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COP and the Experiences of Children and Youth

Considering the Rights of Children and Youth in Global Climate Governance

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Abstract

This article examines how children and youth exercise political agency – and confront its limits – within global climate governance processes linked to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It draws on 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with climate advocates aged 11 to 29 who have attended (or attempted to attend) UNFCCC Conferences of the Parties (COPs). Using an intersectional, rights-based framework informed by postpaternalist theory, we analyse the motivations, barriers, enablers and perceived impacts of child and youth participation. Findings show that peer mentoring and organisational support foster transnational advocacy, while adult-centrism, tokenism and material constraints continue to limit meaningful influence – particularly for participants under 18. Despite these challenges, young advocates adopt creative strategies such as informal lobbying, collective protests and digital campaigns. In doing this they assert their human rights and demand stronger climate action, including on fossil fuel phase-out and finance. We reflect on reforms necessary to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of global climate governance through the rights of children and youth.

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Keywords

children's rights – youth climate action – political agency – participation – UNFCCC – global climate governance – postpaternalism

1 Introduction

This article focuses on the rights issues associated with experiences of children and youth who have engaged with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP), using in-depth, semi-structured online interviews. Grounded in a rights-based perspective, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of child and youth participation in global climate governance, particularly within the framework of the UNFCCC but also the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

Given that child and youth participation in COP is a relatively recent phenomenon with few precedents, much remains to be understood about the characteristics, contributions, challenges and barriers surrounding the participation of children and youth in these spaces. Our study, based on interviews centred on the perspectives of the children and youth themselves, aims to analyse these experiences from a children's rights perspective. Specifically, it seeks to explore how and to what extent these instances are guided by, and contribute to, the realisation of children's rights and human rights more broadly in relation to climate issues and governance. Aligned with Bowman's (2019) call to 'build theory from young people's visions of social, economic, and political change in response to climate emergency' (295), we draw from the lived experiences, perceptions and meaning making of young attendees at COP to reflect on what participation in these international climate negotiations means for them – their motivations, perceptions of barriers and facilitators, and its impact. Such an approach contributes to a growing literature that links child- and youth-led climate advocacy to global human rights frameworks (Cuevas-Parra, 2020).

In this article, we use the term "children" to refer to those under the age of 18 as defined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). We use "youth" to refer to older children (as they may identify more closely with this term) and young adults. We aim to capture in this article the way in which age-based categorisation extends beyond legal definitions of majority, reflecting a more complex dynamic. This tends to be very evident in young climate action. All of our older research participants began their climate activism during childhood. Young and old work together in climate action, and the worsening effects of the climate crisis means that those who are younger

now will suffer later. There is a very strong intergenerational element, therefore, to the climate crisis, and this often belies neat age categorisations (Daly, 2023).

Much of the literature about COP is from the discipline of youth studies. We draw on this literature as valuable insight into the rights of children and youth at COP. Youth studies as a discipline usually considers the experiences of those from 15 years of age, although the definition of youth varies across different contexts (Furlong, 2012). We wish to bring together this literature with our own childhood studies/children's rights approaches, with the aim that research from children's rights and youth studies can each inform the other. This is particularly important considering that children are now accessing spaces that were traditionally reserved only for older adolescents (Daly, 2022). It is important that children's experiences are considered, and children's rights approaches engaged, in these circumstances.

2 Situating Ourselves: A Conceptual Approach to the Rights of Children and Youth in the Climate Crisis

We are a team of co-researchers with diverse backgrounds in academia, practice and advocacy. Situated primarily in institutions based in the Global North, we recognise that our access to funding, networks and policymaking arenas – privileges not equally available to many of our participants – inevitably shapes our research. Florencia Paz Landeira has a background in childhood studies, exploring how children's rights are enacted in practice and how they intersect with social inequalities. Aoife Daly examines human rights-based approaches and children's rights, focusing on environmental rights, climate action, and access to justice. Two members of our research team, Alicia O'Sullivan and Katie Reid, have participated in the Conference of the Parties (COP) in different capacities. Alicia attended as a young advocate in COP26, her firsthand experience shaping the initial questions, hypotheses and matters of concern in this research. Katie engaged with COP26, COP27 and COP28 as a practitioner supporting and safeguarding children's participation, providing insights into the intergenerational dynamics at COP and the relationships between young attendees and supporting organisations. In line with reflexive and positionality-driven approaches to academic research, we acknowledge how our personal and professional experiences shape both the questions we ask and the interpretations we derive. Collectively, these experiences and our academic backgrounds in human rights (particularly children's rights), together with our focus on child- and youth-led climate action, guided this research and approach to engaging with participants.

In exploring the participation of children and youth in COP, our research builds on a rights-based theoretical approach that emphasises human rights in practice. This concept is key to understanding how children and youth engage with climate governance. Formal human rights frameworks, like the CRC, play a role in shaping expectations and understandings of the definitions and parameters of human rights. Pantazidou (2013) refers in a broader (non-child/youth-specific) context to "rights work", denoting the day-to-day work that those at grassroots level to create understandings of human rights (Daly *et al.*, 2024). Children and youth engage in such work without necessarily invoking these instruments directly. Instead, they interpret and apply human rights principles in their demands for climate justice, often intertwining them with broader social justice efforts.

Developmentalist and liberal-welfarist frameworks – ranging from stage-based psychology to historical narratives that cast childhood as a period of natural dependence – have traditionally portrayed children as passive, vulnerable and in need of adult protection. Over the past 25 years, however, critical childhood and children's rights studies have systematically challenged these assumptions, highlighting children's diverse capacities for agency and political action (James and Prout, 1997; Qvortrup, 2009).

Such an agentic view carries significant implications for climate activism and governance. The climate crisis has become one of the central concerns of this generation, motivating children and youth around the world to mobilise in unprecedented ways – through school strikes, legal actions, advocacy at international forums and local community projects (Pickard, 2019). Recognising their capacity to influence policy, shape public discourse and collaborate with adults is crucial for analysing the actual roles that children/youth can (and do) play in addressing the climate crisis. This aligns with approaches that see children not just as future stakeholders but also as current rights-holders and protagonists.

To examine the participation of children and youth at COP, classic frameworks such as Hart's (1992) "ladder of participation" remain influential, describing levels of children's engagement from tokenism and decoration at the bottom to child-initiated, shared decision-making at the top. Hart's model, adapted from Sherry Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of citizen participation" – originally developed to analyse citizen involvement in urban planning in the United States of America – has shaped how practitioners and researchers conceptualise child and youth participation. Although still widely used, Hart himself later reflected on the limitations of the ladder metaphor, emphasising the need to "step back" from rigid models and attend to the evolving, contextual nature of participation (Hart, 2008). Some scholars have similarly argued that

it oversimplifies child and youth involvement, positing that participation unfolds in more nuanced, context-specific ways (Tisdall, 2013). Lundy's (2007) model, which emphasises space, voice, audience and influence, has also shaped discussions about genuine child and youth participation. According to Lundy, children not only need a space to express themselves but must be heard by those in power, and their perspectives should meaningfully inform decisions.

These debates are complemented by one of the most significant insights from the wider field of critical childhood studies: that children's experiences of participation and agency are shaped by overlapping forms of inequality. Age intersects with class, gender, ethnicity and nationality, among other axes, influencing how children engage in, and are perceived within, political processes (Spyrou, 2018). Young advocates from rural areas, the Global South, or low-income communities, face additional barriers to travelling to international conferences or even accessing high-speed internet for online forums. Moreover, these children and youth often confront discriminatory attitudes or stereotypes – some tied to age, others to gender, race or socioeconomic status – that hinder their capacity to be taken seriously.

