CHILDREN AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on climate change’s thematic report on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change

A couple of young boys standing in front of a painted wall

Description automatically generated

“The sooner a child learns about his rights, the better he will own them.” (Girl, 16 years old, Uzbekistan)

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# INTRODUCTION

**Terre des Hommes (TDH) welcomes the call for inputs on access to information by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change.** This submission draws on Terre des Hommes and its partners’ work as well as consultations undertaken with children, particularly as part of the development of UNCRC General Comment 26 (GC26). It outlines recommendations for UN Member States to take with and for children – including through the full implementation of GC26 - to ensure that children’s right to information is upheld.

# CHILDREN’S ACCESS TO INFORMATION ON THEIR RIGHTS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Children in all their diversity represent one third of the world's population and are disproportionately affected by climate change. Children are also agents of change and can make a vital contribution to addressing climate change and environmental degradation. Articles 13 and 17 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child define children’s right to information that is accurate and accessible. GC26 recognises access to information and education as rights that play an important role in helping to protect children’s rights and that are particularly threatened by environmental harm and climate change.

Access to information is one of the three so-called access rights that have been influential in environmental decision-making (the other two rights being access to opportunities for participation in decision-making and access to justice). These (procedural) rights receive a lot of attention in the debate about the role of human rights in environmental policy[[1]](#footnote-2). There is increased focus on supporting groups in vulnerable situations to have access to information. However, children are still not prioritised in such discussions and decisions about access to information.

Accessing information can be crucial for children in different ways and contexts. With accurate information, children can make informed decisions about their own situation, that of their community and contribute to more informed decision-making more broadly. For example:

* + Access to information can be critical for children facing acute environmental challenges so they can understand environmental threats - including to their rights - and possible responses and strengthen their resilience;
* Information can allow children to understand environmental standards, laws policies, environmental impact assessments and other relevant decision-making procedures. It can help them to make sustainable lifestyle choices;
* Being well-informed can enable children to express themselves freely on environmental matters and participate in decision-making. Children can play a critical role in shaping an equitable and just future for current and future generations.

Children gather information in different ways, including from family, friends, school, social media and television. This information is not necessarily accurate, comprehensive or adapted to their age. States should routinely collect environmental information of relevance to children’s rights and ensure that children have access to accurate and child-friendly information.

# KEY ISSUES FOR CHILDREN AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## CHILD-FOCUSED AND CHILD-SENSITIVE DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH

**States should ensure the systematic collection of reliable and regularly updated data and research on the threatened and actual impacts of climate-related harm on children’s rights, including its interaction with, and exacerbation of, the adverse effects of pollution and biodiversity decline.**

GC26 requires that “States should ensure the collection of reliable, regularly updated and disaggregated data and research on environmental harm, including the risks and actual impacts of climate change-related harm on children’s rights” (para 74).

The Committee on the Rights of the Child often requires States to collect environmental information, including through environmental impact assessments, to help assess the specific risks faced by children (for example related to climate change) to inform effective policy making. However, there remains a dearth of information on the specific effects of climate-related harm on children at the regional, national and sub-national levels.

Data collection needs to extend over the whole period of childhood up to the age of 18 years and -should include longitudinal data on the effects of climate-related harm on children’s health and development at different ages. Data collection should be disaggregated to identify children who are most at risk. Such data and research, including child-participatory research, should inform the formulation and evaluation of climate mitigation and adaptation legislation, policies, programmes and plans at all levels, and should be made publicly available.

## INFORMATION FOR ADAPTATION AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE

**States should ensure that accurate and child-friendly information is shared with children and affected communities in a timely manner to enable them to make informed decisions**

“I have experienced how it's like to not feel safe during the stubble burning months in India. I would like to request the UNCRC to keep spreading awareness regarding air pollution.” (Girl, 13, India)[[2]](#footnote-3)

States should strengthen the awareness of communities on disaster risk reduction and prevention measures and strengthen early warning systems, especially in schools and at the community level. In the event of imminent threats of climate-related harm such as extreme weather events, States must ensure that all information that would enable children, their caregivers, and communities to take protective measures is disseminated immediately (as outlined in paragraph 103 of GC26). As further stated in GC26, "Adaptation frameworks should address climate change-induced migration and displacement and include provisions for ensuring a child rights-based approach to these issues".

## INFORMATION THAT IS ACCURATE, CHILD-FRIENDLY AND MITIGATES HARM TO CHILDREN

**States should ensure that information is developed and communicated in a child-friendly way and that it does not cause harm to children. States should partner with children, encourage hope-based communication and develop rights-based climate education with a focus on resilience.**

“I honestly don't know where to start even if I want to change things. And I don't think the adults are being honest about how things are now.” (Girl, 15, Japan)[[3]](#footnote-4)

Information for children must be child-friendly, accurate and it is also essential that it does not cause harm. Furthermore, children should not be made to feel hopeless or that all the burden of action falls upon them. Information can and should be developed and communicated in a way that encourages action and hope.

