

# A COP Fit for Children

How to support children's participation



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**“I urge you to listen to children and consider our opinions when making policies concerning climate change. Children should be encouraged to advocate for their thoughts and lobby. This would show our opinions on climate change and have a crucial impact on the decision-making process.”**

*Shivangi, 18-year-old girl from the United States.*

## Acknowledgements

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## Background

**“I am requesting that the leaders and decision-makers please listen to us and give additional importance to our voice. We promise you to become part of the solution.”**

*Diya, 17-year-old girl from Bangladesh*

The climate crisis is an intergenerational crisis that affects children and their rights now, and in the future, and severely risks deepening inequalities across borders and generations. It is estimated that approximately 1 billion children live in one of the 33 countries classified as “extremely high-risk” to climate change.<sup>i</sup>

Children, in all their diversity, have the right to be heard<sup>ii</sup>. The growing global movement of children demanding climate action has clearly demonstrated that they have essential views and recommendations on how the climate crisis should be addressed. Despite this, climate events and summits at all levels, including COP, are rarely inclusive of children. As adults, we need to recognise children as peers and partners in identifying solutions to the climate crisis and go the extra mile to ensure that children most impacted by inequality and discrimination have a voice.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and entrenched existing inequalities, hitting the children that are impacted most by inequality and discrimination hardest, whether that be because they are children or other intersecting factors – such as their gender, ethnicity, disability, or being from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Children can face many barriers that restrict their opportunities to organise, share their concerns publicly and join events and summits. Children’s safety and wellbeing should not be compromised to ensure they can participate, and children’s voices should not be excluded from COP as a result of COVID-19, vaccine inequity, or other existing barriers to travel, including a lack of travel documentation, legal status, financial resources or accessibility for children living with disabilities among other areas.

Against this backdrop, and to ensure that all children, including those that are most impacted by inequality and discrimination<sup>iii</sup>, are able to exercise their right to participate in decision-making at COP, it is crucial that providing safe and meaningful opportunities for children’s participation (online and offline) is at the forefront of planning for, during, and after COP.

**“We children are maybe not climate scientists, but we know something important. We must act now! Before it’s too late, then we will regret.”**

*Emanuel, 15-year-old boy from Norway*

The COP Presidency, along with all participating governments and the UNFCCC, have a unique opportunity to show the millions of children engaged with climate justice their commitment to children’s participation by ensuring that all children (under 18 years of age, as defined by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) have safe and meaningful opportunities to participate in

COP, and other associated processes (including Bonn intersessionals, Conference of the Youth (COY) and COP Presidency country level engagements).

So far, despite children worldwide taking bold action to hold governments to account on climate and push for more ambitious policies, children and their rights have been conspicuously absent from national and international climate discussions, commitments, and policies. While we have seen a number of spaces created for youth more broadly in the global climate space, such as the UN Secretary General's Youth Panel on Climate, very few spaces are created for children. The world must now recognise the legitimacy and power of children's voices and their leadership in the climate movement.

Governments must make every effort to create mechanisms to ensure children have the opportunity to bring their experiences and recommendations to COP with a specific focus on the participation of children most impacted by climate change and inequality and that the principle of non-discrimination applies to all efforts. Planning for a truly child-friendly and inclusive COP is about how children are involved in the processes leading up to COP, COP itself, and follow-up processes. Below, we have outlined key recommendations for national delegations, the UNFCCC and the host government for COP.<sup>iv</sup>

## Recommendations

### To the UNFCCC and/ or COP Presidency

The UNFCCC and the COP Presidency should ensure that children's participation is actively included ahead of, during, and after COP, systematically creating space and opportunities for children's safe and meaningful participation in all COP discussions, panels and processes and for observing relevant negotiations.

#### Processes ahead of COP

##### Consult:

- Consult children before COP to understand their needs and ideas for making an inclusive COP and take steps to implement these. Consult children during your country visits.

##### Safety:

- Put in place necessary safeguarding procedures and policies. Work together with children to define the risks they may face and mitigation strategies. COPs can be overwhelming (e.g. intense negotiations, a large/noisy venue, long days and meetings), and children's well-being needs to be considered and supported. Risks related to travel, abuse, retribution, privacy, bullying, intimidation, and media exposure must also be considered.

##### Access and Space:

- Revise the application process for children and child/youth organisations. There should be another way to apply to attend COP that does not require complicated documentation. Young people who are not affiliated with a national delegation should not be hindered from attending. Make communications on this application process easy to understand and

translate them into different languages, working to ensure children most impacted by inequality and discrimination have opportunities to engage.