Alongside intersectionality, a key element of our analysis is postpaternalist theory on children's rights (Daly *et al.*, 2024). Postpaternalism theorises that child/youth climate action involves grassroots action from children/youth (for the first time, on a global scale) rather than well-meaning adults "giving" children their rights, and that this requires a different approach to children's rights. Part of postpaternalism is the foregrounding of the "freedom rights" (Daly, 2016) of the CRC. These rights include children's rights to participation, expression and assembly among others (Articles 12–15) and they emphasise that children should be empowered to shape matters affecting them. However, predominant interpretations of the CRC have persistently emphasised the protection and welfare of children over their autonomy and participation, framing them as pre-political and pre-citizen subjects who must be prepared by adults to enter the public sphere. The portrayal of children as vulnerable and in need of protection have prevailed over their recognition as equal citizens.

As we will explore in the next sections of this article, there is still a strong adult–child/youth dichotomy that undermines the ability of children and youth to influence decision-making processes and, ultimately, to access their rights. However, we argue that despite these barriers and inequalities, children and youth are pushing boundaries and finding ways to impact climate justice debates and frameworks. They are using pre-existing environments such us COP in creative and innovative ways (using social media, protesting, using the microphone creatively and off-script, and creating and strengthening transnational advocacy networks) to have their voices heard, to influence the

negotiations and the public awareness, and to create solidarity and collective networks of advocacy throughout the world. Often, this involves peer-to-peer learning. In doing so, they are living out their "freedom rights" outlined in the CRC, such as the right to freedom of expression (CRC Article 13) and the right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly (Article 15), which are not frequently associated with children and youth and, indeed, are sometimes criminalised (Daly, 2016). This indicates that climate advocates have created a shift towards greater recognition of children and youth as holders of political rights and as political actors.

Bringing together these strands of thinking – children as capable social actors, reflexive approaches to participation rights, intersectionality and postpaternalist critiques of traditional children's rights – enables recognition that the equitable incorporation of children and youth as political actors means not only "allowing" their participation in human rights spaces and processes but also acknowledging that these must be transformed by their inclusion. To make these spaces more accessible, equitable and fair for all, structures must be reimagined so that child-led perspectives can shape agendas from the outset rather than be added as an afterthought.

Drawing on this conceptual framework, we view our research "on" children and youth as research *with* them. This stance required ongoing reflexivity about adult–child/youth power relations during recruitment, interview design and data interpretation. We also reflected on how Global North ethical norms (e.g. strict anonymisation) can become a form of protectionist paternalism that inadvertently erases intersectional identities (Abu Moghli, 2023). To counter this, we sought participants' explicit consent to cite age, region and, where they wished, gender or racialised identity alongside quotations, thereby strengthening intersectional analysis while respecting individual preferences.

In the next section, we review existing research on child and youth participation at COP, identifying trends, challenges and emerging strategies through which children and youth navigate institutional barriers and attempt to expand the boundaries of participation.

3 Participation Rights in the Context of the Climate Crisis: A Review of Youth Engagement at COP

Youth participation in the UNFCCC negotiations has attracted increasing scholarly attention over the past decade, shedding light on both the potential and limitations of youth's roles within global climate governance. Early work by Thew (2018) documented how members of the UK Youth Climate Coalition

(UKYCC) navigated the YOUNGO constituency – formally recognised in 2011 – to balance personal growth with collective advocacy. Although these young advocates gained unprecedented visibility at the COP, their influence remained circumscribed by entrenched power structures and cultural norms favouring adult expertise. Thew notes that, until 2017, individuals under 18 were effectively excluded from formal youth participation at COP, and even after that date, those under 18 still faced additional barriers such as the requirement for a legal guardian. We consider literature about COP relating to both children and youth here, whilst acknowledging that there are intersections between these two categorisations.

3.1 *"Youth" at COP*

Further illustrating the multifaceted constraints facing youth, Ortiz, Mankhwazi, and Shafi (2024) centre on experiences of young advocates from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Through interviews with 12 MENA youth, they explore how regional context intersects with issues of access, representation, and potential "youth-washing", a phenomenon wherein organisations spotlight the presence of young advocates while ignoring or minimising their substantive policy demands. This dynamic echoes critiques of tokenism observed elsewhere, emphasising that institutional recognition alone does not guarantee meaningful involvement in decision-making processes.

Marquardt, Lövbrand and Buhre (2024) also examine how youth are positioned at COP, mapping youth organisations and interviewing participants to highlight three dominant subject positions: youth as vulnerable and marginalised, youth as professional insiders, and youth as unruly outsiders. Although institutionalisation has amplified youth presence, the authors contend that global summits remain marked by hierarchical and elitist cultures, thus constraining the range of political claims young advocates can effectively articulate. Even with official recognition, many participants report feeling simultaneously empowered and constrained, a duality that reflects broader tensions between inclusion and influence.

These observations are reinforced by Campisi *et al.* (2023), who note that despite an increase in youth attendance at COP, youth largely occupy observer status rather than formal negotiation roles. Campisi *et al.* advocate structural reforms to bolster youth participation, including specialised training programmes, national and regional youth councils and the strategic use of science diplomacy. Through an intersectional approach, they show that barriers to meaningful engagement are compounded for advocates with marginalised identities, pointing to the need for deeper changes beyond mere symbolic inclusion.

Bullon-Cassis (2024) takes a critical ethnographic perspective on youth engagement from 2019 to 2022, describing a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction among young advocates. Even as opportunities for youth participation expand, many still feel disempowered, leading to frustration and burnout. Bullon-Cassis frames youth climate activism as a 'game show at the end of the world' (2), where gaining social capital through savvy branding and performances does not necessarily translate into real policy gains. She calls for an expanded intersectional framework that includes not just youth but also other historically underrepresented groups, such as Indigenous peoples, to contest narrow framings of the climate crisis.

Yona *et al.* (2020) examine these dynamics via a "leverage points" framework, analysing interviews with youth and non-youth stakeholders in the lead-up to the 2015 Paris Agreement. They identify opportunities for deeper structural or "paradigm" shifts that could enhance youth influence. Yet, even with such theoretical openings, the authors recognise that the sheer diversity of youth identities – from varied socio-economic, ethnic, and geographic backgrounds – often goes unacknowledged. A one-size-fits-all approach to "youth participation" can mask internal power hierarchies, reinforcing the need for intersectional approaches.

More recently, Buhre and Josefsson (2024) have emphasised the material dimensions of youth representation at global climate summits, building on new materialist perspectives to show how matter (e.g., resources, physical spaces, travel logistics) shapes who can attend COPs, what claims they can make and how they can position themselves. Their study of the barriers, routes and on-site dynamics at the COP and Conference of the Youth (COY) reveals the practical hurdles – such as visa acquisition, access to vaccines and high travel costs – that disproportionately affect participants from the Global South and those with limited financial resources. Moreover, they argue that these material constraints directly influence the range of demands articulated by youth representatives, as well as the legitimacy and scope of their representative claims. For example, younger advocates, especially those under 18, face additional difficulties in securing funding or legal permissions for international travel. Consequently, older or relatively privileged youth become overrepresented at climate summits, a bias that can skew the agendas pursued and the voices heard.