GC26 calls on States to provide children and their caregivers with environmental and human rights education and age-appropriate and accessible information. GC26 outlines States’ obligation to make environmental information available, age-appropriate and aimed at overcoming obstacles. As further outlined in GC26, “States must refrain from impeding access to accurate environmental information and protect children from misinformation concerning environmental risks and from the risk of violence or other reprisals (para 70)”.

**Promising practice examples**

* TDH (Germany) has developed a toolkit that makes the regional Escazu agreement accessible to children and youth, to ensure they too can learn about their environmental rights (including their right to access to information), in accordance with Article 10 (2)d of the treaty. The toolkit can serve as an excellent example of how to make international treaties or legislations about the environment accessible to children and young people. See youth-friendly version in Spanish and child-friendly version in 3 languages - <https://ceri-coalition.org/escazu-agreement/>)
* TDH worked with children to produce child-friendly version of [GC26](https://childrightsenvironment.org/general-comment-no-26/) which has now been translated by different partners into multiple languages
* TDH (Switzerland) supports training of children and teachers in Bolivia, enabling some to become committed eco-journalists in their schools and communities, collecting and sharing information – [see video (French).](https://terredeshommessuisse.ch/save-my-planet-save-my-rights/actions-edd-en-video/)

Children from the [Covidunder19 initiative](https://www.tdh.org/en/projects/covidunder19?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAAR1ONW-0HK0S4qe1npo22eCxUGNHoB8cAUlHaJeYkyPYw8vQ4YVxWQJzDHc_aem_AUZCB2SHQ-DjUCLYbMZqoj8TB6iTPR-bLipU10Byh1ULv_y7ih33yuDOfL_K8lB1sqbM-WC2vqchDvD8ofhnZjMH) consulted in the context of GC26 highlighted limitations in information-sharing and education about climate change, sharing examples of fragmented, inadequate and even harmful models, making it difficult to constructively learn about the climate crisis and use this learning as a basis for action:

* “As a child, when I first heard about climate change, I thought I was going to die in a year.” – 15-year-old girl, Bangladesh.
* “If [climate change] is taught in a wrong way, it can cause eco-anxiety”.
* “We know that climate change exists, but we don't know what to do about it“.
* “Children don't know that it is their right to live in a clean healthy environment”.

Children identified climate education as key for inspiring actions to counter environmental degradation and climate change and recommended that **rights-based climate education with a focus on resilience should include:**

* **Reinforcing hope-based narratives**
  + “If we always talk about the problems, it can be quite overwhelming. So we need to talk about solutions. Like how the earth can heal” – 17-year-old boy, India.
  + “Speaking about how earth is beautiful, nature is beautiful: solutions-focused! This can reduce eco-anxiety”.
  + “Environmental studies in school level curriculum should be available. Practical efforts should be made by the school administration and students themselves to protect environment; may be plantation campaigns, cleanliness programs, a class per week on disaster risk management and environment protection."
* **Focusing equity and leveraging popular and creative methods**
  + “Designated days for reaching out to marginalised communities to spread awareness about climate change”
  + “Inform the people in the grassroots about the role of businesses and government in protecting the environment”
  + “Use of mass media- TVs to spread child-friendly information on Children's right to a healthy environment”
* **Mentoring and support by adults using interactive, action-oriented learning**
  + “[We need] drama, campaigns, clubs in schools for education on climate change”
  + “Teachers can engage their student by creating dialogues, by making comics, cards which can be fun and engaging way for children to learn about this”
  + “It is important for individuals to take steps to manage their well-being, such as limiting exposure to media that causes distress and engaging in activities that bring a sense of purpose, and hope.”

It is crucial to use child-friendly methodologies for children’s exposure to such information on climate change – including in environmental settings – reducing harm and mitigating the risk of anxiety.

Information about the causes and consequences of the climate crisis should be available in child-friendly formats to support child participation in climate action, sharing of information between peers and between generations, and to inspire collective action. Arts-based and creative methods such as drama and music that are effective modalities for intergenerational learning should be prioritised. Where possible, resources should be co-created with children and young people. In indigenous communities, traditional methods of passing ancestral knowledge from one generation to the next, including storytelling, are also important.

Children should also be supported to learn about the causes and consequences of climate change in a way that prevents and responds to eco-anxiety. Information shared with children about climate change should be accompanied with opportunities for children to seek support for any eco-anxiety that they may experience when learning about climate change.

