

Channelling “the changemaking power of children” to drive environmental, peace, security and digital policies for the future : An intergenerational research paper

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1) Introduction

This research paper is prepared by children, young people and supporting adults involved in [#CovidUnder19](#), an international collaboration with children and young people, supporting child rights-based advocacy in the post-pandemic world. Coordinated by [Terre des hommes](#), [#CovidUnder19](#) brings together UN agencies, civil society organisations, academics, children and young people around global child- and youth-led, child rights advocacy. Since 2020, [#CovidUnder19](#) has elevated children and young people’s views and experiences about the pandemic through the [Life Under Coronavirus](#) survey, led by Queen’s University Belfast, alongside other work on children’s rights in compounding crises such as climate change.

In 2022, [#CovidUnder19](#) and partners issued an [Open letter to the UN Secretary-General](#) highlighting that children were absent from UN declarations on key tracks of work in Our Common Agenda, such as the UN Youth Office and the Declaration of the Future. Since then, the group has continued to actively advocate for meaningful involvement of children alongside young people in processes linked to Our Common Agenda.

2) Methodology

This research paper was conducted in response to the call for papers in the [Youth Futures Series](#), which invited young people to “*champion the written word of young authors across operational tracks and thematic areas of the Summit of the Future*”.

The central research question explored in this paper was : **In the views of children and young people, what “future generations-oriented policies” are needed to take us into a positive post-2030 world?**

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Following Skogly, the definition of ‘future generations’ used in this research refers to “the rights of current youth and children when they grow into adulthood, as well as other people who will live in the future”.⁸ Both these groups will eventually inherit the social, political, environmental and economic systems of preceding generations. Decisions today shape their respective futures.

The research is based on empirical qualitative data collected during a virtual focus-group discussion (FGD) in February 2023 with a group of children from Asia and Africa. The FGD activities were designed by young people (18 – 20 year olds), who volunteer as peer mentors in #CovidUnder19. In a preparatory session, the peer mentors analysed together the YFS call for papers and selected the specific tracks that they felt would be most interesting and relevant for the children to discuss : 1) environmental governance; and 2) peace, security and digital governance. The peer mentors then designed the FGD modalities and co-facilitated the FGD.

Building on their previous experience as children involved in research and writing, such as the #CovidUnder19 Life Under Coronavirus survey⁹ and the COVID4P Log,¹⁰ alongside research and advocacy around children’s rights and the SDGs¹¹ the peer mentors spent time preparing a methodology that would be accessible and engaging for children (aged 15-17). The methodology consisted in:

- Defining the destination : The ‘island’ of positive environmental/ peace, security and digital governance of the future.
- Describing how to get there : policies to move towards the destination.
- Highlighting parts of our journey: directions, winds (enabling factors), and anchors (constraints)

Annex 1 presents screenshots of the virtual whiteboards and visual tools used to frame the discussion.

The peer-mentors co-facilitated the FDG alongside two supporting adults. The FGD started with a visioning exercise in order to encourage participants to think about what would be the defining features of the world in 2030. Participants were then invited to divide into break-out rooms by selecting the topic that they were most interested in : one group on environmental governance, and the second group on peace, security and digital governance. In the breakout rooms, the peer-mentors facilitated discussions using digital whiteboards (see Annex 1). The results of the FGD were also analysed in a group with the peer mentors and children, and a smaller group worked together to draft the research paper.

The following steps were taken before and during the FGD to ensure a safe, respectful and supportive environment for participants :

- Before the FGD : Participants of #CovidUnder19 sign a code of conduct and about child safeguarding, and are informed about how to raise safeguarding concerns to trained staff.