Buhre and Josefsson also underscore the spatial ordering of COP venues, distinguishing between "blue zones" (diplomatic spaces requiring formal accreditation) and "green zones" (advocate spaces open to broader civil society). While the blue zone affords proximity to government delegations

and high-level negotiations, it reinforces an "elitist diplomatic culture", compelling youth to adopt professional norms that can dilute more radical or dissenting positions. By contrast, the green zone may permit greater freedom of expression, including protests and informal gatherings, yet it offers fewer direct channels to decision-makers. The authors' research participants recounted instances of prejudice and condescension – being called "cute" or denied access based on assumptions of incompetence – demonstrating how adult-centric attitudes are spatially embedded and reproduced. At the same time, Buhre and Josefsson highlight the subversive tactics youth employ, from informal lobbying to staging demonstrations in symbolic locations. These acts can reshape spaces' intended functions, carving out new possibilities for collective organising and shifting public discourse.

Taken together, these studies illustrate how age-based subordination interacts with broader power inequalities, from postcolonial legacies to socio-economic disparities, and how this interplay constrains youth's transformative potential. Although COPs and related events have become important hubs for networking and constituency-building, youth participants remain largely excluded from binding negotiations and may struggle to influence final agreements. Nevertheless, even under these limitations, young advocates continue to adopt adaptive, resourceful strategies – collaborating across borders, forming alliances with non-governmental organisations, and using both traditional and social media to draw attention to urgent climate demands.

However, a closer examination of this emerging body of literature reveals that the category of "youth" is often treated as a homogenous group, frequently glossing over critical age distinctions. While the formal designation "children and youth" is commonly used in institutional contexts, most studies concentrate on older youth – typically aged 18 and above – who are eligible to participate in official processes and do not face the legal and logistical constraints that younger adolescents and children encounter. The specific experiences of children under 18 are rarely the focus of in-depth analysis and their perspectives are often subsumed under broader youth narratives.

Our research contributes to addressing this gap by paying closer attention to the age-based heterogeneity within the "children and youth" category. We reflect more explicitly on how age, legal status and the adult-centric nature of governance frameworks shape participation in differentiated ways. By examining the lived experiences of both younger and older advocates, we highlight the varied challenges and opportunities they encounter, and consider what more inclusive, child- and youth-sensitive climate engagement could look like.

3.2 *"Children" at COP*

There is considerably less literature focused on the experiences of under 18s at COP. Children's experiences have largely been gathered anecdotally or through internal research and evaluation conducted by child rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs) supporting the participation of children. This lack of research into children's experiences largely mirrors the reality that climate summits, including COP, are rarely inclusive of children, as highlighted in "A Cop Fit for Children" (Save the Children International, 2022) guidance developed by an international coalition of child rights organisations. Calling for strengthened children's participation before, during and after COP, the guidance provides recommendations to national delegations as well as the UNFCCC and the State party responsible for hosting each annual COP. To the national delegations, the authors' recommendations include ensuring children can participate through receiving official national delegation badges (known as Party badges) or as Observers and be supported by an assigned, experienced "child engagement focal point" within the delegation; ensuring appropriate child safeguarding measures are taken; and ensuring children access meaningful, child-friendly information, training, support and engagement opportunities so they are able to participate fully. They also highlight the importance of ensuring children are supported after COP, so they understand the outcomes of their participation and the negotiations, and develop plans for engaging in COP the following year.

The authors of "A Cop Fit for Children" urge the UNFCCC and COP host State Parties also to ensure children are able to participate in COP before, during and after negotiations have taken place. They call for necessary safeguarding procedures and policies to be implemented, and for a more accessible registration process to be created for children and child-focused organisations, alluding to complications children have previously experienced due to not being affiliated with a State party delegation. They call on the UNFCCC and the Presidency to provide children with safe, meaningful opportunities to inform negotiations and side-events, as well as child-friendly spaces where they can access resources and support. Again, they urge the UNFCCC to encourage participating State Parties to involve children in their delegations (2022). It is also noted that in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccine inequality affected the ability of children from the Global South to attend COP.

A call for children's involvement in national State Party delegations has also been a recommendation aimed at UNFCCC State Party negotiators in a series of position papers on "Centring Child Rights at COP" developed by the Child Rights Environmental Initiative (CERI) – a collaboration of child rights

organisations working at the intersection of children's rights and climate governance – ahead of COP27 (CERI, 2022) and COP28 (CERI, 2023). The authors highlight that children's exclusion from climate decision making is a denial of their participation rights, and risks leading to poorly planned climate action that negatively impacts on the broader spectrum of children's rights. Citing the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No.12 on the child's right to be heard, the authors highlight the significant contribution children can make to climate decision-making, including identifying issues adults may overlook (2023: 9–11).

Children themselves have taken to calling for greater representation and inclusion in COP. During COP28, ten children (aged 11–17) from Spain, Belgium, Colombia, Hong Kong, Austria, Trinidad and Tobago, Australia, Kenya, South Africa and Bosnia-Herzegovina supported by the organisation Child Rights International Network (CRIN, 2023) penned an open letter to delegates sharing their reflections on the importance of involving children in decision-making processes, and highlighting the significant contributions children have made to draw attention to the global climate crisis. The authors commented on the creation of the Children and Youth Pavilion – a designated space for children and youth introduced in COP27 in Sharm el Sheik in the Blue Zone arena amongst State party-, institution-, and corporate- sponsored pavilions – highlighting that whilst a "positive step forward", they called for children's inclusion in the highest-level negotiations. This message was reiterated in a consequent open letter written by 28 child climate advocates prior to COP29 (CRIN, 2024), stating, 'including children in these pivotal discussions is not just a symbolic gesture – it is an acknowledgment of our rights and a recognition of the intergenerational impact of climate decisions'.

Our research seeks to deepen the understanding of how child and youth participation in COP might be reconfigured through rights-based frameworks and intersectional analyses and, at the same time, the ways in which these spaces are being impacted and transformed by children and youth's presence. Building on these prior studies, we examine the lived experiences of young advocates, investigating how their personal trajectories and collective strategies intersect with the structural barriers and spatial divides. In the next section, we present the main findings from our research. By connecting the conceptual underpinnings laid out here with empirical findings and lived experiences, we hope to advance a more nuanced understanding of what truly inclusive, child-sensitive climate governance could look like – and how it could foster genuinely transformative solutions in an era of escalating environmental crisis.

4 Research Design

This article draws on n = 20 in depth, semi-structured, online interviews with child and youth climate advocates from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America, conducted in 2024. This study has obtained ethical approval from the UCC Social Research Ethics Committee. The sample was purposefully constructed for maximum variation (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015) to capture diversity in age, gender, region and COP experience (see *Appendix 1. Participants' Profiles*). Because qualitative inquiry seeks analytic depth rather than statistical generalisation, issues of "sample size" and "representativeness" are not applicable in a quantitative sense. Instead, adequacy was assessed through information power and thematic saturation.

Of those interviewed, six were children (i.e. under the age of 18; specifically, between 11 and 17 years) when first attending COP, and three were 18 years of age. The remaining 11 youth were aged between 20 and 27 years. The fact that these interviewees were not under the age of 18 at COP, however, belies the fact that they began their climate action journey at a young age. All participants in this study started their advocacy prior to turning 18, and even as young adults they continue to mobilise arguments rooted in children's rights and emphasise the importance of including younger voices in climate decision-making. Consequently, their perspectives on climate justice are deeply shaped by formative climate action experiences during childhood.

Participants were contacted through the research team's networks and through an open call via the Youth Climate Justice project website and social media channels.[1] The call to participate in the study was also disseminated by young members of University College Cork's (UCC) delegation for COP29 held in Baku, Azerbaijan in November 2024. All participants were provided with a detailed information sheet about the project and they had to sign assent/consent forms prior to the interviews; for those under 18 years old, parental consent was also obtained. Both consent and assent, our data protection policies and the scope and aims of this research were reviewed and validated with the participants during the virtual call before starting the interview. We conducted thorough risk assessments on the country of each participant interviewed, to familiarise ourselves with any relevant legal and/or research frameworks, and to be sure that there were no unforeseen risks to participants engaging in our research interviews.

