



POLICY BRIEF

INTERGENERATIONAL MOBILIZATION TO PROTECT CHILDREN AND YOUTH AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE

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Background

Common sense interpretation of the newly released IPCC special report on Global Warming of 1.5 C, plus many other recent scientific reports, suggests that the preferred international goal of holding global warming in this century to 1.5 degrees Celsius over preindustrial levels is no longer politically achievable. That mark may be surpassed by 2040. Meeting even the less demanding objective of 2.0 degrees is unlikely. More realistic projections now expect global warming to surpass 3.0 degrees, and perhaps considerably more, by 2100. That guarantees catastrophic results rendering some densely populated places virtually uninhabitable, extending disease, destroying livelihoods and increasing poverty for many millions of families, launching mass migrations far surpassing those seen today, and threatening essential food, water, and air resources for very large populations in many parts of the globe.

These climate-driven difficulties are likely to exacerbate second order problems already present, especially armed conflicts, massive human rights violations, and breakdowns in international cooperation just when it is most needed. It is difficult to see how national governments and the international system at present unable to successfully address even the relatively mild climate-related exigencies now before them will cope with far more demanding emergencies in the future.

This means that humanity is now faced with two separate but linked and simultaneous climate challenges; (1) far more urgent reduction of the greenhouse gases that drive climate change and (2) adaptation to and protection from an increasingly more exigent human environment caused or exacerbated by it. These challenges probably will dominate much of civic and economic life throughout the rest of this century.

Children and youth are now, and will continue to be, the primary victims of climate change and its related fallout. They account for half the world's population, the half who will inherit a problematic future they have no voice in determining from the other half whose addiction to fossil fuels is quickly degrading the inheritance it leaves them. This means that children and youth have a long-term future interest that conflicts with the shorter-term interests of today's adults who prosper by emitting greenhouse gases. This conflict is increasingly recognized and is even in some places the subject of lawsuits seeking to establish that children have a right to protection of their future well-being.



While intergenerational rights are less than fully explicit in international human rights law, a fundamental principle of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most widely ratified human rights convention, holds in Article 3 that “[I]n all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.” Children’s “best interests” are not confined to the present and must include proper concern for their future well-being (hence their uncontested international right to a decent education). Logically, that should include protection from the ravages of climate change caused by the heedless neglect or conscious selfishness of today’s adults.

The problem is that compromised adults (e.g. those in government) having a vested interest in maintaining the status quo against children’s best interests control access to the legal and social structures by which children and youth can effect change needed to access and exercise their human rights. The question is where to find uncompromised adults who can intervene to assist children and youth to gain their rights to future well-being minimally threatened by climate change.

One answer arising from observation and experience in different parts of the world is that *elders*—usually older women and men retired from career responsibilities and in the role of grandparents or mentors---are often natural allies to children and youth and in a position to help them defend their rights and interests in an adult-dominated society. In some cultures, particularly amongst Indigenous populations, that role is built into the social fabric; elsewhere it may come in the form of an organized movement making “oldsters into elders” through preparation in “conscious eldering”.

The present *youth* generation represents an underdeveloped resource to address these global challenges and build more resilient futures. Furthermore, youth are less habitual problem-solvers, more willing to take risks, early adopters of technology and innovation, and have a creative, vibrant energy that can be harnessed for social change.

Youth, including in recent fora specifically on climate change, have indicated that they would be happy for such interest from elders in helping open the way for them. They insist on being taken seriously as active subjects with their own ideas and objectives rather than being condescended to and merely recruited into adult agendas. But within a relationship of mutual respect they appreciate the protective concern, wisdom and mentoring of elders, as well as the access they can provide into adult-controlled government and social structures where the young can advocate for their own well-being and best interests.

