

# INTERGENERATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE - JUSTICIA AMBIENTAL INTERGENERACIONAL

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 [www.ucc.ie/en/youthclimatejustice/](http://www.ucc.ie/en/youthclimatejustice/)

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This article is about climate justice and what it means for children and young people today. It argues that children are not only part of the future—they are already experiencing climate change and should have a say in decisions that affect their lives.



It brings together ideas from youth climate litigation cases, different ways of thinking about time, and research on generations to suggest a new approach: adults and children working together to care for the planet now.

## Key Messages

- **Children are already living the climate crisis—justice cannot wait.**
- Young people are going to court to demand climate action, but the **law often moves too slowly.**
- We need to move beyond the idea that adults protect children only for the future.
- People of different ages live the climate crisis together, but not in the same way.
- **Children should be listened to and involved in decisions about the environment today.**



## Why Intergenerational Justice Needs a Rethink

“Intergenerational justice” usually means that adults today should not harm the planet for future generations. This is an important idea—but it can also lead to delay: setting goals for 2050 while problems continue today.

**Climate change is already affecting children’s lives around the world.** So we need to think differently: **children are not only future adults—they are people living through environmental harm right now, and they should be heard.**

## From Principle to Pressure: Youth Climate Litigation

- Around the world, young people are going to court to demand climate action.
- These cases show that **climate change is not just about the environment—it is also about rights, fairness, and responsibility between generations.**
- Even when courts do not fully accept these cases, they reveal a key problem: **the law often moves too slowly to respond to urgent harm and to take children’s experiences seriously.**



## The Problem of Time Lag

Climate change moves fast. The law often moves slowly.

Many young people who start legal cases as children become adults before the case ends.

By then, environmental harm is often worse.

This shows a **mismatch between ecological time (how fast damage happens) and legal time (how slowly systems respond)**. It also affects who is recognized as having rights—and when.

## What Queer & Decolonial Perspectives Add

We are often taught that life follows a fixed order: childhood, then adulthood—and that only adults make important decisions.

Some scholars call this “chrononormativity”: the idea that time is organized in a way that gives power mainly to adults.

This way of thinking can exclude children from decisions that affect them now.

**Other perspectives—especially from Indigenous and decolonial traditions—see time differently: as connected, relational, and shaped by responsibilities to people, land, and nature across past, present, and future.**

These ideas help us question whether it makes sense to always treat children as “not yet ready” to participate.



## Rethinking “Generation”

We often imagine generations as layers: adults above, children below. But anthropologist Tim Ingold suggests another image: a rope, made of many strands woven together.

This means **people of different ages live at the same time and are connected to each other**.

In climate change, this is very clear: **children, adults, and older people are all affected now—though not in the same ways**.

If generations are interconnected like this, then **laws should not treat children only as “future beneficiaries,” but as people with rights and voices in the present**.



## Toward Postpaternalist Environmental Justice

Building on children's rights scholarship, the Youth Climate Justice project proposes a **postpaternalist approach** to intergenerational environmental justice.

This does not mean removing protection. Children still have the right to be protected.

But it also means recognizing that **children can express views, participate, and help shape decisions.**

In other words: not deciding only for children, but also with them.



### What This Means in Practice

- **Access to justice:** Children should be able to bring cases and be heard in court.
- **Faster responses:** Courts should act more quickly in urgent environmental situations.
- **Real participation:** Children's views should have an impact on decisions—not just be heard symbolically.
- **Fairness:** Not all children are affected in the same way; inequalities shape who is most exposed and who gets heard.
- **New legal ideas:** Some cases connect children's rights with the rights of nature, opening new ways to think about justice.

### A shift in international human rights law?

If we keep thinking of children only as “the future,” we risk ignoring what is happening to them now.

Many young people are already living with the impacts of climate change—floods, heat, pollution, and displacement.

**We need a different approach: one where adults and governments continue to have strong responsibilities to protect children, but where children are also recognized as people with rights and voices today.**

Climate justice is not only about the future—it is about how we act together in the present.



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