We used in-depth semi-structured interviews (Osborne and Grant-Smith, 2021) to explore children and youth's experiences on their own terms, getting

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a sense of the context of a person's experience, understanding their world and worldview, and how that might shape knowledge and meaning (Qu SQ Dumay, 2011; Kendall, 2008; Zhang, Wildemuth, 2017). Data analysis followed Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We tabulated full transcripts in a shared Excel workbook and generated initial inductive codes independently. Preliminary theme maps were then (i) discussed in dedicated reflexivity meetings within the core research team and (ii) shared in online workshops with youth co-researchers and NGO partners, enabling collective sense-making. Feedback from these sessions informed a final round of theme refinement, producing four overarching themes that structure the Findings section.

Interviews have been anonymised to protect the privacy of participants. We gave much consideration as to how to identify the characteristics of participants in this article. Although the nuance of the country information would have been useful to present, we decided instead to present their region as an identifier, to ensure sufficient anonymisation.

The following key questions guided the in depth semi-structured interviews[2]:

- How does age – intersected with other identity positions, such as gender, ethnicity and geographical background – affect participation at COP?
- How much support do children/youth get from their supporting non-governmental organisation at COP?
- How relevant do they think human rights and children's rights are to their work?
- Do children/youth see themselves as leaders on climate, and on human rights?
- What does all this mean for intergenerational relationships when it comes to human rights?

5 Findings: Participation in Climate Governance from Children and Youth's Perspective

This section presents the perspectives of the 20 children and youth interviewed for this research, focusing on how they experience, navigate and interpret their participation in COP processes. We group their insights into three broad themes: (1) motivations and facilitators, (2) barriers, and (3) impact. Throughout each subsection, we highlight the leadership these young participants exercise– whether in shaping their own advocate journeys, engaging others in collective efforts, or influencing global climate governance.

2 These five items were our analytical questions; during the interviews they were reformulated into age-appropriate, conversational prompts.

5.1 *Motivations and Facilitators*

We asked children and youth to reflect on their journey in climate action. Many interviewees traced their climate advocacy back to a formative experience in childhood. They described moments – personal epiphanies, traumatic events or encounters with environmental injustice – that galvanised them into action. For example, Young Person (YP)6 recounts how the 2018 IPCC report served as 'a wake-up call at age 15', propelling her from a general awareness of climate change into active participation, first through school strikes and later by seeking direct involvement at COP. She explained:

> It was the 2018 IPCC report that came out, and I was 15 at the time … I knew climate change existed, but it didn't feel real. That IPCC report, which gave such a limited time frame, really woke me up. It wasn't just an abstract issue anymore. For others around the world, it was already a present crisis, but I'd been somewhat sheltered from it. I got really concerned, did more research, and ended up writing an opinion piece for a local newspaper. Then a group of friends and I started a WhatsApp group, and we organized a school strike in our city – 10,000 people showed up! It was my first protest, and it was crazy.
>
> YP6-Female-18 at first COP-Europe, 16 September 2024

Similarly, YP8 recalled a vivid childhood memory: witnessing a family suffering from severe drought when she was only five years old. This early exposure to environmental hardship fuelled her lifelong passion for climate advocacy, evolving into planting trees, hosting a climate-focused podcast, and ultimately participating in COP28 and COP29. Over time, she clarifies, her sense of purpose shifted from small-scale initiatives toward a broader commitment to 'protecting children's rights through climate justice' (YP8-Female-11 at first COP-Africa, 8 October 2024).

For some, natural disasters or local crises provided the initial impetus. YP12, for instance, described surviving a severe typhoon, an event that left an indelible mark on her view of environmental injustice:

> I was a child survivor of that, and I guess that shaped my entire perspective on climate. I kept wondering, 'Why did this have to happen to us?' From then on, it was just this whole path for me toward climate action … I was 12. It was such a pivotal moment in my life – it completely changed me. At that age, witnessing everything around you disappear leaves a lasting impact.
>
> YP12-Female-23 at first COP-Asia, 21 November 2024

She noted that her motivation to pursue climate action stems directly from the inequality she witnessed in how different communities received support post-disaster. YP14 (Male-16 at first COP-Africa) and YP15 (Male-18 at first COP-Africa) also recounted environmental hardships in their hometowns – mining damage, toxic pollution – that instilled in them the conviction that climate injustice is inseparable from broader struggles for equality. In other cases, childhood curiosity or relationships with relatives seeded the groundwork for activism. YP9 (Female-20 at first COP-Europe) traced her interest back to conversations with her grandfather, whereas YP11 (Male-22 at first COP-Europe) recounted how early involvement in Fridays for Future deepened his understanding of how policy changes connect to local environmental challenges. Regardless of the initial trigger, these personal stories suggest that early life experiences frequently catalyse long-term commitments to climate activism – even in the face of significant obstacles.

A common trajectory in the climate action journey of participants involved evolving from localised advocacy to seeking influence in international forums such as COP. Several participants recount starting with school-based recycling drives or local marches and gradually realising the limitations of local action alone. YP4, for example, explained that her experience was like a snowball, from activities organised in her secondary school, to national youth groups meetings and then to international networks that led her to getting involved in the planning for COP26. Along that process, she 'learned about climate justice, just transition, and intersectionality. I saw where my voice and lived experience had value, especially as someone from a farming community' (YP4-Female-23 at first COP-Europe, 13 September 2024). This shift often entails learning policy language and negotiation processes – skills that can be daunting without adequate mentorship or guidance. Many described turning to youth networks or older advocates better to understand the mechanics of global climate negotiations. In these transitions, children and youth begin to see themselves not just as concerned citizens but as leaders who can bring grassroots perspectives to the global stage.

Almost all participants mentioned peer networks and mentorship as pivotal to their journeys. Early involvement in local organisations or youth groups (e.g., youth wings of environmental NGOs, children's advocacy collectives or faith-based groups) provided practical skills, moral support and pathways to global climate engagement. One participant highlighted that her first step beyond local activism was facilitated by a children's organisation that taught her how to communicate complex climate issues to decision-makers:

> Little by little, I got involved, participating in training spaces where we talked about politics, human rights, childhood, children's leadership, and our proposed solutions. We tried to advocate politically several times during situations that arose in the country, [but] activism isn't just about politics; it's also art, dialogue, training, support.
>
> YP16-Female-18 at first COP-Latin America, 9 December 2024

Mentors – both adult allies and older youth – often provided "maps" of the bureaucratic labyrinth in events like COP, explaining how to register for side events, interpret negotiation texts and network effectively. This support is crucial for young participants who otherwise face steep learning curves in navigating the complexities of international diplomacy. Notably, many participants saw these mentorships as horizontal or peer-driven: older youth passing on knowledge to younger ones, forming a chain of empowerment that helps new advocates step into leadership roles sooner.

These intragenerational support systems build a sense of belonging and solidarity derived from collective action. YP6 (Female-18 at first COP-Europe) noted that working as part of a tight-knit group of youth advocates creates critical mass. This continuous engagement sometimes yields tangible results, such as government commitments to incorporate children's perspectives in national climate strategies or to support funding mechanisms for youth-led projects. Even if these victories are incremental, they demonstrate how collective organising bolsters the influence of individual children and youth, and extends the reach of their leadership well beyond the negotiations.