⁸ Skogly, S. (2021) ‘[The Right to Continuous Improvement of Living Conditions and Human Rights of Future Generations – A Circle Impossible to Square?](#)’

⁹ Lundy, L., Byrne, B., Lloyd, K., Templeton, M., Brando, N., Corr, M., Heard, E., Holland, L., MacDonald, M., Marshall, G., McAlister, S., McNamee, C., Orr, K., Schubotz, D., Symington, E., Walsh, C., Hope, K., Singh, P., Neill, G., & Wright, L. H. V. (2021). [Life Under Coronavirus: Children’s Views on their Experiences of their Human Rights](#), *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 29(2), 261-285

¹⁰ Lee, L. M., Wright, L. H. V., Machado, C., Niyogi, O., Singh, P., Shields, S., & Hope, K. (2022). [Online Intergenerational Participatory Research: Ingredients for Meaningful Relationships and Participation](#). *Journal of Participatory Research Methods*, 3 (3, Youth-themed Special Issue). <https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.38764>

¹¹ Child Rights Report of the UN Human Rights Office to the 2021 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, [Child-Friendly Summary](#).

- During the FGD : Participants were informed about the objectives and purpose of the research, that participation in the FGD is voluntary and that they could stop participating in the FGD at any point in time. They were asked to give their consent to take part and to have their names mentioned if they wish
- After the FGD : In order to uphold the principles of 'do no harm', participants were offered the opportunity to reach out to trained professionals in case any of the topics discussed, such as fears for the future or the climate crisis, trigger anxiety.

3) FGD results

The following section presents the results of the FGD for each of the two tracks / topics covered in the FDG.

3.1) Track 1: Environmental governance

- **The destination (what we want to see in 2030)**

"Proper use of natural resources with availability of environmental friendly services and good trust and co-ordination among people." – Purnima, 16, Nepal

"Equity will be ensured. We will get a corruption-free environment and human rights will be ensured. There'll be an evolution in science and economy. We can also reach all the goals of SDG, tackle climate Issues, and gain enormous economic development." – Rodoshee, 15, Bangladesh

"Children have access to social services (healthcare, WASH services, nutrition) Example UNEP Climwarn project." – Dhruv, 17, India

Sustainability, accessibility, and climate justice emerged as common themes identified by children when they envisioned the world in 2030. The statements highlighted the vision of a sustainable world where natural resources are secure, food security is attained and the 2030 Goals are met. Added to this vision was the idea of accessibility where children have 'equitable' access to resources and human rights, environmental services, social services (healthcare, WASH services, nutrition) and families are provided with a social security net. Children also shared their vision of a world where future generations are also viewed as valid stakeholders. This vision encapsulates how the United States' National Institute for environmental and Health Sciences [NIEHS](#) defines climate or environmental justice, "making sure that everyone has a fair chance of living the healthiest life possible."

- **How we get there - policies**

"[In] Kenya: How are resources managed and where are they going? The government should make it public Information... [We need] 100% inclusivity, 100% transparent accountability, priority resource allocation" – Brian, 17, Kenya

"Embedding the environment in all levels of decision-making and action." – Purnima, 16, Nepal

"Transparency, accountability, participation, implementing laws, and proper use of technology. We should think of the environment while making all policies. Nature is free and it provides facilities which we cannot measure in dollars." – Rodoshee, 15, Bangladesh

"Having easy-to-read versions of Climate Information and policies for people who are young, specially-abled, and uneducated." – Dhruv, 17, India

When asked to describe the ways in which their vision of 2030 can be realised, children expressed the need for “embedding the environment in all levels of decision-making and action” (Purnima, 16, Nepal). Children also reflected the need to keep UNCRC at the centre of policies. Sensitivity of policies towards marginalised communities and regional disparities also emerged as a policy concern among children in the group. There was also a call to make these policies more transparent and accountable to people, which was supplemented by the demand consultative National Children’s Framework, child-friendly and easy-read versions of these policies and capacity building among climate-affected communities through vocational training. Overall, the need for child sensitive climate policies (ambitious and urgent, rights-based, holistic and multi-sectoral and inclusive) was underlying in the comments made by children.

