

PROTECTING THE FUTURE: UN LAUNCHES GENERAL COMMENT ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Authors: Laura Marchetti & Luisa Tesch

“what is good for children and nature is good for humanity.”

- Esmeralda Curi Quispe,
Member of the Youth Advisory
Board to the GC26

This article starts echoing the statement of Esmeralda, a Peruvian girl and climate activist. In a loud and firm voice she reflected on this powerful statement during the launching ceremony of General Comment No. 26 (GC26) on Children's Rights and the Environment with a special focus on climate change in the Palais des Nations, Geneva on 18th September 2023.

Eighteen children's rights experts from all over the world make up the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Committee is tasked with monitoring that states that have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) are implementing its provisions. They also write General Comments to clarify and offer direction to the states on how to implement the treaty.

The most recent General Comment, GC26, provides guidance on how the environmental crisis affects children's rights and what states must do to ensure a cleaner, greener, healthier, and more sustainable world for children. It emphasises the urgent need to address the adverse effects of environmental degradation, with a special focus on climate change and the enjoyment of children's rights.

Laura Marchetti was fortunate to be at the launch. There was an atmosphere of pure attention and emotion during the ceremony. The audience - NGOs and individuals involved in protecting and promoting children's rights - participated actively by posing questions to the panel on the implications of GC26 for children and duty-bearers.



Photo: Laura Marchetti

GC26 is the outcome of an 18 month-long consultation process in which more than 16,000 children from 121 countries participated. It included children living in communities at the forefront of the environmental and climate crises such as the Pacific Islands, India, Zimbabwe and Vietnam. Esmeralda Curi Quispe, quoted in the opening of the article, was one of 12 children experts across ages, experiences and backgrounds from different parts of the world who formed the Children's Advisors Team and who were key in the development process. This was one of the most comprehensive consultation processes ever undertaken by the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

At the launching ceremony, the Children's Advisory Team members shared the panel with the chair of the Committee and other guests, making their voices heard loud and clear. The children's key demands of adults include:

- A clean and healthy environment
- To be listened to, taken seriously and play a role in environmental action
- Clear and transparent actions from governments, corporations and all adults
- Cooperation across countries and regions of the world
- Awareness raising and environmental education
- Spaces to share their ideas for potential solutions.

A **child-friendly version** of GC26 (available in [English](#), [French](#), and [Spanish](#)) was also presented in the ceremony, helping the spread of this document in clear and accessible language. The friendly version elaborates on how children's rights are related to climate change and that the environmental crisis particularly threatens some of their rights. For instance, since children have the right to life, survival, and development, their lives should never be put at risk from harm such as pollution or lead exposure.



GC26 reinforces the following key messages for NGO's working with and for children and youth:

1. Advocate for Environmental Rights:

NGOs should advocate for the rights of children related to the environment. This involves pushing for governmental policies and actions that respect, protect, and fulfil these rights. Climate change is a major threat to children and young people (especially to girls), putting children's overall health, nutrition, education, and development at risk. Even though climate change impacts all children, those living in low-income countries and the global south are at increased vulnerability.

2. Empower Children to Claim their Environmental Rights:

It is essential to ensure that children and young people (and especially girls) have a voice where decisions on this issue are taken, to support climate education and to support communities and governments where children live to be ready for and adapt to the climate crisis. NGOs should empower children. This could involve educating children about their rights, providing support for legal actions if necessary, and ensuring that mechanisms are in place for children to access justice when their environmental rights are violated.

3. Make resources available for children and youth:

Children and young people are not only the focus of our work but also active co-creators and participants. The child-friendly versions of GC26 provide a good example.

Child-friendly resources empower children by providing accessible, comprehensible information, fostering informed participation, and enabling advocacy. These resources bridge the information gap, empower children to engage in policy processes, and promote inclusivity while creating future advocates.

Environmental harm is a significant threat to children's rights worldwide. Despite children being less responsible for the environmental crisis, they are already taking action not only for themselves but for all of us. In this context, GC26 represents a milestone in making the right of children to participate enshrined in [Article 12 UNCRC](#) a reality. The drafting process, content, and launching ceremony of this General Comment show that children are enthusiastic about filling those spaces that belong to them and are eager to make their voices heard and considered.

Now it is up to governments who have ratified the UNCRC to uphold those rights to ensure the future of the planet and humanity. Concrete steps governments can take, according to GC26, include [regulating business enterprises](#), [assessing the environmental impacts](#) of policies and projects, [identifying and preventing foreseeable harm](#), and [mitigating](#) such damage if it is not preventable.

According to Volker Türk, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (who made a statement via video message in the ceremony),

“the choices that states make today have the power to transform the lives of children for decades to come.”



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Laura Marchetti:

Lawyer from the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile with eight years of experience in litigation and legal advice on children's human rights. Holds a master's degree in International Children's Rights from Leiden University.

Luisa Tesch:

Junior Programme Manager at ICDI. Holds a master's in Social Policy and Public Health from Utrecht University and a Psychology degree from the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile. Specialises in Childhood and Public Policies with a focus on child protection, evaluation of programmes and social policy.

REFERENCES

Child Rights Connect – General Comments, available at <https://childrightsconnect.org/general-comments/>

Convention on the Rights of the Child, available at [Convention on the Rights of the Child | OHCHR](#)

Terre des homes - General Comment No. 26: Celebratory launch with children worldwide, available at <https://www.tdh.org/en/media/press-releases/general-comment-no-26-celebratory-launch-with-children-worldwide>

Unite for children environmental rights – Protect children’s rights and our planet, available at <https://childrightsenvironment.org/>

United Nations – Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/crc>