Organisational backing also emerged as a critical facilitator, especially when it includes structured training or long-term engagement plans. Such preparation, though not universal, equips children and youth with the tools to engage more confidently. Some of the participants mentioned university delegations or partnership programmes with international NGOs as beneficial, especially when these initiatives prioritise a rights-based framing of climate advocacy and treat children's input as more than a mere formality.

Governments and delegations sometimes act as facilitators, too, though experiences here are mixed. YP9 said her national delegation included youth in meetings prior to COP to shape the country's position, giving them 'actual input in national priorities', though she still found that once at COP, 'the older men in suits did most of the talking' (YP9-Female-20 at first COP-Europe, 16 October 2024). Others mentioned that their governments provided scholarships or fellowships specifically aimed at underrepresented youth, offsetting travel costs and addressing some financial barriers. While such support does not

eliminate adult-centrism, it does help youths overcome initial hurdles that would otherwise keep them from attending.

Across participants' narratives, leadership also emerged as part of their motivation. Interviewees described stepping up – organising local campaigns, speaking at rallies or coordinating social media advocacy – because they sensed a gap in existing policy efforts. YP8 (Female-11 at first COP-Europe) firmly saw her – and other youth – as leaders on climate issues. She defined leadership not by age or title but by the willingness to take action, inspire others and drive change. Her involvement in diverse initiatives (e.g., podcasting, tree planting and public speaking) was portrayed as instrumental in changing perceptions among decision-makers and sparking broader conversations on climate justice. She believes that every action contributes to a ripple effect that can ultimately influence global policies.

During our interviews, however, participants challenged traditional notions of leadership, rejecting individualistic and heroic portrayals. As one participant said: 'It's been a very collaborative effort among young people. What's exciting now is seeing young people not only knowing their rights but using them. They're challenging senior politicians and standing up for themselves' (YP4-Female-23 at first COP-Europe, 13 September 2024). They also challenged the traditional notion that leadership is reserved for adults or future citizens, emphasising that leadership should be recognised in the present, not deferred to an indeterminate future. As YP16 stated:

> In my organization, we don't usually say "leader" so much as "protagonists" or "delegates", because we're all part of it. I do see myself as a protagonist and as a leader because I have my peers' trust to carry their voice. But it's more than that; it's about making everyone into a leader and protagonist … Leadership goes hand in hand with learning from each other. We grow together as a collective.
>
> YP16-Female-18 at first COP-Latin America, 9 December 2024

This perspective is transformative – it reimagines political agency as a shared, horizontal process that values every voice equally. By taking on leadership roles now, these young advocates are not only influencing policy but also redefining what it means to be a leader in the realm of climate justice.

5.2 *Barriers*

Despite strong motivation and enabling dimensions, participants frequently encountered structural hurdles in international forums like COP. These

barriers ranged from logistical and financial constraints to intersectional discrimination, adult-centrism and tokenistic practices that undermine youth leadership potential.

One strong feature of participants' experiences related to logistical and financial constraints. Many participants reported difficulty covering travel and accommodation expenses, as well as a lack of comprehensive guidance on navigating the event itself. YP4 underscored the gap between receiving minimal logistical support and being prepared for the complexity of negotiations: 'I was given a ticket and a place to stay, but no one really prepared me for the labyrinth of negotiations and bureaucratic hurdles inside COP' (YP4-Female-23 at first COP-Europe, 13 September 2024). This lack of structured, in-depth support often leaves young delegates disoriented, preventing them from fully participating. Language barriers also loom large – particularly for those whose first language is not English. The technical vocabulary of UNFCCC negotiations can exclude otherwise knowledgeable and capable youth advocates.

Adult-centrism repeatedly emerged in participants' testimonies, reflecting a deeply entrenched bias in which adults retain final authority, and children and youth are often relegated to symbolic or peripheral roles. YP1 laments:

> You're completely disregarded, honestly. It's funny because they keep talking about 'your future' while making decisions that damage it. It's a strange dynamic – you fight to get into the room, and then once you're there, they speak about you, your future, but they don't actually listen to you.
>
> YP1-Female-22 at first COP-Europe, 27 August 2024

YP3 also recounted her experience, emphasising age as a particular issue in relation to power dynamics – being younger is perceived by YP3 as a particular risk for not being taken seriously:

> I attended my first COP when I was 16, and I was in that grey area – not quite a kid, but not quite an adult either. I even met a girl who was seven or eight years old at COP28 which was incredible. But she told me she often felt undermined because she was so young, even though being at COP28 means you're already doing something most adults never achieve.
>
> YP3-Female-16 at first COP-Asia, 11 September 2024

These reflections emphasise that even when children and youth are given a seat at the table, they feel that their contributions are frequently devalued.

Several interviewees specifically felt that there was tokenism at play, whereby they were there for show. They also expressed concern at situations

where a single child or youth representative is called upon to speak for all children and youth. This is clearly a vast, diverse constituency, arguably as vast as adults as a group. YP1 explained: 'They often pick one young person, say that they represent all youth, and expect them to speak for everyone. That's not democratic' (YP1-Female-22 at first COP-Europe, 27 August 2024). It is questionable where children and youth are labelled on the programme "youth representative" or "youth speaker". This may put a lot of pressure on them as they will know that they cannot possibly represent all children and youth – one would never see "adult speaker" on a programme.

This practice, besides oversimplifying the diversity of opinions and experiences, may be a form of tokenism where the role of children and youth is reduced to a decorative presence rather than an influential actor. This "single representative" model reinforces the marginalisation of certain voices by reducing rich and varied perspectives to a single, token narrative. Many of the participants felt they were treated more as a photo opportunity than as an active contributor to policy discussions. YP2 felt expendable: 'No wonder they're applauding me – they know I don't have any power. I'm just another person who can be erased. If I say something they don't like, they can make me disappear, just like that' (YP2-Male-17 at first COP-Latin America, 6 September 2024). This practice, participants argued, allows adult-led institutions to claim they are inclusive while continuing to sideline a broad range of children and youth perspectives. The mismatch between the rhetoric of their inclusion and actual decision-making power erodes trust and underscores the need for genuine co-creation rather than ornamental representation.

Discrimination was another theme of the interviews. Participants frequently described how their experiences at COP were shaped by the intersection of multiple identity factors – age, gender, race, nationality, socio-economic status, and language – creating complex patterns of discrimination and exclusion. These intersecting inequalities not only determined who could attend international climate forums, but also who had access to spaces of influence and whose voices were taken seriously once inside. YP4 recalled:

> What I quickly realized was that people who were brown, from developing communities, or not from countries with colonial power were having a much harder time, especially the young people. For example, while I could sneak into rooms, my friend from [Polynesian island]- a young brown girl, would get kicked out of spaces she was specifically invited to by her government. That was shocking to me.
>
> YP4-Female-23 at first COP-Europe, 13 September 2024

There were also gender and heteronormativity issues at play. Some interviewees reported needing a male colleague to validate their views. Others expressed that they faced homophobic and transphobic attitudes in supposedly inclusive spaces. For YP7 (Non-binary-27 at first COP-Asia), who identifies as gay and nonbinary, being at COP meant navigating adult-centrism alongside gender- and sexuality-based discrimination. These testimonies underscore how climate forums like COP often reproduce broader social hierarchies, undermining the civic and political rights of children and youth – especially those with multiple marginalised identities.