- **The parts of our journey: directions, winds, and anchors**

"Government and non-government agencies should work together in order to achieve the goals. Crimes, Irrationality-robbery, theft, corruption [are holding us back]." - Rodoshee, 15, Bangladesh

"Multi-Stakeholder conversations (having everyone on the table, listening NOT hearing, having checks to ensure that no one group is only heeded. If they don't know and can't hear, they can't act. Education and free media are the twin tools forward." - Dhruv, 17, India

"Misconception that others should start the work at first [is holding us back]. Coordination and supporting sound ecosystem management [will drive the boat forward]." - Purnima, 16, Nepal

"Failure to have a "global viewpoint". Climate change is a global problem but the government ignores the crises elsewhere unless the crises knock on their doors." - Dhruv

When asked about directions in which the policies must be driven to, in order to attain children’s 2030 vision, a multi-stakeholder approach was seen as a driving force for policies alongside education and free media. Voices of indigenous communities and minorities were viewed as critical to driving these policies forward. Whereas, the lack of urgency and failure to view climate change as a global problem was seen as a pertinent challenge to climate policies. Children and young people are among the most vocal advocates of accountable environmental action. Listening to and incorporating their perspectives in policymaking can bring a sense of urgency and responsibility to environmental governance.

3.2) Track 2: peace, security & digital

- **The destination (what we want to see in 2030):**

In the break-out room that focused on peace, security, and digital governance, the theme that emerged was a world free of violence and hate. Participants described this world as being defined by positive energy, human creativity and equal rights. Children shared a vision of a peaceful and secure world which kept children safe both online and offline.

"In my little world there would be more peace and security and no excessive use of technology. [There will be] Less gun violence or no violence at all." - Shahida

"Free from cyber crimes" - Osish

"In my world, there would be no tribal war." - Akorede

"In the world of 2030, there will be mandatory safeguarding protocols in all institutions. [There will be] No need to seek asylum and refuge. [There will be] No fear of nuclear wars." - Miriam

"Young people should be able to vote" - Shahida

Children expressed their distrust and worries towards digital technology (especially artificial intelligence), and the fear that it could prevent human inventiveness and inspiration . They also expressed concern about the profit-oriented nature of digital platforms.

"AI can kill the creativity of human beings, and that would be bad for us." - Osish

"CEOs of digital media platforms that collect people's data with no consent to gain money." - Miriam

- **How we get there: policies**

When discussing how to achieve this ideal vision of the future for governance around peace, security and the digital environment, two contrasting positions emerged in the group. On one hand, some participants believed that centralised control was needed to prevent children from facing harms, particularly in the digital space.

"[In the future], Young people will only be exposed to quality content on social media." - Minahil

"Using tech to create advanced surveillance on news and press (digital media)... International standard that institutions should abide to create a surveillance department within their institution to monitor safeguarding" - Miriam

In reaction to this, another member of the group was more cautious about these ideas :

"There is a fine line between censorship and removing dangerous content. [We need to...] balance freedom of expression with safeguarding children and vulnerable groups from harm." - Dhruv

- **The parts of our journey : directions, winds and anchors**

When speaking about the winds or enabling factors that could support policymaking for peaceful, safe and digital futures, participants highlighted both principles, such as inequality and inclusion, alongside concrete actions such as education :

"People should respect each others' views and should follow cyber ethics." - Minahil

"[The winds are] The changemaking power of children"- Miriam

"A digitally literate person can lead the boat to the right direction." - Jeshis

In terms of the anchors holding progressive policies back, participants reflected on both personal experiences, as well as structural issues such as lack of investment.

“The hurdles that are holding us back is thinking about bad pasts that are sometimes too hard to forget” - Shahida

Overall, the discussion on this topic highlighted how children perceive technology to be a double-edged sword in achieving peace and security. They expressed hopes to harness the positive aspects of digital technology while mitigating the negative. As digital natives, children and young people were able to critically assess the dysfunctionalities of the digital environment, and to pinpoint key areas where action is required to ensure robust and rights-compliant digital architecture of the future.

4) Implications and conclusions

In sum, two main implications can be drawn from this small piece of qualitative research.

