

CLIMATE (IN)JUSTICE: HOW CLIMATE CHANGE AFFECTS CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO JUSTICE

This Policy Brief synthesises insights from the CFJ-EN 3rd seminar “**Climate (In)justice: How Climate Change Affects Children's Access to Justice**” that took place in **Brussels, Belgium, on 10 and 11 October 2024**.

The brief incorporates **5 key messages** drawn from discussions with participants, including young activists, child rights experts, academia and policymakers. Each key message is accompanied by a set of actions, targeting policymakers at both national and international levels as the primary stakeholders. Along with other actors, they could strengthen climate justice in a manner that respects children's rights and refers to useful resources.

The proposal emphasises the urgent need for action in the current climate crisis, the inclusion of all children in the process, and the systemic reform of justice systems to address these issues effectively.

KEY MESSAGES:

Strengthening justice systems to support children and youth in the climate crisis

Empowering children and youth in climate decision-making

Protecting and safeguarding child and youth activists

Addressing the disproportionate impact of climate change on marginalised children

Holding States accountable for climate (in)action

“ Society is not ready to listen to children’s voices, and want to silence them, because they are not ready to hear what they have to say. ”

Benoit Van Keirsblick,
Director of DCI-Belgium and
Member of CRC Committee

1

Strengthening justice systems to support children and youth in the climate crisis



Justice systems must be adapted and equipped to address the **needs of children and youth in the climate crisis** and uphold their right to **access justice**. Due to their unique perspectives and situations, children and youth face **systemic barriers to accessing justice**, including procedural challenges, societal resistance, and a lack of legal resources (such as tools or professionals) tailored to their circumstances.



Expanding access of children to mechanisms that enable them to challenge environmental injustices and hold governments and corporations accountable.

We call for **national governments, the European Union, the Council of Europe and other international organisations, and judicial authorities** to **harmonise legal standards and develop simplified legal processes** tailored to children’s capacities, situations and specific needs.

We call for **national governments, NGOs, law firms and pro bono legal networks** to strengthen and provide **free legal aid** for child and youth activists, particularly those who become victims or who face **criminalisation or repression**.



Increasing resources to support children and youth and give them access to justice in the context of climate crisis.

We call for **governments** to set **budgets that adequately and meaningfully support youth climate justice**, by equipping justice systems, to train professionals and to support children and youth in their judicial process in the context of climate justice.

We call for **States** to **establish dedicated ombudspersons for children or independent commissions** to monitor and address the unique challenges faced by children and youth in the context of climate crisis.



RESOURCE

- [CFJ-EN handbook Climate change & Child-friendly justice \(2024 Special Edition\)](#)

“ We must create spaces where children are truly heard. Their ideas are not the future, they are the present. ”

Fanni Mátyók,
Founder of WellBee

2

Empowering children and youth in climate decision-making



Children and youth must be recognised as **active participants in climate policy and governance**. Their right to participation, enshrined in the UNCRC and other international and European instruments, is often undermined by adult-dominated systems and tokenistic approaches. **Empowering children and youth** to lead change themselves ensures climate solutions that are **inclusive and responsive** to the needs of both present and future generations.



Integrating children and youth's participation into climate governance at all levels.

We call for **national governments, regional and international institutions (EU, CoE, UN), and NGOs** to collaborate to **establish councils and advisory boards for children and youth** within governments and international institutions, particularly for events such as the COP ensuring their meaningful participation and representation in key climate negotiations and policy frameworks.

We call for **civil society organisations and regional and international institutions** to create **safe spaces and platforms** where children can openly discuss their concerns and propose solutions to shape climate policies and actions, for example at the [World Congress on Justice with Children](#).



Adapting participation and communication methods to engage, inspire, and involve children and youth through peer-led interventions.

We call for **children's rights NGOs, experts and creative professionals (artists)** to develop peer-led initiatives **using creative tools such as storytelling, art, theatre, and other mediums** to make climate issues accessible and relatable for children.

We call for **schools or other supportive environments where children feel comfortable** to implement **climate education** tailored to different age groups and cultural contexts, promoting active involvement from children.



RESOURCES

- [Council of Europe, Let's decide together! Guide to meaningful and effective engagement of children in decision-making processes, 2023](#)
- [Council of Europe, Children as Defenders of Human Rights - a study on Council of Europe Member States, December 2023](#)
- [UN Special Rapporteur, Promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change, July 2024](#)

“ We are the first generation to feel the impact of climate change and the last ones to do anything about it. ”

Oskar Bonte,
Belgian young activist

3

Protecting and safeguarding child and youth activists



Child and youth climate activists face significant risks, including criminalisation, intimidation, and mental and emotional exhaustion, often caused by disillusionment and frustration. **Protecting their mental and physical well-being, as well as their rights, is essential** to ensure they can continue their advocacy without fear or harm. Collaboration between children, youth, and adults is crucial. Governments, civil society, professionals, and trusted adults have a key role to play in **safeguarding the activism of children and youth**.



