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Temporalities in Crisis: Analysing the Sacchi v. Argentina Case and Children's Rights in the Climate Emergency

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Palabras Clave: litigio climático liderado por jóvenes | derechos de la niñez | crisis climática | temporalidad

ABSTRACT

This article examines the Sacchi v. Argentina case, a landmark legal action led by children against five states for their role in climate change, analysed through the lens of temporality. The case, brought before the Committee on the Rights of the Child, was pivotal in linking the climate crisis to children's rights, despite being ruled inadmissible. This paper explores the multiple temporalities inherent in the climate crisis, such as urgency, gradualness and intergenerational effects, and how they intersect with legal frameworks and children's unique experience of time. By focusing on the narratives and claims of the child petitioners, this study investigates the disproportionate impacts of climate change on younger generations and the ways in which the law constructs time, offering a new perspective on the relationship between human rights and environmental justice. The analysis contributes to the broader discourse on how to address children's rights within the growing field of climate litigation.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina el caso Sacchi v. Argentina, una acción legal histórica liderada por niños y niñas contra cinco estados por su papel en el cambio climático, analizada a través de la lente de la temporalidad. El caso, presentado ante el Comité de los Derechos del Niño, fue fundamental para vincular la crisis climática con los derechos de la niñez, a pesar de ser declarado inadmisibile. Este trabajo explora las múltiples temporalidades inherentes a la crisis climática, como la urgencia, la gradualidad y los efectos intergeneracionales, y cómo estas se entrecruzan con los marcos jurídicos y la experiencia de la niñez con el tiempo. Al centrarse en las narrativas y reivindicaciones de las y los jóvenes litigantes, este estudio investiga los impactos desproporcionados del cambio climático sobre las generaciones más jóvenes y las formas en que el derecho construye el tiempo, ofreciendo una nueva perspectiva sobre la relación entre los derechos humanos y la justicia ambiental. El análisis contribuye al discurso más amplio de cómo abordar los derechos de la niñez en el creciente campo de la litigación climática.

1 | Introduction

In September 2019, 16 children from 12 countries filed the first climate lawsuit petition to the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) under the third Optional Protocol to the CRC on a

Communications Procedure, in force since 2014. The children argued that each of the respondent States—Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany and Turkey—has caused a violation of the human rights of the petitioners by having significantly contributed to climate change through their historic and current

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carbon pollution. In particular, the children claimed that these States failed to take the necessary preventive measures to protect and fulfil their rights to life (Article 6), health (Article 24) and culture (Article 30) under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Between May and September 2021, the Committee conducted five oral hearings with representatives from both sides. For the first time under the Optional Protocol to the CRC on a Communications Procedure (CRC OP3), the children were directly heard in a separate online hearing where they could explain the impact of climate change on their lives and their reasons for filing the petition to the Committee. On October 11, 2021, the Committee published its decision, declaring the petition inadmissible because the children had not exhausted all domestic remedies in the five respondent States. As a result, the Committee could not examine the merits of the case or determine whether the respondents had violated their obligations under the CRC. Despite this, the Committee made what is considered a ground-breaking ruling (Wewerinke-Singh 2021), being the first international body to hold that States can be held responsible for the negative impact of their carbon emissions on the rights of children within their territory and those living outside the boundaries of those States. Moreover, the Committee adopted a flexible approach to the foreseeability requirement, as it relied on the general acceptance of the verified scientific evidence presented in the case regarding the adverse effects of climate change on human rights, in conjunction with the personal testimonies of the child litigants.

The case, known as *Sacchi v. Argentina*, marked a turning point in both climate litigation and the field of children's rights. It was the first child-led initiative to hold States accountable in a climate case before a supranational adjudicatory body (Krajnyák 2024). It involved a series of procedural and interpretative innovations, catalysed the creation of new instruments such as General Comment 26 on children's rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change (Tigre and Iliopoulos 2023) and opened a set of questions regarding the proof of harm (present and future), causation and the status of the victim and, more broadly, about how to think about the climate crisis from an (inter and intra) generational approach (Daly 2023).

Considering that it has become a paradigmatic case, the aim of this article is to analyse it by focusing on the dimension of temporality, which includes our notions and relationship to the rhythms of social processes as well as to future horizons and potentially to hope. That is, to explore the ideas and perceptions about time in relation to the climate crisis and children's rights that appear in the petition and how these intertwine with legal arguments. We argue that the climate crisis encompasses multiple temporalities—ranging from acceleration to gradualness, from the imminent to the continuous—that are experienced in a situated manner and embodied by populations in different parts of the world, based on various identity markers and stratification criteria. As we can see from the *Sacchi* case and other legal cases—but also other expressions of children and young people's climate action—the way children experience these temporalities is unique, as their entire

life course appears inexorably interconnected with the condition of precarity in the face of the climate emergency, their own becoming tied to the rhythm of potential devastation of beings and spaces. Examining the *Sacchi v. Argentina* case through the lens of temporality allows us to rethink childhood in the present–future relationship in the face of contemporary emergencies and, in a broader sense, address why age matters when thinking about the climate crisis and its effects on human rights.