- Encourage other Parties to support children in attending either through their official delegation or support them in attending the conference as Observers.
- Establish a formal space or constituency group within the UNFCCC specifically for children with support from child rights organisations proficient in safeguarding procedures.
- Review security protocols to ensure children's access and participation will only be supported, not hindered (including access for their accompanying adults and translators) in all COP spaces.
- Encourage/ensure formal spaces (online and offline) for children to engage in discussions ahead of COP and at key pre-COP events.
- Ensure different stakeholders supporting children's participation can uphold the standards for quality and meaningful children's participation (see the [Basic Requirements for Children Participation](#), or [General Comment No. 12 \(2009\) The right of the child to be heard](#)).

### Information:

- Create and circulate a set of guidance materials to country Parties to encourage child-inclusive negotiation processes, climate policies and action.
- Simplify communications on COP processes (Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI), Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) intersessionals, pre-COP, COP negotiations, events, agendas and processes), translate them into different languages (online and offline), ensure they are easily accessible and use age and gender-responsive language.

## During COP / throughout the whole COP process

### Information:

- Ensure up-to-date, accessible, age and gender-responsive explanations of negotiated texts and daily agenda in different languages (online and offline) where possible.

### Access and Space:

- Ensure that children have spaces and opportunities for participation during COP discussions, panels and high-level processes and can observe and participate in relevant negotiations in an ideal situation. Children in all their diversity should be included, ensuring diversity in gender, age, disability, ethnicity, and socio-economic background.
- The COP Presidency should include a principle in all event applications to be inclusive (either through having children on the panel, reserving space for children to make interventions/ask questions or ensuring the event is inclusive). This would be similar to the principles of gender-equal panels.
- Provide children with a child-friendly space where they can access the resources/support they need, meet together as a group, and plan and prepare for their participation online and offline, such as a children and youth pavilion in the blue zone to be facilitated by the COP Presidency each year.

- Child-friendly mechanisms and platforms should be established online and offline to facilitate children’s formal engagement during COP – in both the green and blue zones.
- Take into account the accessibility needs of some children, including between the zones.

### Enabling and Respectful Environment:

- Take steps to create an enabling environment for children’s participation where their views and recommendations are respected and valued, and they have a real opportunity to influence decision-making. For example:
  - Frame children’s participation as a core/essential way of working and a shared human rights obligation (i.e., not an optional ‘nice to have’ aspect of the proceedings); secure and protect space for children in all key processes and events.
  - Ensure adults/advocates intervene if they witness disrespect for children and their participation and remedy the situation.
  - Set up briefings and ensure organisers, security, translators, panellists, moderators, media, etc., understand the importance of children’s participation and their role in creating a supportive and respectful environment (see [guidance for moderators/adult panellists](#)).

### Safety:

- Create a safe environment for children. Ensure children have access to the resources needed to support their physical and mental health and protect them from violence/abuse. This could include appointed chaperones responsible for their safety, implementation of previously planned safeguarding procedures, on-call counselling services, on-site first aid, daily debriefings, medical insurance, feedback mechanisms, clearly defined reporting and referral mechanisms, and more.

## After COP

### Information:

- Share the outcomes of COP, including summaries of key negotiations and commitments, in accessible, age and gender-responsive formats and in different languages, also for children with disabilities.

### Evaluation:

- Undertake an evaluation of children’s experiences during COP. Create space, opportunities and facilitation for children to take stock of what happened at COP and plan their next steps for engaging in a green and sustainable future.

### Documentation and Learning:

- Document steps taken to create a child-friendly COP to be used by future Presidencies.
- Apply learnings and experiences to future planning processes/COPs.
- Include children in the planning and handover to the new team.

## To National delegations and wider COP member state participants

Government stakeholders working on COP should enable children's participation throughout COP processes as part of the official national delegation (Party badge) and by creating the space and opportunity for children's participation as Observers. The below recommendations should be considered for both options.

### Processes ahead of COP

#### Coordination:

- Head of delegation/lead negotiator should consider identifying a child engagement focal point in the delegation, trained in the safe and meaningful participation of children. This person will be responsible for liaising with children, supporting their meaningful participation and coordinating many of the efforts listed below.

#### Preparation:

- Ensure children have time to prepare and meet together as a group before COP to discuss and agree on their desired outcomes and strategies to achieve them.

#### Safety:

- Undertake a risk assessment and develop a plan for child safeguarding. Work with children to further understand risks and possible solutions. Ensure that information related to safety and safeguarding is child-friendly and accessible.