**Promising practice examples**

* TDH Foundation’s [Engaging with children about the climate crisis and violence against children: A rights and resilience-based approach | Terre des hommes (tdh.org)](https://www.tdh.org/en/digital-library/documents/engaging-with-children-about-the-climate-crisis-and-violence-against-children-a-rights-and-0). This resource is a companion guide for child-focused practitioners who are committed to ensuring that children can engage with information about the climate crisis and violence against children in a way that is supportive and does not cause harm. It combines rights-based and resilience-based approaches to uphold children’s status as rights-holders while reinforcing their capacities to cope, adapt and transform the world around them. It is intended for practitioners working with children in development and humanitarian contexts. In addition to an overview of children’s rights and psychosocial resilience and how these aspects can support children to engage on the topic of the climate crisis, it outlines a workshop methodology that puts this approach into practice. The workshop has numerous specific objectives, including informing children about climate effects, exploring their reactions, feelings and understanding, and reinforcing children’s well-being and psychosocial resilience by supporting children to formulate recommendations and calls to action.

## THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN CHILDREN’S ACCESS TO INFORMATION

**States should strengthen the provision of education on climate change in educational settings and should partner with children to develop curricula.**

Education is instrumental in ensuring that children are aware of their rights, learn about the environment, and increase their awareness and preparedness for environmental damage and related challenges. However, environmental education remains relatively underexplored as an environmental right compared to the three access rights. Often, education is characterised as a precondition for citizens to be able to exercise their access rights, however it is not seen and described as a right in and of itself. The right to environmental education is embedded in the UN CRC (Art. 28 and 29) and the duty to provide such education is one of the main human rights obligations of States as stated in the Framework Principles on Human Rights.

Art 29(1) (e) of CRC requires that the education of a child is directed to the development of respect for the natural environment, and art 28 ensures that children receive an education that reflects environmental values. GC26 includes the following provisions:

* + A rights-based environmental education should be transformative, inclusive, child-centred, child-friendly and empowering.
  + Teaching materials should provide scientifically accurate, up-to-date and developmentally and age-appropriate environmental information.
  + Environmental values should be reflected in the education and training of all professionals involved in education, encompassing teaching methods, technologies and approaches used in education, school environments and preparing children for green jobs.

Children consulted by Terre des Hommes said that curricula around climate change were often very technical and problem-focused, leaving them with feelings of helplessness and anxiety and raised many recommendations about strengthening the provision of information and learning about the environment in educational settings, for example:

* “I am still in elementary school and don't know much about environmental issues, so I would like you to hold environmental summits for children in elementary, middle and high schools all over Japan to think about and discuss environmental issues and to hold events that will make people more interested in environmental issues.” (Boy, 12, Japan)
* “Add information about climate change to the current school curriculum so that all children and youths can attain first-hand information on climate change.” (Boy, 16, Zambia)[[4]](#footnote-5)
* “Children should be involved in the development of the curriculum, providing advice and guidance on teaching methods and ways of disseminating information effectively and accessibly.” (Child participating in a workshop in Scotland)[[5]](#footnote-6)

**Promising practice examples**

* [Blue Schools – Swiss Water & Sanitation Consortium (waterconsortium.ch)](https://waterconsortium.ch/blueschool/) with TDH (Foundation) integrate training on topics like recycling, the water cycle and the importance of taking care of the ecosystem into the school curriculum.

## ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND MEANINGFUL CHILD PARTICIPATION

**States should ensure that children have all the information they need and can share their perspectives, needs and recommendations and inform relevant decision and policy-making processes at all levels.**

As outlined in GC26, access to information is a pre-requisite for meaningful child participation. Children and their caregivers must be informed of children’s rights, which is crucial for having their voice heard and being able to contribute to decision-making processes that concern them. GC26 outlines that children should be equipped to understand the effects of climate-related decisions on their rights (paragraph 102). Children are experts of their own lives and active agents of change and their views should be proactively sought for the design and implementation of measures addressing the significant and long-term environmental challenges that are fundamentally shaping their lives. Their views should be incorporated and shared with others.