Given the broader social and legal landscape—marked by both the expansion and increasing prominence of children's climate action, particularly in courts, and the human rights turn in environmental litigation—in this article, we will zoom in on the petition filed by 16 children before the Committee on the Rights of the Child and examine how the issue is framed within it. This will necessarily involve a careful consideration of the historical and political context, as we agree that 'social conflicts are transformed when they enter the legal realm, in that they are, in a sense, *alienated within* legal logic and procedures' (Buckel et al. 2024, 36). While previous research has examined the implications of the Committee's decision on the case and, in particular, has focused on its approach to extraterritoriality due to its progressive nature, here we propose a contextualised and detailed reading of the multiple temporalities that shape the relationship between the climate crisis and children's rights and how these temporalities are intertwined in the legal arguments framing the case.

This article is organised as follows: The next section presents the methodological approach used to analyse the case. We then review the theoretical debates around temporality, children's rights and the climate crisis, providing the conceptual framework for this study. The subsequent section delves into the *Sacchi v. Argentina* case, offering a contextualised analysis of the actors, claims and narratives involved. Finally, we discuss the implications of the case for understanding the intersection of childhood, temporality and climate justice, before concluding with reflections on the broader contributions and directions for future research.

This article aims to foreground the unique contributions of the *Sacchi v. Argentina* case to ongoing debates on childhood, temporality and climate justice. Specifically, it highlights how child-led climate litigation brings a distinctive lens to discussions of intergenerational equity and the temporal dimensions of human rights. This approach enriches both the theoretical frameworks of childhood studies and the practical implications for environmental justice. By focusing on the specific narratives and claims of child petitioners, the paper not only contributes to an understanding of legal temporalities but also emphasises the necessity of incorporating children's perspectives into broader discourses on justice and sustainability.

2 | Methodology

This article employs a qualitative methodology, integrating a critical analysis of legal documents, narratives from youth climate activists and theoretical frameworks of temporality. The primary focus is on the *Sacchi v. Argentina* case, analysed

through official submissions, court rulings and related legal texts. These materials were selected for their relevance in elucidating how temporal dimensions intersect with children's rights and climate justice.

The study incorporates narratives from youth activists, drawing on publicly available statements, interviews and testimonies linked to the case and broader climate movements. These narratives provide insight into how children and young people articulate temporal claims, emphasising urgency, intergenerational equity and their roles as present and future agents of change.

The analysis employs categories of temporality—such as urgency, not-yetness and intergenerational responsibility—derived from childhood studies and socio-legal theories. By contextualising the case within broader debates on temporality, the article examines how legal arguments construct and challenge conventional notions of time, agency and rights. This approach underscores the interplay between systemic delays in climate action and the immediate needs of younger generations, offering a robust framework for addressing the research questions.

3 | Theoretical Debates Around Time: Childhood, Children's Rights and the Climate Crisis

The climate crisis is, at its core, a temporal phenomenon. Its defining feature is the unprecedented acceleration of environmental changes, which jeopardises the ability of human and non-human systems to adapt. This acceleration threatens not only planetary habitability but also the reproduction and regeneration of diverse life forms. The urgency of the crisis has prompted conceptualisations of our era such as the Anthropocene (Crutzen 2006), Capitalocene (Moore 2016) and Chthulucene (Haraway 2016). These frameworks emphasise different dimensions of human–nature relationships but converge on recognising the crisis as a ‘critical threshold’ that questions dominant development paradigms and modern cultural assumptions about progress.

To align this temporal framing with the study of children's rights, it is important to explore how these disruptions in time intersect with constructions of childhood. The Anthropocene and its associated temporalities not only highlight ecological precarity but also reshape narratives about generational responsibility and agency. As will be explored further in this article, these shifts demand a reevaluation of how childhood is positioned within legal and political frameworks responding to the climate crisis, with particular attention to how children's rights are uniquely affected by these temporal disruptions.

For example, the Anthropocene highlights anthropogenic changes driving ecological degradation, while the Capitalocene underscores the commodification of nature under capitalism as a central factor in environmental collapse. Haraway's Chthulucene, on the other hand, critiques human exceptionalism and calls for cross-species entanglements and mutual care practices to address shared vulnerabilities. These concepts frame the climate crisis as a disruption of temporal rhythms and

demand a rethinking of humanity's relationship with time and nature in light of ecological collapse.

This temporal urgency intersects with human rights frameworks, as Dehm (2022) argues. She highlights the mismatch between the accelerating impacts of climate change and the slower responses of legal and policy systems. Helle (2019, cited in Esjing et al. 2024) describes this as a perception that ‘time has broken’—a world moving simultaneously too fast and too slow. In this context, temporal frameworks become essential tools for understanding systemic crises and their disproportionate impacts on vulnerable populations, particularly children.