#### Accountability:

- Examine what children have shared about past processes (positive and negative) and address these issues while planning for COP.
- Engage with children to define children's expectations; 'what success looks like'; the support/resources they need to engage effectively (including capacity-building needs).

#### Access and Space:

- Support children to join the official delegation (including travel arrangements); support children to attend COP through other means (online and offline); encourage selection processes (for child delegates) to be inclusive, child-led, peer-selected, rooted in existing community level mechanisms and equal opportunities for all genders (see [here](#)).
- Secure space for children in all relevant processes, including intersessionals, regional climate weeks, the Conference of Youth (COY).
- Help children overcome challenges related to travel visas, passports, vaccine requirements and other possible travel restrictions. Compensate children for any expenses.

#### Consult:

- Encourage the establishment of mechanisms to support ongoing dialogue between children and decision-makers (e.g., child reference groups, online forums, feedback mechanisms,

etc.); regularly consult children throughout the entire year, especially before and after every opportunity for inputs and debriefing.

- Ensure that children's demands expressed through other processes, e.g. research, protest and petitions, are reflected/included in COP processes/negotiations/thematic focus.

**Information:**

- Present the Nationally Determined Contributions and other relevant climate information in an accessible, age and gender-responsive format.

**Training:**

- Provide training for children and child/youth-led groups on climate policy processes both online and offline, including connecting to decision-makers online and offline, benefiting from mentorship. These trainings should also target those who may face additional barriers to accessing climate information due to their age, gender, race, location, digital access, and disability.

## During the COP process

**Coordination:**

- Child engagement focal points will continue to liaise with children, support their meaningful participation and coordinate many of the efforts listed below.

**Networks:**

- Support child networking and connect children with other groups e.g., YOUNGO, other children.

**Advocate:**

- Be an advocate for children and intervene if processes are not supporting children's full participation (e.g., security barriers, access to translation, accessibility issues, etc.).
- Ensure adults/advocates intervene if they witness disrespect for children and their participation and remedy the situation.
- Advocate for children's rights to be integrated as central elements of all texts negotiated.

**Information:**

- Update children on key negotiations and debates and hold regular meetings with children and other negotiators throughout COP to discuss ideas from children.
- Ensure accessible, age and gender-responsive information on climate science, climate policy processes and COP logistics/agenda during COP.

**Transparency:**

- Hold regular meetings with children and the entire delegation during COP to explore:
  - Wellbeing check-ins;
  - Opportunities for children to engage in proceedings;
  - Children's experiences (positive and negative) and how they can best be supported;



- Children’s recommendations related to key negotiations and debates.

**Enabling and Respectful Environment:**

- Take steps to create an enabling environment for children’s participation where their views and recommendations are respected and valued and that they have a real opportunity to influence decision-making. In other words: to help convince all duty-bearers of the vital need to respect and support children’s civil rights and freedoms. For example:
  - Provide briefings for delegates and other state stakeholders;
  - Ensure moderators/panellists at events at COP understand how to support a child-friendly process (see here);
  - Secure and protect gender-equal spaces for children in all key processes/events.

**After COP****Debrief:**

- Organise a debriefing with children directly following COP. Debriefing should highlight key outcomes and negotiations and evaluate children’s experiences.

**Next Steps:**

- Begin planning for the next COP (with children), taking into account children’s recommendations and experiences.
- Start exploring with children what will be negotiated at the next COP and provide space for children to give feedback to the national delegation.
- Ensure that the ideas shared by children during the previous COP will be implemented and taken forward.
- Include children in the planning and handover to the new team.

**Improve:**

- Strengthen established mechanisms that support ongoing dialogue between children and decision-makers (e.g., child reference groups, online forums, feedback mechanisms, etc.) and seek to strengthen their sustainability and influence.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> UNICEF, 2021. The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis: Introducing the Children’s Climate Risk Index. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/reports/climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis>

<sup>ii</sup> UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12; UN Human rights council Resolution 45/30 “realising children’s rights through a healthy environment” Paragraph 9; UNCRC General Comment 12, Chapter 11

<sup>iii</sup> This includes children who are impacted by inequality and discrimination due to gender inequality, and discrimination based on ethnicity, disability, being from lower socio-economic backgrounds, age, and other factors.

<sup>iv</sup> The details are not comprehensive and should not replace more detailed policies and procedures related to child safeguarding, protection, risk, and meaningful, ethical children’s participation.