“I think we need to raise a lot more awareness, not only among adults, but among children, it's really urgent. You have to inform them, motivate them too. I believe that the governments must hurry to make decisions vis-à-vis the behaviour of the populations (especially the rich and consumerist countries). Laws should be implemented for the reduction of plastic / GHG emissions at the level of households but also and, very importantly, of large industries. People must be made aware (and therefore informed) of their consumption (which must absolutely be reduced). We need to change mentalities. And for that, we need children and adults, of course.” (Girl, 15, Bangladesh)[[6]](#footnote-7)

“Spreading awareness among people is the first and foremost thing we can do to make them understand about the environment and climate and prevention.” (Girl, 15, India)[[7]](#footnote-8)

## ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND REMEDIES

**States should put in place systems and mechanisms to ensure that children have access to child-friendly information about the opportunities and processes involved in climate litigation and to facilitate children’s participation in the legal system.**

“The challenge young people face is that they are the ones who bear the brunt of climate change on a daily basis. They are not recognized or prioritized as key beneficiaries of climate [action]. The future lies with the youth, and justice should be fair, when young people find information, they act on it and get killed for taking action.” (Boy, South Africa)[[8]](#footnote-9)

The provision of child-friendly information to enable children to exercise their rights and access to justice mechanisms is particularly important in the context of climate change. With children and young people active as campaigners and at the forefront of climate justice movements, it is critical that they are educated and informed about exercising their right to protect and access complaints procedures in case their rights are violated during their action.

For children, access to justice means having the ability to use legal mechanisms to address grievances, seek protection of their rights, and obtain redress for harm. Climate litigation, a form of legal action aimed at addressing climate change and its impacts, is a field where access to justice plays a pivotal role. Recent examples of successful climate litigation, such as the European Court of Human Rights’ condemnation of the Swiss government for climate inaction[[9]](#footnote-10), show the potential of these procedures to advance jurisprudence, the evolution of the legal systems, and to deliver impactful advocacy at the global level. Children need to be informed about the opportunities and processes involved in climate litigation to actively participate in defending their rights and the environment. It involves understanding legal rights and existing legal frameworks, awareness of legal mechanisms and procedural aspects, access to legal support and resources and knowledge in case studies and precedents.

The importance of access to justice is underlined in Section D of GC26 “Access to Justice and Remedies” (paragraphs 82-90). However, several challenges such as the complexity of legal systems, limited access to education, cultural and social barriers and lack of legal recognition for children limit the use of these legal tools to defend children’s environmental rights. Access to information about these systems is therefore crucial, though still often lacking. Actions to overcome this challenge could include the development of child-friendly resources, climate education on access to justice curricula, programmes to support legal literacy and facilitating children’s participation in the legal system. Institutional support should also be enhanced through legal frameworks and mechanisms that recognize and support children’s involvement in climate litigation and access to justice more generally.

For more information, see [TDH (Foundation) publication on access to justice in the context of climate change](https://www.tdh.org/en/digital-library/documents/climate-in-justice-for-children-how-climate-crisis-affects-access-to-justice-and-childrens-rights).

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“I would like us to be able to think about the future and not see destruction, crisis, but rather see, based on our actions, a prosperous future where life is something fundamental and that leads the care of this house, the earth, above all things. I would like us to see a future where citizens value a plant as much as they do with money, I am faithful to believe in a utopia where no one throws a piece of paper, where no one wastes water and takes care of the planet, a utopia where environmental leaders are considered heroes and non-incendiary and where above all things lead the love, respect and sustainability of society in favour of a future in peace with the planet.” (Child, 16, Armenia)

1. See, for example, the [Aarhus](https://unece.org/DAM/env/pp/documents/cep43e.pdf) and [Escazu](https://repositorio.cepal.org/entities/publication/86cae662-f81c-4b45-a04a-058e8d26143c) treaties on environmental rights. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. [Report of the first Children and Young People's Consultation (childrightsenvironment.org)](https://childrightsenvironment.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Report-of-the-first-Children-and-Young-Peoples-Consultation.pdf)  [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. [Report of the first Children and Young People's Consultation (childrightsenvironment.org)](https://childrightsenvironment.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Report-of-the-first-Children-and-Young-Peoples-Consultation.pdf)  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. [Report of the first Children and Young People's Consultation (childrightsenvironment.org)](https://childrightsenvironment.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Report-of-the-first-Children-and-Young-Peoples-Consultation.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. [Findings from the second Phase-revised\_EN (childrightsenvironment.org)](https://childrightsenvironment.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Findings-from-the-Second-Phase-of-Consultations-with-Children-and-Young-People-for-General-Comment-No.26-6.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. [Report of the first Children and Young People's Consultation (childrightsenvironment.org)](https://childrightsenvironment.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Report-of-the-first-Children-and-Young-Peoples-Consultation.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. [Report of the first Children and Young People's Consultation (childrightsenvironment.org)](https://childrightsenvironment.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Report-of-the-first-Children-and-Young-Peoples-Consultation.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. [Children's Global Charter | General Comment No. 26 on Children’s Rights and the Environment (childrightsenvironment.org)](https://childrightsenvironment.org/global-charter/) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng/#%7B%22itemid%22:[%22001-233206%22]%7D> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)