The integration of temporality into children's rights discourse is especially critical, as children occupy a unique position. They experience present harms while facing lifelong consequences, making temporal arguments central to understanding how the climate crisis violates their rights. The *Sacchi v. Argentina* case exemplifies how disrupted temporalities shape the social, legal and political dimensions of climate justice, emphasising the urgency of immediate action.

3.1 | Temporalities of Childhood and Children's Rights

Childhood is deeply imbued with temporal connotations. As Balagopalan (2024) argues, the recognition of childhood as a temporal phenomenon underpins Childhood Studies. One key argument in this conceptual framework is that normative constructions of time produce children as lacking. By ‘normative constructions of time’, we mean this linear, chronological, progressive and self-claimed universal time of modernity, intertwined with the development paradigm and hence also central to colonialism. Dominant frameworks in modernity portray childhood as a phase of ‘not-yetness’, where children are perceived as incomplete beings on a linear path toward adulthood (Hanson 2022). This framing situates children as ‘others’ to adulthood, legitimising paternalistic systems that prioritise their future potential over their present agency. The developmental paradigm reinforces these notions, embedding childhood in a teleological narrative where growth is synonymous with progress and societal value.

Scholars in childhood studies contest these frameworks, advocating for perspectives that recognise children as active agents (James 2011). Millei (2021) critiques the linear constructions of time underpinning modern citizenship, arguing that they portray children as subjects in formation, subordinate to ‘complete’ adult citizens. This narrative, rooted in Enlightenment ideals, aligns childhood temporality with the broader telos of human progress.

Knight (2019) and Burman (2008) extend this critique, situating childhood and its temporal frameworks within colonial projects. The modern subject, characterised as rational and advanced, was co-constructed with those deemed ‘other’: non-European, non-adult and not-yet-developed populations. This colonial logic positioned childhood as a site of intervention, aligning its temporal trajectory with the civilising missions of colonialism.

Llobet (2024) emphasises how the association between childhood and futurity remains a locus of power, dictating which futures are possible and for whom.

In both childhood studies and children's rights theory, conceptual efforts have focused on challenging the view of children as 'becomings' and advocating for recognising children as 'beings' and as social actors of the present with their own perspectives and experiences. This recognition considers age in conjunction with other social stratification criteria and subjective becomings (in its plural, potential and open sense, not predetermined). In this way, there has been an attempt to counteract social perceptions that attribute the primary value of childhood to its future potential. However, this had the paradoxical effect of leaving the relationship between childhood and the future insufficiently explored—as Spyrou (2020) has pointed out—at a theoretical level and, therefore, contributed to forging an image of childhood that is overly present-focused, without deeply considering its dynamic and processual nature, thus reifying once again the distinction between childhood and adulthood.

The climate crisis magnifies these temporal tensions. Public and policy discourses often depict children as temporal symbols—either as innocent victims of past inaction or as agents of hope tasked with rectifying historical mistakes. Hanson (2022) critiques this duality, arguing that children are often trapped in 'allochronic time' existing simultaneously as products of a damaged past and as saviours of an uncertain future. These narratives risk instrumentalising children, reducing their agency to their perceived utility in securing societal continuity.

Youth-led climate actions challenge these reductive binaries. Movements like Fridays for Future and legal cases such as *Sacchi v. Argentina* reframe children as political agents of the present, without denying their singular vulnerabilities to the climate crisis. These initiatives assert that children's rights and concerns are not solely future-oriented but demand immediate recognition and action. As we will explore in this article, the *Sacchi* case, structured around the argument that 'we are running out of time,' underscores how delays in addressing the climate crisis disproportionately harm children, transforming temporal urgency into a central human rights issue.

3.2 | Temporalities, Legal Frameworks and Climate Justice

The relationship between temporality and law has become a critical focus in climate change litigation. Historically, legal systems have operated within frameworks of linear, progressive time, often failing to account for the complexities of ecological harm. As Crawford (2015) notes, socio-legal studies have only recently begun to grapple with the temporal dimensions of justice, spurred by the urgency of the Anthropocene (Richardson 2017).

Climate change litigation highlights the interplay between past actions, present urgencies and future responsibilities. For example, historical emissions establish a legacy of harm, while

current inaction exacerbates risks for future generations. Legal discourse often mediates these temporalities through frameworks that delineate immediate threats, long-term projections and retrospective accountability (Page 2006; McKinnon 2012). Hilson (2018) observes that these competing temporal frames shape the outcomes of climate cases, influencing whether courts prioritise immediate action or defer to procedural delays.

A prominent challenge in climate justice is the concept of 'temporal dissonance' (Dehm 2022), describing the disconnect between the rapid pace of ecological collapse and the protracted timelines of judicial processes. Nixon's (2011) concept of 'slow violence' further illuminates this tension, highlighting how gradual, cumulative harm evades the immediacy required by legal interventions. In this context, delay is not a neutral procedural issue but an active mechanism of injustice that perpetuates harm.

