

COP and the Experiences of Children and Youth: Considering the Rights of Children and Youth in Global Climate Governance

Youth Climate Justice Project, School of Law, University College Cork (Ireland)



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Background

Each year, more and more children and youth are attending COP, the global United Nations conference where decision-makers from across the world discuss climate action and progress.

We do not know a lot about the experiences of children and youth who have participated (or tried to participate) – both the positive experiences they have had, and the challenges they have faced.

As part of the **Youth Climate Justice research project**, our research team decided to explore this by speaking with children and youth from across the world.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How does age (and other identities) affect participation at COP?

How are children and youth supported to participate at COP?

Do children and youth find children's rights useful for their COP advocacy?

Do children and youth see themselves as leaders in climate and children's rights?

What did our research involve?

We held 20 online interviews with children and youth from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America aged 11 to 29 at the time they attended (or tried to attend) COP.

Explaining their motivations to attend, many told us about directly experiencing the impacts of the climate crisis and environmental injustice. They see COP as an opportunity to take their local advocacy to the international level, and to make sure younger voices are heard by leaders.

What is the Youth Climate Justice research project?

This research study is part of a wider project, funded by the European Research Council, on Youth Climate Justice which is exploring child and youth-led climate action across the world, and what this means for children's rights.

The wave of child and youth-led climate action (e.g. protests, lobbying and legal cases) in recent years has been transformative for how we view children/youth. We are exploring whether this has taken us into a '**postpaternalist**' era for children's rights, changing how we think about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).



What did we find out?

Barriers

Our participants shared what challenges they face in relation to participation in COP.

- **Logistical and financial constraints.** Many children and youth have experienced profound challenges with travel, accommodation and visa arrangements and costs. For some, this meant they could not attend.
- **Discrimination and exclusion.** Children and youth's experiences at COP are shaped by multiple identity factors – age, gender, race, nationality, socio-economic status, and language – creating different forms of discrimination and exclusion, even determining who could attend, and who were taken seriously once inside. Participants who were younger, female, nonbinary or from less privileged backgrounds more likely to experience discrimination and exclusion, and those whose first language is not English.
- **Adult-centrism and tokenistic practices.** Children and youth are frustrated that whilst being showcased for visibility through 'photo-ops' or side-event appearances, they are rarely welcomed in decision-making spaces. They also express concern at situations where a single child or youth representative is called upon to speak for all children and youth, and the pressure that comes with this.

"I was given a ticket and a place to stay, but no one really prepared me for the labyrinth of negotiations and bureaucratic hurdles inside COP." *Female, Europe, aged 23 at first COP*

"I made alliances with about 15 young people, out of the 55,000 attendees, because they were the only 15 under 18 in those spaces ... and since you're a child, they don't even let you into the negotiation rooms." *Male, Latin America, aged 17 at first COP*

"I attended my first COP when I was 16, and I was in that grey area—not quite a kid, but not quite an adult either. I even met a girl who was seven or eight years old at COP28, which was incredible. But she told me she often felt undermined because she was so young, even though being at COP28 means you're already doing something most adults never achieve." *Female, Asia, aged 16 at first COP*

Facilitators

Our participants shared what helped them to participate and feel supported at COP.

- **Mentorship from adults and older youth.** Often, older allies help children and youth understand the complexities of COP, including registering for events, interpreting negotiation texts and networking effectively. Intergenerational support like this helps empower younger activists to become leaders themselves.
- **Being supported by an organisation.** Children and youth feel positively about being supported by organisations (such as NGOs and universities) who can provide training, logistical support, access to opportunities and help build their skills and confidence – treating children's input as more than a mere formality. Children and youth have also been part of government delegations, although our participants' experiences of this was mixed.
- **Transnational youth coalitions and alliances.** Being part of youth networks supports children and youth to access resources (such as partial grants for travel or translation assistance) and join collective advocacy actions like policy briefs, silent marches and side events.

Emotional toll

Participation in such high-pressure, adult-led environments can impact children and youth emotionally. Our participants highlighted the stress of visa processes, pressure to represent entire communities, and a fear of speaking out.

Several participants experienced burnout or a sense of “eco-anxiety” made worse by COP’s slow negotiations and disappointing outcomes. Whilst some had safeguarding support and adult chaperones, this was not the case for all.

Children’s rights

Many participants feel that children’s rights need to be better recognised in climate governance. This would provide a legal justification for children’s participation, mandate safeguards (such as emotional support and safe spaces) and make sure references to “future generations” become policy commitments.

References to children (under 18s) are largely missing at COP which some participants argue is a result of children being seen as emotive figures rather than political agents and rights-holders.

Based on my experience at COP and in other spaces, I would say that children’s rights specifically are not a significant part of the conversation. The relationship between climate change and human rights is clear: climate change impacts children all around the world, and we’re already experiencing these effects. However, they currently aren’t given enough attention. When these topics are addressed, it’s often in side-events and capacity-building sessions, not in the main negotiations.” **Non-binary, Europe, aged 15 at first COP.**

Impact

Whilst there are many challenges, and often disappointment in the COP outcomes, our participants feel strongly that child and youth participation at COP has meaningful impacts:

- **Personal development.** Children and youth develop confidence and climate policy literacy, access networking opportunities, gain visibility and media attention. Learning and connecting with allies and peer networks helps children and youth shape their efforts back home.
- **Collective power.** By working together as protestors, lobbyists, educators and moral voices, children and youth can push negotiators to be more ambitious.
- **Keeping the momentum.** Whilst some see COP as slow or “dysfunctional” – they also view it as a crucial for creating legal norms, international connections and building pressure for future actions.

“For me personally, COP has changed how I think about where change comes from. When I went to COP 26, I was 18, and I thought, ‘This conference is going to save the world’. Now, I see COP as just one piece of the puzzle. Change also comes from activism, protests, and the pressure put on negotiators outside of these spaces. COP has opened doors for me to meet people, build networks, and gain knowledge that I wouldn’t have otherwise.”

Female, Europe, aged 18 at first COP

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