The first implication is around the answers to the research question: what “future generations-oriented policies” are needed to take us into a positive post-2030 world? The results of this research suggest that children and young people’s priorities for future generations-oriented policies build solidly on the promises of the SDGs to leave no one behind and to put the furthest behind first. As we approach the half-way mark of the SDGs confronted with the harsh reality that we are falling behind achieving those targets, the views of children and young people who took part in this research are a clear call to reinvigorate efforts around the SDGs in order to achieve a more peaceful, sustainable and just existence on planet Earth that provides the foundations for future generations

But they also go further than that. In a world totally led by adults, the children and young people who participated in this research paper asking for one thing : change. Change of adults’ views and behaviour towards all future generations, both children who are alive now and those who are not yet born but will be born in the future. Children's perspectives start to allow us to imagine what would be the characteristics of policymaking that go beyond the SDGs, which are precisely what should begin to be reflected in Our Common Agenda.

The second implication is around the research process, or how we were able to get to the answers above. This research highlights how youth-led research methods can provide a fruitful approach to enabling children to meaningfully take part in discussions about ‘difficult questions’ that adults may often assume are too complex for children.

Taken together, by way of conclusion, the research suggests three compelling answers for the research question that was set out at the beginning of this exercise. In the views of children and young people, the characteristics of “future generations-oriented policies” that can take us into a positive post-2030 world are as follows:

- 1) **There is no policymaking on a dead planet: climate policymaking must be cross-cutting.** All policymaking for the future must necessarily include an angle of climate change. This is a departure from the current configuration of how specific climate-related goals are laid out in the current SDG framework. Concretely, this would entail considering the climate-related and environment-related dimension of all of the tracks related to Our Common Agenda, and not just as a stand-alone, separate issue. For example, considering an environmental dimension of digital governance in the new Digital Compact would require bold policies to reduce the environmental footprint of digital infrastructure (such as blockchain).

- 2) **Children’s lived experiences of a planet in an era of polycrisis are the keys to policymaking for the future.** Children, as a generation born into and growing up in a context of compounding crises, from climate to conflict to covid, must be recognised as bearing unique expertise that is a resource for policy making for future generations. Access to evidence-based information and regular policy updates remains a significant roadblock. Future-generations-oriented policies must address this challenge by providing child-friendly, accessible, and multimedia versions of all relevant documents in multiple languages, alongside spaces for meaningful exchange and co-creation of policy solutions fit for the future. Particular attention is required for children and vulnerable groups in authoritarian and majoritarian settings who often cannot exercise their right to be heard. It is thus crucial to adopt policies that enforce safeguarding guidelines while ensuring that independent and accessible platforms are available to children and vulnerable groups to claim their rights and be protected in the process.

- 3) **Shifting power towards disenfranchised groups today is a cornerstone of intergenerational equity. Policymaking for the future must be intergenerational and intersectional.** Adults must redress the ways in which children are overlooked, disregarded and excluded in decision-making around questions that affect them the most. Young people are uniquely placed to support children’s meaningful participation through peer-to-peer methods. Therefore, the common understanding of youth participation must shift from ‘getting young people to sit at adult tables’, towards something much more transformative along the lines of forging intergenerational and inclusive spaces that as bridges between children and adults.

Taken together, children and young people’s views provide a new lens of analysis for the processes and political outcomes of the Summit of the Future and all processes related to Our Common Agenda. The results of this research allows us to imagine what would be the seeds of the post 2030 agenda. Echoing Nolan,¹² the views of children and young people who took part in this research reinforce the message that policy-making for the future must entail an acknowledgement of “the potential linkage between the interests – and rights claims – of children and future generations”.

Consequently, the research is a rallying cry towards decision-makers who must take urgent steps to ensure the safe and inclusive participation of children and young people in all processes related to Our Common Agenda.

¹² Nolan, A (2022) [“The Children are the Future – Or Not? Exploring The Complexities of the Relationship between the Rights of Children and Future Generations”](#), EJIL: Talk