The judicialisation of environmental conflicts has transformed courts into critical arenas for addressing these temporal tensions. However, traditional legal temporalities, rooted in Enlightenment ideals of progress, struggle to accommodate the layered impacts of climate change. For instance, linear conceptions of time inadequately address intergenerational harm, limiting the scope of remedies available to vulnerable populations, including children (Grabham and Beynon-Jones 2018).

Alternative frameworks, such as 'adjudicative temporalities' (Chowdhury 2021), address these limitations by exploring how legal judgments construct narratives of past harms and future risks. This approach emphasises the active role of law in producing time, shaping how responsibility and harm are understood. Similarly, McNeilly's (2021) 'untimely' perspective advocates for a reimagining of human rights law that embraces uncertainty, aligning legal frameworks with the realities of climate crises.

In the context of children's rights, these temporal debates are particularly salient. Fornalé (2023) highlights the interrelation between vulnerability and temporality, arguing that human rights obligations must address 'formless threats' dispersed across time and space. This approach calls for flexible legal interpretations that account for immediate harms and long-term risks. The concept of 'slow violence' is especially relevant, capturing the incremental impacts of environmental harm on children's health and survival.

Building on these foundations, scholars like Gear (2019) and Adam (1994) advocate for a reconfiguration of legal temporalities to better address ecological harm. Gear critiques the anthropocentric bias in human rights law, highlighting how its focus on immediate concerns neglects long-term impacts on future generations. Adam argues that modernity's clock-bound conception of time must be replaced with frameworks recognising the 'contextual, irreversible temporalities' of life and nature. These perspectives call for a paradigm shift in legal thinking, aligning with the layered temporalities of the climate crisis.

In conclusion, integrating temporality into legal and human rights discourse is essential for addressing the climate crisis. The *Sacchi* case highlights the urgency of this endeavour, demonstrating how children's rights can serve as a lens to

rethink temporal frameworks and advocate for justice that is both immediate and sustainable. By foregrounding the unique temporalities of childhood, the case challenges traditional narratives and opens pathways for inclusive approaches to climate litigation.

4 | The Case: Context, Actors and Claims

The *Sacchi v. Argentina* case was formally presented in 2019 before the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), thus inaugurating a new international arena for climate litigation and consolidating a 'children's rights turn' in this matter. Before identifying and analysing the notions of time that permeate the legal arguments presented in the petition, it is necessary to provide a succinct historical contextualization of the case and introduce the involved parties. The outcomes of legal processes need to be read contextually and relationally. Innovations—in both procedures and interpretive frameworks in action—are not constructed in a vacuum of meanings (Ferreira and Schuch 2010); instead, they are articulated in unique scenarios, permeated by historically constituted significances and networks of social relations (Villalta and Graziano 2022). As Duffy (2018) has argued, to see litigation in context allows us to comprehend the synergy between litigation and other agents of change.

This case is part of a broader movement of children and young people's climate action and, more specifically, a growing trend of youth-led climate litigation. However, some elements of the immediate historical context contribute to a better understanding of both how the child litigants came to formulate the lawsuit and why the Committee emerged as a possible arena to present it.

First, it is worth mentioning the Committee's decision to devote its 2016 general discussion day to the issue of children's rights and the environment, with the aim to promote understanding of the relationship between children's rights and the environment; identify what needs to be done for child rights-related laws, policies and practices to adequately account for environmental issues; and for environment-related laws, policies and practices to be child-sensitive.

The Committee framed this decision within the recent adoption of international agreements and frameworks—such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement on climate change, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the New Urban Agenda—which had already emphasised the connection between environmental protection and the realisation of human rights. Alongside other initiatives, these had created a momentum across the UN human rights system to consider the relationship between children's rights and the environment. From the outset, therefore, this is viewed as a time-sensitive issue that is beginning to be considered as the most relevant children's rights concern of our era. It is also worth mentioning that one of the presentations of the Committee's 2016 general discussion day was made by the then United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment, John H. Knox, who would later act as *amicus curiae* in the *Sacchi* case.

In the final report, it argued that the Committee.

Will consider adequate steps to provide more robust guidance on children's rights in the environmental context, including in due course the drafting of a General Comment. At the same time, the Committee wishes to emphasize that the international law on children's rights sets out fairly clear obligations requiring States and other relevant actors, including the business sector, to take steps to protect children from environmental harm, including through preventive and precautionary measures. When governments fail to protect children from environmental risk factors, this constitutes a violation of children's rights.

(United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child 2017, 38)

We find here a direct antecedent to the argumentative logic that would later unfold in the *Sacchi* case. However, this cannot be considered in isolation but rather in conjunction with another even more international and disruptive process: children and young people's climate action. The political participation of children and youth is not a novelty, nor are the resistances toward it. However, the global scale of the children and young people's climate action, their expanding claims to be recognised as key political actors in climate policymaking and their engagement in climate law cases as litigators against companies and governments with innovative interpretations of rights are some of the key features that mark the singularity of the phenomenon.