Within this broader picture, younger participants – particularly those under 18 – faced distinct challenges that compound these dynamics. Several described the institutional and cultural barriers that limited their access to negotiation spaces and diminished their legitimacy as political actors. One participant recalled:

> I made alliances with about 15 young people, out of the 55,000 attendees, because they were the only 15 under 18 in those spaces … and since you're a child, they don't even let you into the negotiation rooms.
>
> YP2-Male-17 at first COP-Latin America, 6 September 2024

Others reflected on how their age placed them in a grey zone – neither fully recognised as children needing protection nor as autonomous participants.

Physical space also emerged as a marker of exclusion. Several participants noted how children are often confined to the Green Zone – associated with broader civil society – while the Blue Zone, where negotiations occur, remains largely inaccessible. YP4 remarked:

> At COP26, I didn't hear much about children in the Blue Zone. There was talk about "youth", but "youth" is a very broad category, and not all youth have the same power … It doesn't feel inclusive, and I don't think it's the right space for children.
>
> YP4-Female-23 at first COP-Europe, 13 September 2024

This spatial divide reinforces broader patterns of marginalisation, where younger children are often celebrated as symbolic figures yet lack opportunities for meaningful engagement. YP4 expressed concern about the potential instrumentalisation of very young participants who may be showcased for visibility while being excluded from decision-making or denied adequate emotional and safeguarding support.

These insights highlight the importance of addressing age not as an isolated category, but as one that intersects with other social hierarchies to shape access, representation and legitimacy in climate governance. While many youth face discrimination, under-18 participants encounter particular barriers rooted in assumptions about capacity, protection and credibility. Recognising these dynamics is essential for building more inclusive frameworks that respect the rights and agency of all children and youth – not only in name, but in practice.

The emotional toll that participation in COP can take was a strong feature of interviews. Participation in such high-stakes, adult-dominated environments can exert a heavy emotional and psychological burden. Research participants cited the stress of visa processes, fear of retribution and pressure to represent entire communities. YP2 described:

> I remember I couldn't sleep because I was super stressed, super anxious, because you never imagine … You hear about it in the media, in the news, but you never imagine that you'll actually be there. Before all this, I did an interview with a very important radio station that put me in the public eye in my country, I didn't realize it. I had no idea at the time.
>
> YP2-Male-17 at first COP-Latin America, 6 September 2024

In some cases, institutional supports exist (e.g., safeguarding officers, adult chaperones), but these can be patchy or insufficient – especially for children and youth who attend without a robust organisational backing. Several participants expressed burnout or a sense of "eco-anxiety," aggravated by COP's slow negotiation processes and the gap between promised actions and concrete outcomes.

One of the most striking insights from our interviews is the near-complete absence of children's rights language in official COP texts and procedures. YP10 stated:

> Based on my experience at COP and in other spaces, I would say that children's rights specifically are not a significant part of the conversation. The relationship between climate change and human rights is clear: climate change impacts children all around the world, and we're already experiencing these effects … However, they currently aren't given enough attention. When these topics are addressed, it's often in side-events and capacity-building sessions, not in the main negotiations or agenda items at COP.
>
> YP10-Non-binary-15 at first COP-Europe, 24 October 2024

Even though references to "future generations" abound in negotiation rhetoric, the specific rights of children (under 18s) – who are already experiencing climate impacts – remain peripheral. Several participants argued that this omission is both a cause and a consequence of the adult-centric culture at COP, where children are seen as emotive figures rather than political agents/rights-holders. It is a feature of young climate action more broadly that children's rights appear frequently to be absent from the conversation. They are also frequently absent from child/youth-involved climate litigation (Daly, 2023). This may be for a number of reasons. Many of those under the age of 18 do not identify as "children" but rather as youth and therefore "children's rights" may not be attractive language, or an attractive concept/legal principle (Daly, 2023). As discussed above, children who attend COP and similar decision-making arenas often fall through the cracks. Several interviewees noted that negotiators rarely acknowledge the distinct legal status of participants under 18. When this recognition is absent, safeguards and entitlements reserved for under the age of 18 – such as the right to play set out in Article 31 of the CRC – tend to be sidelined in climate conversations.

5.3 *Impact*

Despite the formidable barriers they encounter, participants unanimously asserted that child and youth participation at COP has meaningful impact – both on their personal trajectories and on the broader climate governance landscape. This section explores how engaging with COP shapes young advocates' own lives and how their presence influences negotiations, policy decisions and public discourse.

Many interviewees described their COP experiences as personally transformative. Although they confronted logistical, emotional and structural hurdles, they also gained policy literacy, networking opportunities, visibility and media attention that can often bolster advocacy efforts back home. For instance, YP6 reflects:

> For me personally, COP has changed how I think about where change comes from. When I went to COP 26, I was 18, and I thought, "This conference is going to save the world." Now, I see COP as just one piece of the puzzle. Change also comes from activism, protests, and the pressure put on negotiators outside of these spaces. COP has opened doors for me to meet people, build networks, and gain knowledge that I wouldn't have otherwise.
>
> YP6-Female-18 at first COP-Europe, 16 September 2024

These personal gains often translated into greater confidence and an expanded sense of leadership. Some children and youth spoke of returning to their communities with new insights, determined to influence national or local policies. YP11 (Male-22 at first COP-Europe) noted that although negotiation outcomes on finance and adaptation were sometimes disappointing, the process of learning and connecting with allies helped him refine his long-term activism strategy.

Several participants perceived that their collective efforts can – and do – make progress in the area of climate change mitigation, albeit incrementally. YP13 cites an example from COP29:

> For example, at COP29, youth voices were strong. We didn't stay silent. We organised a night vigil on Saturday and engaged in silent actions with negotiators. Initially, the climate finance commitment was set at $250 billion per year, but through our participation and activism, it was increased to $300 billion. That felt like a direct impact of our involvement and energy at COP.
>
> YP13-Female-25 at first COP-Africa, 29 November 2024

While it is impossible to isolate child and youth advocacy as the sole factor in such shifts, stories like these illustrate how coordinated action, visibility stunts and behind-the-scenes lobbying can push negotiators to make more ambitious commitments.[3] Even when policies fall short, child and youth advocates believe their presence signals that "the world is watching", applying moral pressure on decision-makers to consider how these outcomes will affect younger generations.

Participants also stressed the importance of transnational youth coalitions and alliances. By forming or joining youth-led organisations, they gained collective clout that enhanced their impact at COP. These networks helped them share resources (such as partial grants for travel or translation assistance), co-developed policy asks and conducted joint advocacy actions like silent marches or side events. YP6 pointed out that this collective approach extends well beyond the two-week COP window:

3 A draft decision circulated on 22 November 2024 set the finance figure at $250 billion. Youth-led groups immediately criticised the offer and staged high-visibility protests inside the COP venue (see *Al Jazeera*, 22 November 2024; AP, 16 Novmber 2024). The final text adopted on 23 November raised the target to at least $300 billion (ESG Dive, 25 November 2024).

> At a broader level, young people often push for things to get on the agenda, like fossil fuel phase-out. We may not always get exactly what we want – like at COP 28, we wanted a commitment to phase out fossil fuels, but ended up with "phase down" language instead. But the momentum young people generate around these issues is undeniable. The transparency and accountability we bring, through social media and other channels, also play a huge role in influencing the narrative.
>
> YP6-Female-18 at first COP-Europe, 16 September 2024

Through these sustained strategies, young advocates occupy a multifaceted role: protestors, lobbyists, educators and moral voices reminding negotiators of climate injustice's generational implications. Although they acknowledged the systemic flaws of COP – labelling it at times as slow or "dysfunctional" – they also viewed it as a crucial platform for creating legal norms, forging international connections and building pressure for future actions.