Strengthening safeguarding and protection mechanisms for child and youth activists.

We call for **national and local governments, regional and international organisations (EU, CoE, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child)** to ensure robust **legal safeguards** for children participating in peaceful protests.

We call for **law enforcement agencies and mental health services and professionals** to establish **emergency response plans** that provide immediate protection and emotional support for activists facing threats or repression.



Facilitating open dialogue between children and society to amplify their voices.

We call for **civil society organisations, media outlets and educational institutions (schools)** to launch **public awareness campaigns** highlighting the connection between **climate justice, children's rights and mental health**.

We call for **cross-sector and multidisciplinary partnerships with legal and health professionals, NGOs and policymakers** to provide **mental health support, safety and safeguarding training, and advocacy resources** for child and youth activists.



RESOURCES

- [DCI Belgium and partners, Quality Standards for Legal Assistance for Children Suspected and/or Accused: A Step-by-Step Guide, 2022](#)
- [UN High-Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children, The Climate Crisis and Violence Against Children, 2022](#)

“ We must dismantle adult supremacy to address systemic inequalities. ”

Sophie Shields,
Policy and Impact Specialist, The Institute
for Inspiring Children's Futures at the
University of Strathclyde, Scotland

4

Addressing the disproportionate impact of climate change on marginalised children



Marginalised groups such as **Roma children, LGBTQIA+ children, children with disabilities, and those in detention** face heightened **vulnerabilities** to climate change. These groups often lack access to resources and justice systems, deepening their exclusion.



Developing inclusive evacuation plans tailored to marginalised children's needs.

We call for **local governments and emergency response agencies** to design **evacuation plans** that specifically address the needs of marginalised children, including those with disabilities, as well as children in care or detention, **ensuring access to safe facilities and medical supplies during emergencies.**

We call for **international organisations and national governments** to provide **technical support, resources, and training** for implementing these plans effectively at local and regional levels.



Expanding social support programmes for vulnerable families in climate-affected areas, particularly targeting children at risk of displacement or exclusion.

We call for **social services agencies, local governments, and civil society organisations** to partner in designing **support programmes** focusing on housing, healthcare and education for children at risk.

We call for **States and social services agencies** to **adequately equip these social support programmes** with human and financial resources.



RESOURCES

- [Save the Children, Guaranteeing Children's Future: How COVID-19, cost-of-living and climate crises affect children in poverty and what governments in Europe need to do, 2023](#)
- [CFJ-EN and Justice with Children Global Initiative, Towards LGBTI+ sensitive justice systems for children in Europe, 2022](#)

“ It is a lot more empowering to see that we are making a change instead of feeling victimised. ”

Ioana Mihailescu,
Romanian young activist

5

Holding States accountable for climate (in)action



Governments bear a legal and moral responsibility to address the climate crisis and uphold **children’s rights to a safe environment**. However, many states fall short of their commitments, necessitating **stronger accountability mechanisms** to ensure action aligns with obligations.



Introducing robust accountability frameworks to monitor State compliance with environmental and human and children’s rights laws.

We call for **national governments, in collaboration with independent watchdog bodies (CoE or UN Committees) and CSOs**, to produce transparent and child-accessible **reporting on climate commitments and progress**.

We call for **regional and international bodies (CoE, UN Committees)** to collaborate in designing and **enforcing penalties for States that fail to meet climate targets**.



Leveraging strategic litigation to drive systemic reforms and compel governments to act.

We call for **children’s rights and climate focused NGOs, pro bono networks, law firms and child/youth groups** to identify and support landmark **legal cases that challenge inaction and push for reforms**.

We call for **States to remove obstacles for children and youth to file complaints at national, regional and international levels** (e.g. European Court of Human Rights, Committee of Social Rights, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, etc.).



RESOURCES

- [ACRiSL, Child Rights Strategic Litigation: Key Principles for Climate Justice Litigation, 2023](#)
- [ACRiSL, Advancing Child Rights-Consistent Strategic Litigation Practice, 2022](#)
- [CRIN, Guide to Strategic Litigation, 2014](#)
- [Terre des Hommes, Climate in-justice for children: How climate crisis affects access to justice and children’s rights, 2023](#)

Children and youth are not just victims of the climate crisis; they are agents of change. Policymakers must recognise their voices as central to climate action and justice. By strengthening justice systems, empowering child participation, including all children, protecting activists, and holding States accountable, we can build a present and a future that respect and uphold children’s rights while tackling the urgent challenges of climate change.

“We need to act; we need to act now!”

Benjamin Van Bunderen Robberechts,
Belgian young activist

“Time is crucial to make a change.”

Elisa Morgera,
UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection
of human rights in the context of climate change

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