengthen children's agency, should only take place with the meaningful participation of children themselves. The consultations' format will therefore be designed so as to provide ample opportunities for dialogue with child and youth representatives.⁷

Format

Each consultation will take place over the course of 2-3 days, comprising interactive sessions to allow for mutual exchange among child, youth and adult participants and a public outreach event.

Experts will be invited from across the region, taking into consideration the need for diverse representation (within available resources) and other practical considerations. They will be drawn from different communities (child rights, environmental, development etc), and from various sectors (Government, civil society, relevant networks of children's rights organisations or professionals, business, research institutions and academia, international organisations, regional and national human rights institutions and courts). Options for broadening participation beyond those present at the consultation will be considered, for example via online platforms. Follow-up to the event will be crucial to widen the net of relevant stakeholders involved.

The limited number of participants will require a careful selection process. The group of organizers is convinced that - based on the experience, expertise and the (vast) list of contacts

⁷ The UN defines a 'child' as a person below the age of 18, and 'youth' as those between the ages of 15 and 24. This initiative focuses on those below the age of 18, although the terms children and youth will be used.

that the collaborating partners already possess - it will be possible to identify the most qualified experts.⁸

[Child and youth participation](#)

Child participation will be as broad as possible, drawn from both the selected host country and other countries in the region. Efforts will be made to ensure that children come from different backgrounds and represent a range of views. The organizers will also facilitate wider child and youth engagement. **A short global poll for children and youth** (in [Spanish](#), [English](#), [Portuguese](#), [French](#)) was launched on Earth Day 2019, and will remain open for the entire duration of the Global Initiative. Results are being fed into regional consultation discussions and outcome documents, high-level fora and reports at national, regional and international levels. which is hosted on UNICEF's Voices of Youth platform (using the #MyPlanetMyRights).

Children will be assisted in preparing for the meetings by TdH partner organisations, where TdH has regional and national presence (guaranteed for Colombia and Indonesia). Where possible or needed, other collaborating partners will share in facilitating child participation.

The core organizers will draw on the expertise of Queen's University Belfast and other experts in order to facilitate meaningful child participation.

V. Partners

[Core partners](#)

The initiative will be conceptualized, planned and carried out by a core group of organizers who will be engaged for the duration of the initiative across all regions. The core partners include:

UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment (OHCHR)
Terre des Hommes
Project Dryad
Child Rights Connect
Global Child Forum
UN Environment
UNICEF
WWF

[Collaborating partners](#)

⁸ Participants at the first consultation in Bogota included, inter alia, representatives of the government of Colombia and the vice-minister for foreign affairs of Costa Rica, national human rights institutions like the Ombudsperson for Children from Chile, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, international organizations such as UN Environment and UNICEF, NGO such as Greenpeace or Human Rights Watch, grass-roots organizations from various Latin American countries and the Caribbean, child and youth activists, academics from the WHO children's environmental health collaboration center in Mexico.

The core partners will work with collaborating partners on region/project-based tasks (not all collaborating partners will engage in all regional workshops). This may include provision of funds, logistical support, expertise and other support. The initiative will remain open for new collaborating partners to join throughout its implementation.

Collaborating partners include:

World Health Organization

Queen's University Belfast

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH and Federal

Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (working group on the environment)

Child Rights Connect

[Regional partners](#)

Heinrich Böll Foundation

Child Rights Coalition Asia

RMI- Indonesian Institute for Forest and Environment

Censat Agua Viva - Friends of the Earth Colombia

Cosajuca

Pensamiento Y Accion Social

[Decision-making](#)

Decisions that pertain to conceptual matters and the core structure of the initiative will be prepared and taken by the core group, incorporating inputs from relevant collaborating partners. Decisions regarding single consultations will be taken in collaboration among the respective partners involved. Responsibility for the planning process will remain in the hands of the core group. The overall aim is to be as inclusive as possible while maintaining a smooth and results-oriented workflow. All decisions will be made with a view to keeping the ecological footprint and other environmental impact as low as possible.

VI. Further information and contacts

For further information and clarifications, please contact:

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