Most research participants saw a rights-based approach – explicitly recognising children's rights and human rights in COP texts – as essential to changing the negotiation culture. They invoked instruments like the *United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No. 26 on Children's Rights and the Environment with a Special Focus on Climate Change* to argue for the implementation and safeguarding of their rights during negotiations. YP1 articulated:

> We often talk about "the future," but how can any child have a future if their right to education, clean water, or life itself is compromised by climate change? Advocating for climate justice means advocating for human rights.
>
> YP1-Female-22 at first COP-Europe, 27 August 2024

Research participants asserted that explicitly embedding children's rights in climate governance would provide a moral and legal justification to amplify children and youth's voices, mandate safeguards (such as emotional support and safe spaces), and ensure that the intangible references to "future generations" become concrete policy commitments. When combined with leadership frameworks that validate children's agency, a rights-based lens fosters a transformative approach – one that moves beyond token invitations toward genuine power-sharing.

Taken together, the findings highlight the complexity and heterogeneity of child and youth participation at COP. While participants described deep personal motivations and hopes for transformative change, their engagement

was frequently constrained by structural barriers, intersectional discrimination and adult-centric institutional cultures. Yet across these constraints, young advocates employed a range of strategies – emotional, logistical, and political – to navigate exclusion and push for recognition.

The experiences recounted by these children and youth illustrate a dual transformation that unfolds at COP. On a personal level, the process broadens their policy knowledge, boosts their confidence and solidifies their identities as current rather than future leaders in the climate space. At the same time, their collective presence can incrementally shift the scope of discussions and outcomes, particularly when they coordinate across national lines and engage in shared actions that highlight the intergenerational stakes of climate policy. Although many participants acknowledged that COP negotiations still fall short of true inclusivity, they saw these conferences as pivotal forums for pressuring decision-makers to move beyond platitudes and consider the direct impact of climate decisions on children's rights and well-being.

Young advocates underscored that the gap between rhetoric and reality remains wide: they must often contend with tokenism, adult-centrism, intersectional discrimination and the emotional toll of speaking out. Nevertheless, they responded by cultivating peer support, forging alliances with adult allies and strategically deploying human rights instruments to assert their political legitimacy. In this way, they transformed the role of children and youth from a symbolic "voice of the future" to a dynamic force challenging established power hierarchies. By positioning themselves as legitimate stakeholders and leaders today, they reframed the very nature of participation in climate governance, pushing toward a model that treats children not as peripheral actors but as co-authors of our collective environmental future. This redefinition of participation signals a broader transformation – one that challenges adult-centric assumptions embedded in multilateral diplomacy and opens possibilities for reimagining climate governance as an intergenerational, rights-based process.

6 Discussion

The findings of this study underscore a core tension in global climate governance: even as children and youth gain visibility at forums like COP, they remain bound by structural constraints that limit their capacity to influence decisions. In line with the work of Buhre and Josefsson (2024), participants in our study spoke of how logistical and financial barriers, tokenistic gestures and entrenched adult-centrism regularly undercut the legal and moral frameworks

that ostensibly recognise them as rights-holders. At the same time, they described resourceful tactics – ranging from informal lobbying to organised protests – that exemplify the agency children and youth can wield, sometimes leading to incremental policy shifts or broader cultural transformations. These accounts thus illustrate a paradox: children and youth actively shape political arenas that purports to include them, yet often encounter them primarily as symbolic proxies for "the future" rather than legitimate contributors in the present.

One critical insight drawn from these experiences is how the interplay between formal rights instruments and everyday "rights work" generates new possibilities for child and youth participation. In principle, the CRC establishes a legal basis for children's freedom of expression, association and participation in decisions that affect them. However, the research participants rarely framed their demands in overtly legalistic language; many found greater resonance in social justice perspectives, focusing on climate inequities or the ethical obligations of current decision-makers. This melding of human rights discourse with grassroots activism brings to mind a more fluid understanding of children's rights – one that acknowledges the importance of legal norms yet remains open to creative, context-specific advocacy strategies. By organising protests, forging alliances with NGOs, or leveraging social media to expose inconsistencies in policy, the young advocates in this study translated core ideas of the CRC into action without always naming the CRC itself.

Their narratives also shed light on how paternalism persists in formal negotiation spaces. The postpaternalist theory on children's rights, which underpins much of our analysis, suggests that children's capacity to advocate for themselves should be recognised and supported rather than overshadowed by adult intermediaries. Yet the participants detailed multiple instances in which adults effectively dictated the terms of their participation by limiting children and youth to short speaking slots, "feel-good" photo opportunities or peripheral side events, in line with the findings of Ortiz, Mankhwazi and Shafi (2024). Despite rhetorical commitments to "future generations," adult stakeholders often left children and youth with little real power to shape outcomes. This disconnect between discourse and practice is not merely a localised failing in climate diplomacy; it reflects deeper societal norms that treat children as lacking independent authority. Indeed, paternalistic attitudes sometimes extended beyond the legal definition of childhood into early adulthood, showing that age-based subordination is both fluid and deeply embedded in institutional cultures. Our research shows that, by articulating their own vernacularised rights language, young delegates therefore challenge what we might term epistemic adultism at the heart of COP – signalling

that meaningful participation requires institutional, not just procedural, transformation.

Such systemic constraints are exacerbated by intersectional inequities. In line with the work of Marquardt, Lövbrand and Buhre (2024), several participants in our study recounted how socio-economic background, racial and ethnic identity and geographic location compound age-based discrimination. Global South delegates described facing profound challenges related to visas, travel funding and language barriers. Others recalled experiences where adult men held sway over negotiations and largely dismissed younger voices, especially if they were female, nonbinary or from less privileged backgrounds. These testimonies confirm that power imbalances around age do not operate in isolation; they intersect with other axes of marginalisation to shape who is heard at COP and whose advocacy is sidelined. The fact that some relatively privileged children and youth could "sneak" into negotiation rooms while their peers were excluded starkly illustrates how multiple forms of inequality intertwine to determine access. From a rights perspective, it is therefore insufficient to view children's participation as an issue of age alone; meaningful inclusion must address broader systems of economic injustice, colonial histories, gender biases and linguistic hierarchies that filter child and youth voices.

Yet the accounts of our interviewees also underscore that children and youth are not passive recipients of adult-imposed limitations; rather, they engage in what might be termed strategic subversions of the very structures that aim to confine them. Building on our postpaternalist lens, we acknowledge that decades-long intergenerational movements in the Global South – such as the Peruvian working-children unions (Taft, 2019) and Brazilian school occupations (de Castro 2022) – demonstrate that rights-based disruption is intertwined with broader collective repertoires. The CRC, while offering a shared normative language, can simultaneously reinscribe the adult/child binary; placing these tensions in conversation with childist and intersectional scholarship deepens our postpaternalist analysis and foregrounds the diverse, context-specific strategies through which young people contest climate governance norms.

This strategic dimension manifests in peer-led mentorship, where more experienced child and youth advocates share practical knowledge with those younger than them – how to interpret negotiation texts, use official passes creatively, or secure meetings with key officials. It also appears in their alliances with supportive adults who actively resist paternalistic norms and help open doors for child and youth-led proposals. Crucially, children and youth repeatedly invoked collective actions like silent vigils, petition drives and online campaigns, showing that their approach to political engagement

is often collaborative rather than individualistic. Such networks allow them to pool scarce resources, craft more coherent policy demands and amplify their moral authority by presenting a united front. Taken together, these practices expose how climate-governance spaces are contested not only along generational lines but also across intersecting axes of power – region, race, gender and class – underscoring a need for an explicitly intersectional narrative of postpaternalism. This type of organic action signifies a postpaternalist way of working – when faced with inadequate frameworks, young advocates advance their rights (to participation, to a healthy environment and so on) by organising themselves and by mobilising both global child-rights norms and community-rooted strategies that sit outside liberal individualism.