One year before the petition was presented to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, another milestone took place. August 2018 marked the beginning of #FridaysForFuture, a youth-led and -organised global climate strike movement. This began after 15-year-old Greta Thunberg and other young activists sat in front of the Swedish parliament every school day for 3 weeks to protest against the lack of action on the climate crisis. They created the hashtag and used social media as a platform for a call to action, encouraging other young people all over the world to join them. #FridaysforFuture soon became a movement that has significantly contributed to bringing the environmental concerns of children and youth to the forefront on a global stage (Bowman 2019; Thomas, Cretney, and Hayward 2019). By doing so, it has broadened and deepened our understandings of climate justice from an intergenerational perspective, fully considering both the temporal nature of the climate crisis and its implications in our age-stratified society.

The Committee did not remain indifferent to this movement; on the contrary, it has repeatedly acknowledged its significance and urged national authorities worldwide to take the climate demands of children and youth seriously and respectfully. In this context, in March 2019, UN experts on children's rights, human rights defenders and human rights and the environment lauded the Human Rights Council's adoption of a resolution calling upon States to protect and empower human rights defenders, including environmental human rights defenders. The resolution

also calls on States to facilitate the participation of children and youth in decision-making and implementation of environmental policies and programmes (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2019).

September 2019 condensed a series of key events. On Friday the 20th of that month, the Global Climate Strike took place, with millions of people marching in different parts of the planet demanding the reduction of the use of fossil fuels to try to halt climate change. In the streets and in the media, children and young people were the protagonists of this global action. The protest was organised ahead of the UN Climate Action Summit that took place days later, on September 23, with the aim of advancing climate action and stepping up the implementation of the Paris Agreement.

That same day, David Ackley III, Debby Adegbile, Ranton Anjain, Iris Duquesne, Ellen-Anne, Raslen Jbeli, Litokne Kabua, Catalina Lorenzo, Ayakha Melithafa, Carlos Manuel, Raina Ivanova, Ridhima Pandey, Chiara Sacchi, Carl Smith, Greta Thunberg and Alexandria Villaseñor, represented by the non-profit environmental law organisation EarthJustice and the global law firm Hausfeld, presented their petition to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. There, they narrated the impact climate change has had on their own lives and the exercise of their rights, and they denounced that five regional leaders and G20 members—Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany and Turkey—were failing to curb emissions, while continuing to promote fossil fuels, despite having knowledge about the risks of climate change for decades. The petition contended that the five respondents had violated their obligations as outlined in the UNCRC by (i) neglecting their duty to prevent foreseeable domestic and transboundary human rights transgressions linked to climate change, primarily through emissions reduction; (ii) failing to engage in international collaboration to address the exigencies of the climate crisis; (iii) neglecting the application of the precautionary principle to shield life in situations of uncertainty; and (iv) not ensuring intergenerational equity for the younger generation.

The petition drew upon expert analysis and personal narratives to demonstrate how the effects of climate change—such as hurricanes, droughts, sea-level rise, the collapse of food systems and other threats—had violated and will violate each petitioner's human rights by threatening their physical survival, impairing their physical and psychological development and harming their health. Following the formal presentation, the 16 young people, gathered in New York, participated in a press conference hosted by UNICEF, introducing the petition and their demands and various other events surrounding Climate Week, the United Nations Climate Action Summit and the UN General Assembly (Table 1).

That these children and young people, aged 8 to 17, from different parts of the world and with unique experiences of the impact of climate change, came together and collaborated on this petition can only be understood within the framework of the global scale and the combination of online and in-person platforms that the children's climate action movement had acquired in the preceding 2 years. The expansive wave generated by #FridaysForFuture thus serves as a condition of possibility

TABLE 1 | Petitioners.

Petitioner	Country	Age
David Ackley III	Marshall Islands	16
Debby Adegbile	Nigeria	12
Ranton Anjain	Marshall Islands	16
Iris Duquesne	France	16
Ellen-Anne	Sweden	8
Raslen Jbeli	Tunisia	17
Litokne Kabua	Marshall Islands	16
Catalina Lorenzo	Brazil	12
Ayakha Melithafa	South Africa	17
Carlos Manuel	Palau	17
Raina Ivanova	Germany	15
Ridhima Pandey	India	11
Chiara Sacchi	Argentina	17
Carl Smith	Alaska	17
Greta Thunberg	Sweden	16
Alexandria Villaseñor	USA	14

for the Sacchi case. In this way, the case was built on a pre-existing platform of visibility and audibility constructed by the children themselves, evidenced by the fact that several of the child litigants were already public figures in their communities, if not internationally, before the case was presented. This set of distinct characteristics positions it as a case of strategic human rights litigation, aimed at promoting an agenda that goes beyond the individual case (Hahn 2019), with the potential to both transform the law and foster social change (Duffy 2018).