IICRD, like others, has found from field experience in partnership with Indigenous communities in Canada and in other collaboration around the world, that “elders” can be systematically mobilized as allies to help children and youth access and exercise their human rights and that modes and tools of cooperation can be developed that encourage old and young to work productively together. That includes backing child and



youth initiatives and leadership where they emerge. This partnership has so far been applied mostly to local community situations, including in Indigenous communities, but some now suggest that this cultivated working alliance between young and old is capable of opening regional, national and even international spaces to the voices and participation of the young so that they can also at those levels influence thinking, and bend policies, to better recognize and serve the needs, rights and wellbeing of children and youth in addressing climate change now and in the future.

Strategic considerations

Two powerful ideas must lie at the heart of an alliance between the young and the old. First is recognition of the essential interdependence between all people, communities, societies and governments in addressing a phenomenon that is global even when it has local expression. Everyone must recognize and relate to the rest of humanity as needed partners in effort as well as in fate. The future of today's young depends on decisions taken by adults, but the future of civilization and the legacy of the old, and perhaps the human species, depends on how successfully today's children and youth understand and grapple with climate change and its complex fallout. In the words of a remarkable "Declaration of Interdependence" written by Canadian scientist and environmentalist David Suzuki and others on the occasion of the 1992 Earth Summit,

We are one brief generation in the long march of time; the future is not ours to erase. So where knowledge is limited, we will remember all those who walk after us, and err on the side of caution. . . . At this turning point in our relationship with Earth, we will work for an evolution: from dominance to partnership; from fragmentation to connection; from insecurity to interdependence.

Experience from various countries suggests that locally based projects bringing children and youth into community conservation, environmental and sustainable development activities can be highly successful means not only for educating the young but also for eliciting popular interest and support for them. In some cases such projects are the initiatives of children and youth and enlist the ongoing support of adults and their social and political institutions. Such endeavors bringing together communities in partnership with each other and with nature merit systematic diffusion, support and expansion.

As Suzuki has repeatedly pointed out and field experience amply confirms, the major challenges to be faced revolve around four interacting themes representing humankind's close identification with Nature: Soil, water, air, and energy. Among the greatest threats related to climate change are diminished food production (from both soil and sea), drought and flood, unhealthy and even lethal air pollution, and dependence on fossil fuel energy sources that are causing the climate change emergency. Each of these, and their interactions, need to be addressed in depth under the paradigm of interdependence.

The second necessary idea is absolute priority for the young. "Children's troubadour" and renowned children's advocate Raffi Cavoukian promotes the concept of "child



honouring” as a cross-culturally accessible way to bring children to the top of public concern and priorities. As he explains in his book, *Child Honouring*:

At this critical point in the history of humankind, *the irreducible needs of all children can offer a unifying ethic by which the cultures of our interdependent world might reorder their priorities.* . . . This is a “children first” approach to healing communities and restoring ecosystems. It views how we regard our young as the key to building a humane and sustainable world. . . . It offers a proactive developmental approach to creating sustainable societies. As a creed that crosses all faiths and cultures, Child Honouring can become a potent remedy for the most challenging issues of our age.

Based on work that IICRD and others have been pursuing in community work for many years, the notion of Child Honouring, when extended to apply to the full age range of childhood and youth from birth to 30 years of age, suggests four action pathways in accordance with ascending age. All of these are roles in which elders can make critically important contributions.

Protection of children from the effects of climate change, especially when young and in conditions of special vulnerability. This may involve advocating for new or expanded policies having a strong social justice focus.

Preparation of children through education and directed experience to understand and respond to climate change issues, including expected impacts that they will have to deal with. At more advanced secondary and university levels, education around climate change issues needs to include practical information and training needed to undertake social action.

Participation of older children and youth in public debate and action, to have their voices heard and taken seriously, including in the formation of policy.

Promotion and support of youth activism and initiatives aimed at creating the society the young want to establish and live in a youth and eventual adults. This involves investing in their leadership and following them, where merited.