Another significant theme involves the gap between formal negotiation halls, typically reserved for accredited delegates, and the peripheral spaces where many young advocates gather. Spatial separations, described vividly in the interviews, reflect a microcosm of power differentials. In the so-called "green zone", children and youth may enjoy greater freedom to stage protests or build horizontal alliances, yet they remain physically removed from the "blue zone", where binding agreements are shaped. Although these peripheral spaces can foster vibrant activism, participants lament that their most ambitious proposals rarely make it into final negotiation documents. They thus operate within a hybrid framework, simultaneously protesting external to the core sites of power and attempting to infiltrate them. On the one hand, this dual positioning underscores the creativity and resilience of child- and youth-led movements. On the other, it highlights the persistent difficulty of shifting adult-centric agendas when children are seldom present at the actual decision-making table.

These accounts show why paternalistic assumptions persist, in spite of high-profile child and youth activism. From the perspective of many adult stakeholders, children and youth offer inspirational or human-interest elements that can bolster public relations while not necessarily threatening existing power structures. The notion of children and youth as future-focused can help states or corporations frame incremental policies as forward-looking, even if those policies fail to address immediate needs or systemic injustices. Young advocates who challenge such narratives often meet with condescension or polite dismissal. Participants' anecdotes about being praised for their passion but ignored on substance (a phenomenon Taft (2021) has described as the "wowing" of child activists) illustrate how paternalism can manifest as a veneer of respect that conceals deeper inequalities. This divergence between appearance and reality points to a need for more robust oversight mechanisms

that hold adult stakeholders accountable for genuinely integrating children and youth's perspectives, rather than merely showcasing them.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings nuance discussions of children's agency by highlighting the tension between legal norms, everyday activism and intersectional power relations. Collectively, these insights indicate that the future of children's engagement in climate governance may depend on two interconnected developments. First, institutions must be reimagined in ways that explicitly incorporate child and youth voices – not merely in symbolic events, but in the core negotiations where policies are formalised. Such inclusion requires new procedural norms, greater material support and a genuine commitment to non-discrimination. It also requires an embedding of human rights principles in COP systems. The CRC is crucial for adequate and child-centred involvement of children and youth in matters affecting them. Work needs to be done to consider how the child-youth "divide" or "intersection", depending on what way one looks at it, can be negotiated. Perhaps the principle of participation, enshrined in CRC Article 12 (but also a key feature of environmental rights, e.g. in the Aarhus Convention), could be rethought and expanded. The rights of children and youth could be encompassed in a shared way of working (an expanded principle of child and youth participation rights) which is inclusive of the needs of both.

Second, it is important that children and youth themselves continue to expand their collective power by building cross-border alliances, refining communication strategies and coordinating lobbying efforts. Resources from NGOs, governments and others will be crucial for supporting this. As children and youth grow in policy acumen and learn to operate within (and around) formal systems, they can further challenge paternalistic structures that restrict their influence.

The experiences of these young delegates demonstrate both the possibility and the fragility of child and youth leadership in global climate governance. On one hand, they articulate visions of climate justice that integrate the right to a liveable future with present-day responsibilities – visions that, if taken seriously, could profoundly reshape international policies. On the other hand, they encounter systematic obstacles reflective of deep-rooted social hierarchies and adult-centrism. Rather than seeing these tensions as intractable, however, the study highlights them as points of potential transformation. The children and youth who speak in these pages reject an individualised, paternalistic conception of children's rights, instead suggesting a more expansive view that ties their participation to collective action and intersectional justice. The collective notion of leadership that they enact unsettles the one-person-spokesmodel that still dominates youth participation at COP, prompting a shift

toward distributed authority and rotating representation. Recognising this way of working will likely require sustained advocacy, legal reforms and a shift in societal norms about who is authorised to speak on climate and human rights. By bridging moral arguments, political strategy and a nuanced understanding of power relations, children and youth affirm that their leadership on climate issues is neither optional nor tokenistic, but essential to the global pursuit of a just, sustainable future.

7 Conclusion

This study has illuminated the multifaceted roles that children and youth assume when engaging with high-level climate diplomacy at COP. Far from mere poster children for future concerns, they display resourceful, often sophisticated, forms of advocacy that blend legal norms, social justice imperatives and situated knowledge of local environmental crises. Their collective presence – bolstered by peer-to-peer learning, transnational coalitions, intergenerational support and strong moral appeals – can spur negotiations toward more ambitious commitments, albeit in limited and uneven ways. Yet the emotional and logistical toll, combined with persistent adult-centrism and intersectional inequities, underscores that genuine transformation will require deeper systemic shifts.

The analysis shows that acknowledging children's rights as a central element of climate governance is not simply a matter of inserting child-specific language into formal agreements. It involves rethinking who has the authority to set agendas, propose solutions and hold decision-makers to account – an agenda that is inherently challenging in adult-led institutions. By foregrounding the concept of postpaternalism in children's rights, the research calls for moving beyond protective or tokenistic approaches and toward recognising children/youth as capable political actors who can claim space at the negotiation table. At the same time, the findings highlight that child and youth leadership remains deeply intersectional, emerging at the crossroads of geography, race, language and class. Attending to these intersecting power dynamics will be essential for any comprehensive effort to institutionalise children's participation and redress the imbalances that have long shaped global climate policy.

Ultimately, the testimonies of the young advocates demonstrate that climate governance need not remain the exclusive domain of adult expertise, market forces or state-centred negotiations. Children and youth are already articulating alternative modes of engagement, rooted in community-based initiatives, collaborative protest strategies and rights-based arguments that

challenge paternalistic norms. Their efforts, while impeded by barriers both formal and informal, reveal the possibility of transforming COP into a space that is not only intergenerational in rhetoric but genuinely responsive to the voices of all those who inhabit the planet – young and old alike. By creating mechanisms for ongoing dialogue, capacity-building and financial support, and by broadening the scope of what "meaningful child/youth participation" can mean, global climate institutions may move closer to addressing the ethical and political demands these young advocates pose. These demands go well beyond a desire for visibility; they represent a call for structural change that respects both the autonomy of children and the urgent need for collective solutions in an era of escalating environmental crisis. Beyond contributing to academic debates, we hope these insights can inform future policy frameworks and participation guidelines that not only include, but also respect and strengthen the political agency of children and youth in climate decision-making spaces.

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Appendix 1: Participants' Profiles

Young Participant	Age at first COP	Age at interview	COP	Gender	Region
YP1	22	24	27 & 28	Female	Europe
YP2	17	19	27	Male	Latin America
YP3	16	18	27 & 28	Female	Asia
YP4	23	25	26 & 28	Female	Europe
YP5	25	28	26 & 28	Male	Europe
YP6	18	20	26, 28 & SB60	Female	Europe
YP7	27	28	28	Non-binary	Asia
YP8	11	12	28	Female	Africa
YP9	20	22	27 & 28	Female	Europe
YP10	15	18	26	Non-binary	Europe
YP11	22	23	28 & 29	Male	Europe
YP12	23	23	28 & 29	Female	Asia
YP13	25	25	29	Female	Africa
YP14	16	21	25	Male	Africa
YP15	18	22	29	Male	Africa
YP16	18	22	29	Female	Latin America
YP17	22	27	15, 16 & 29	Female	Asia
YP18	11	12	29	Male	Africa
YP19	21	21	29	Female	Europe
YP20	24	27	26	Female	Europe