The petitioners asked the Committee to recognise climate change as a children's rights crisis. They requested that it find that each respondent state, along with others, has caused and is perpetuating the climate crisis by knowingly disregarding scientific evidence on necessary measures for prevention and mitigation. Additionally, they sought a determination that by recklessly perpetuating life-threatening climate change, each respondent is violating the petitioners' rights to life, health, the prioritisation of the child's best interests and the cultural rights of indigenous petitioners.

Furthermore, the petitioners recommended that the respondents review and amend their laws and policies to ensure that mitigation and adaptation efforts are accelerated to the maximum extent of available resources, based on the best scientific evidence, to protect the petitioners' rights and prioritise the best interests of the child, especially in allocating the costs and burdens of climate change. They also urged each respondent to initiate and increase cooperative international actions to establish binding and enforceable measures to mitigate the climate crisis, prevent further harm to the petitioners and other children and secure their inalienable rights. Lastly, they asked that the

respondents ensure the child's right to be heard and to express their views freely in all efforts to mitigate or adapt to the climate crisis at international, national and subnational levels, in accordance with Article 12.

After 2 years, in which the respondent countries submitted individual observations, the petitioners responded to the objections, two amicus curiae briefs were presented and a closed-door oral hearing took place where the child authors had the opportunity to explain how climate change had already affected the enjoyment of their rights under the CRC and to share their expectations of the Committee's handling of the case, in October 2021, the CRC rejected the petitions for failure to exhaust domestic remedies.¹

5 | Multiple Temporalities: From the Living Rights to the Courts

5.1 | Child Petitioners' Narratives²

I thought this was immediate, and I was scared. Now that I know it takes longer, it is more subtle, and I am less scared, but I still think about it a lot. I feel lost. I like to keep my mind off it because it scares me, but it still pops up a couple of times a day.

(David Ackley III) (Sacchi et al. vs. Argentina et al. 2019, A6, 1)

The narratives of the child petitioners in the *Sacchi v. Argentina* case bring forth vivid and compelling accounts of how climate change has directly impacted their lives and communities. By interweaving personal experiences with broader environmental patterns, these accounts underscore the unique temporal dimensions of the climate crisis as experienced by children.

David Ackley III, from the Marshall Islands, shares his daily encounters with rising sea levels, intense storms and the gradual erosion of his homeland. For David, climate change is a pervasive reality, affecting his culture, traditions and future. His account encapsulates the dual temporality of climate change: the immediate threat of displacement and the slow violence of environmental degradation. Similarly, Litokne Kabua describes how rising ocean temperatures and unpredictable weather patterns disrupt traditional practices, challenging his community's way of life and sense of continuity (Sacchi et al. vs. Argentina et al. 2019, A8).

The temporal dynamics of climate change are further illustrated through Greta Thunberg's reflection on the ethical contradictions she perceives in global inaction. Greta's statements reveal a tension between the present urgency and the long-term consequences of delayed action: 'What we do or don't do right now will affect my entire life and the lives of my children or grandchildren' (Sacchi et al. vs. Argentina et al. 2019, A13, 3). Her perspective aligns with Dehm's (2022) concept of 'temporal dissonance,' highlighting the disjointed pace between ecological collapse and the sluggishness of legal and policy responses. This tension influences policy by creating a paradox where the urgency for immediate mitigation measures clashes with the

slow-moving machinery of governance and legal frameworks. Public perception, similarly, often oscillates between alarm at the apparent inaction and resignation due to the perceived ineffectiveness of existing systems to respond in time. The cumulative impact of inaction, where delayed mitigation efforts irreparably shape the future, echoes Helle (2019) portrayal of a world where 'time has broken'.

Catalina Lorenzo's testimony from Brazil conveys a sense of despair and uncertainty about the future. She discusses the destruction of ecosystems essential for survival and cultural preservation, connecting the dots between intentional deforestation and the degradation of water resources. Her emotional response—ranging from sadness to anger—reflects the broader affective dimension of climate change's temporal complexity (Sacchi et al. vs. Argentina et al. 2019, A2). As Llobet (2024) notes, these emotions often become politically mobilising, as the association of childhood with moral urgency amplifies demands for immediate action. Catalina's despair underscores the need for policymakers and international bodies to prioritise climate action not only to address ecological harm but also to respond to the psychological toll on young generations. Her testimony challenges leaders to recognise the human costs of inaction and positions children's lived experiences as vital in shaping responsive and equitable environmental policies.

Other petitioners like Ridhima Pandey from India and Carl Smith from Alaska emphasise the intergenerational injustice perpetuated by the climate crisis. Ridhima's concern for the future of the Ganges River—a symbol of life and spirituality in India—resonates with Carl's fears about the loss of subsistence practices among his Yupiaq community. Both narratives critique the notion of progress that ignores the irreversible damage to ecological and cultural systems. Carl's poignant observation, 'If we ruin it, there is no going back' (Sacchi et al. vs. Argentina et al. 2019, A15, 6), epitomises the existential stakes of inaction.