There is a very notable recent upswelling of both youth and elder activism around climate change issues, but so far in separate contexts. The two groups are not for the most part in regular contact with each other. What is needed now, some have noted, is more opportunity for the young and elderly to come together and join forces. The question is how to provide for that. One idea is that this is an appropriate function for state/province, regional and local government to sponsor, perhaps in conjunction with education institutions. It also is an open opportunity for non-profits of various types.

There also is substantial interest in international outreach, perhaps creating a global intergenerational movement. There is some thought to the effect that this might be practically effected by building on human rights (especially child rights) networks since the purposes and dynamics involved closely parallel human rights values, thinking, and



action. In view of some preliminary legal scholarship on the topic, it has been suggested that a properly structured global process of intergenerational consultation on climate change might serve very well to inform and stimulate the creation of an official new human right on the topic, which may be badly needed.

Action recommendations

At the recent Intergenerational Gathering hosted by IICRD at the Global Climate Action Summit in San Francisco (Sep. 11) youth shared the following concerns and strategies:

- Recognize the **enormous diversity** amongst youth experiencing the effects of climate change, for example young women and men living in the Global South and North, in differing bioregions (e.g. urban, marine, land based, mountains, desert), experiencing poverty and discrimination etc.
- Appreciate the **emotional spectrum** that youth feel when confronted with the enormity of the challenges posed by climate change
- While recognizing challenges faced by youth, **appreciate the resilience**, creativity, social connectivity and innovation youth can bring to managing changing climate
- **Start where youth are at**, many young people may not think of community change in direct relation to changing climate but rather in relation to direct adversity faced by youth such as violence, migration, discrimination and social and political exclusion
- **Create social and political space for adults and youth to learn from one another**, the existing political paradigms are often adult centric and unable to adequately respond to the challenges of climate change, new political paradigms including greater and more meaningful youth engagement should be explored

Based on these insights and recommendations emerging from the Summit Gathering, the following Policy Action Recommendations are suggested:

1. Each state/provincial government, perhaps with university technical and organizational support, should establish a standing Intergenerational Council on Climate Change to ensure that children and youth are (a) properly protected from salient dangers, (b) educationally prepared to understand climate change and the practical impacts of it they are likely to have to deal with, (c) afforded opportunity to be consulted and participate in public and policy dialogue on the topic, (d) able to organize their own political, educational, economic and other initiatives in defense of their own values, purposes and best interests.
2. An intergenerational task force should at appropriate state/province or local levels review climate change education and information available at all age levels from primary through secondary education, making recommendations for improvements needed to ensure that children and youth are as a group provided



as age appropriate all the information they need about the nature of climate change and its likely effects on them in order to make good decisions about their own lives and to participate in public discussion of the issues involved.

3. Learn from experience in Indigenous and other societies in which the lessons learned of elders and youth working together to adapt and transmit traditional social and ecological knowledge can be applied to other climate impacted communities.
4. Youth with experience in social and environmental justice, community activism and child and youth rights should be invited to provide expert input in designing, co-leading and monitoring Intergenerational efforts addressing the effects of climate change
5. A global project should be organized to (a) frame and organize international conversation and information about climate change and its effects on the young; (b) collect and document climate change-related actions in which children and youth participate, making the information available on line for public use; (c) provide a means of continued discussion for young persons and elders together to develop ideas for sustainable development appropriate to the challenges of current and expected climate change; (d) establish a communication system allowing intergenerational interest groups, and especially children and youth in them, to easily communicate with each other; (e) organize events bringing interested parties together as needed and appropriate.
6. Eldering education regarding climate change should be developed and made available to a broad international public to recruit elders to the cause and to help grandparents and other elders protect and prepare the young they know for climate change and its related challenges.
7. Facilities should be provided for interested but unaffiliated children and youth and elders to find information, join groups, and provide feedback on climate change-related issues.
8. An international group of qualified experts and appropriate youth should be formed to explore establishment of an intergenerational human right pertinent to climate change challenges.