The diversity of these accounts—from Ayakha Melithafa's focus on food security in South Africa to Alexandria Villaseñor's experiences with wildfires in California—demonstrates that, while the situated experience of the crisis varies, a shared sense of urgency and demand for immediate action binds these narratives together. The children's testimonies act as a powerful call to recognise and address the temporal dimensions of climate justice. As Millei (2021) critiques, the narratives challenge the linear constructions of time that render children passive subjects, instead asserting their active agency in shaping climate futures.

In summary, the ideas, perceptions and emotions about climate change expressed in the narratives of the child petitioners encapsulate the following temporal elements: the urgent sense that time is running out; feelings of uncertainty and the tension between despair and hope; concerns about a future under threat or potentially destroyed; a palpable sense of acceleration linked to worsening environmental impacts; and fears of catastrophic outcomes, including the extinction of species and loss of habitats. As Huebener (2020) has argued, the environmental crisis is also a crisis in the way we imagine time.

In each of these accounts, we find references to time not as a neutral framework of human experience, but as an actor, particularly with references to speed, which clearly allude to the acceleration of climate change but also to the fact that environmental violence can be experienced as cumulative, gradual, slow, continuous and therefore sometimes imperceptible. At the same time, imaginaries about the future are debated between catastrophe, uncertainty and also hope, directly associated with agency and the possibility of change.

5.2 | Legal and Temporal Arguments in the Petition

The *Sacchi v. Argentina* petition frames the climate crisis as both an immediate and enduring threat to children's rights, articulating the centrality of temporality in its legal arguments. The petitioners argue that climate change is not a distant future concern but an ongoing crisis with tangible, life-threatening impacts on children's health, survival and development. This dual framing of imminence and continuity shapes the petition's temporal logic, emphasising the urgency of preventive action.

One key temporal concept presented is the notion of delay. The petition asserts that delaying effective climate action shifts the burden of mitigation onto future generations, compounding the harm and perpetuating intergenerational injustice. For example, child petitioners like Ridhima Pandey highlight how the slow response to climate issues jeopardises their right to a healthy future. Ridhima's concerns about the endangered Ganges River illustrate the tangible impacts of delayed action, while David Ackley's fears of displacement from the Marshall Islands emphasise how delay translates to immediate and escalating threats. These narratives exemplify how inaction directly amplifies the vulnerabilities of younger generations, making the urgency of climate justice palpable. This argument draws on the principle of intergenerational equity, a cornerstone of both environmental and children's rights frameworks. The petitioners emphasise that the respondents' inaction constitutes a failure to uphold the precautionary principle, which requires proactive measures to prevent foreseeable harm. As legal processes become more central to resolving environmental disputes, the concept of 'slow justice' emerges as a significant concern. Slow justice, often instrumentalised by corporations to delay proceedings, exacerbates existing power imbalances and perpetuates environmental injustices (Conde et al. 2023). This strategy not only undermines the efficacy of legal remedies but also amplifies the impact of 'slow violence', a term coined by Nixon (2011) to describe the gradual, often invisible, accumulation of harm over time. In this context, the temporality of legal processes is not merely a procedural concern but a substantive issue that affects the delivery of justice and the protection of human rights.

The scientific arguments in the petition highlight the approach of critical thresholds or tipping points in climate systems, beyond which catastrophic effects become irreversible. For instance, the melting of polar ice caps is often cited as a tipping point; once a critical amount of ice is lost, it triggers a feedback loop where darker ocean surfaces absorb more heat, accelerating warming

and further ice loss. This example underscores the urgency of immediate mitigation efforts to prevent cascading and irreversible consequences. By connecting these thresholds to children's lived experiences and rights, the petition demonstrates how temporal delays in mitigation exacerbate existing inequalities and vulnerabilities. For instance, the claim that 'climate justice delayed is climate justice denied' encapsulates the interplay between temporal urgency and legal responsibility. This reflects McNeilly's (2021) call for an 'untimely' perspective in human rights law that aligns with the uncertainties of the climate crisis.

Moreover, the petition underscores the unique temporal experiences of children. Unlike adults, children will bear the cumulative impacts of climate change over their entire lifetimes. This temporal asymmetry is a central theme, as articulated in the statement: 'The respondents' delay in mitigating climate change shifts an irreversible human rights burden onto children and future generations'. By foregrounding children's voices and perspectives, the petition challenges traditional legal temporalities that prioritise immediate, short-term considerations over long-term sustainability. This aligns with Adam's (1994) critique of modernity's linear time, advocating for frameworks that recognise the contextual and irreversible temporalities of ecological harm.

The legal arguments are further enriched by a rights-based approach that integrates the principles of non-discrimination and the best interests of the child. These principles are directly undermined by delays in climate action, which disproportionately affect marginalised and vulnerable children. The narratives of indigenous petitioners like Carl Smith³ and Ellen-Anne⁴ highlight how cultural and ecological practices—intrinsically tied to temporal continuity—are jeopardised by environmental harm. The petition situates these experiences within a broader critique of the 'tragedy of the commons', where short-term economic gains are prioritised over the collective well-being of present and future generations.

The procedural temporalities of international law also come under scrutiny. The petition argues that exhausting domestic remedies would result in undue delays, failing to address the urgency of the crisis. This procedural critique aligns with the broader temporal dissonance identified in climate litigation, where the slow pace of legal processes conflicts with the accelerating impacts of climate change. By invoking exceptions to the exhaustion rule, the petition underscores the need for legal frameworks to adapt to the temporal realities of the climate crisis. For example, streamlining international adjudication mechanisms or creating specialised climate courts could address procedural delays more effectively. Such adaptations resonate with the 'adjudicative temporalities' proposed by Chowdhury (2021), which explore how legal narratives construct past harms and future risks, actively shaping the temporal logic of justice.

Through these temporal and legal critiques, the petition positions children as central actors in reframing climate justice debates. Their unique vulnerabilities and temporal experiences demand a reconfiguration of legal frameworks that prioritise immediate and sustainable action, challenging the anthropocentric and progress-oriented paradigms of traditional legal thought.

The lens of temporality offers a powerful framework for understanding the complexities of youth-led climate litigation and its implications for childhood studies and children's rights. The analysis of the *Sacchi v. Argentina* case highlights how the intertwined temporalities of the climate crisis—urgency, gradualness and intergenerational responsibility—shape both the experiences of children and the legal arguments advocating for their rights. By centering children's perspectives, this case provides critical insights into ongoing theoretical debates around time, childhood and human rights.

Firstly, the narratives of the child petitioners reveal the profound ways in which climate change disrupts traditional conceptions of time. Their testimonies emphasise an acute awareness of accelerated environmental decline, the cumulative effects of 'slow violence' and the tension between despair and hope. These lived experiences challenge linear, developmental frameworks that situate childhood solely as a stage of 'not-yetness' and underscore the immediacy of children's agency. Instead of being passive subjects awaiting adulthood, these children emerge as active participants in shaping climate futures, demanding a rethinking of how time structures perceptions of childhood and agency.

Secondly, the integration of temporality into the legal arguments of the *Sacchi* case illuminates significant limitations within existing human rights frameworks. The concept of 'slow justice' exemplifies how procedural delays in international law exacerbate the vulnerabilities of children, who will bear the brunt of delayed climate action across their lifetimes. By framing climate change as a children's rights crisis, the petition foregrounds the temporal asymmetries of the crisis and advocates for legal innovations—such as the prioritisation of intergenerational equity—to address these gaps. This reconfiguration aligns with calls for 'adjudicative temporalities' that recognise the cumulative and long-term nature of ecological harm.

Finally, the case bridges theoretical debates on temporality and childhood with practical legal and policy implications. The *Sacchi* petition positions children not only as symbols of the future but as stakeholders whose present and future well-being demand urgent and sustained action. The case underscores the importance of crafting legal and institutional responses that move beyond anthropocentric and progress-oriented paradigms, embracing a more relational and dynamic understanding of time and justice.

In conclusion, the study of temporality within the context of the *Sacchi* case deepens our understanding of how climate change reconfigures relationships between time, rights and agency. It challenges dominant narratives that marginalise children's present experiences and calls for a reimagining of legal and social frameworks to address the temporal realities of the climate crisis. By doing so, it opens pathways for more inclusive and equitable approaches to climate justice, ensuring that the rights and voices of the youngest generations are both protected and amplified within the collective and intergenerational endeavour of crafting possible futures.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Endnotes

¹ For a more detailed description and analysis of these processes and the decision, see Tigre and Lichet (2021).

² The child petitioners' narratives are collected in Appendix A to the Petition (*Sacchi et al. vs. Argentina et al.* 2019). Henceforth, any reference to the child petitioners' narratives will refer to this Appendix unless otherwise specified.

³ Carl is a member of The Yupiaq of Akiak, an indigenous Tribe that live in southwestern Alaska next to the Kuskokwim River. The Akiak are a self-sustaining people, who have practiced traditions of subsistence hunting, fishing and gathering since they can remember. From Carl's experience, these practices are being threatened and becoming more difficult due to the effects of climate change.

⁴ Ellen-Anne is Swedish and a member of the Sami community. The Sami people have lived in the Arctic regions for thousands of years in what is now Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. The Arctic region where the Sami people live and carry out reindeer herding, and other livelihoods and cultural practices connected to nature is called Sapmi. According to Ellen-Anne's narrative in the Appendix to the Petition, the Sapmi and the Sami livelihoods and culture are severely threatened by the climate crisis.

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