

Photo: LWF/Albin Hillert/Ikon

Stop Stealing Tomorrow – Why Youth Voices Must Shape Climate Change Adaption

Author: Rebecca Ander

Foreword

In 2020, the bishops of the Church of Sweden published A Bishops' Letter About the Climate[1]. At the time, there was still hope that it would be possible to keep the 1.5°C goal alive, even if "its pulse is weak," as COP26 President Alok Sharma expressed it on the final day of COP26. Six years later, however, UNEP's Emissions Gap Report 2026[2] makes it clear that decades of insufficient climate action have put the world on a trajectory that exceeds this target, making climate impacts increasingly severe and the world a more dangerous place.

The Bishops' Letter is a powerful invitation to rethink our current unsustainable development path. It also carries a strong moral message of responsibility towards children and young people's future. As the letter states: "If we do not act in time, we will leave today's and tomorrow's children to foot the bill."

In this spirit, this brief is an appeal for greater youth participation in decision-making processes, particularly where decisions will have profound consequences for future generations. It is also a call to integrate a child rights perspective into climate policy and action to safeguard a livable future for all. The purpose of this brief is to bring the issue of intergenerational justice to the negotiating tables and into conversations with political decision-makers.

The brief will be launched at COP31 on 14 November, Youth Day. Our hope is that it will serve both as a wake-up call and as a source of practical guidance for climate policymakers and negotiators. Through its recommendations, the brief seeks to inspire concrete actions that advance intergenerational justice and strengthen climate adaptation efforts in ways that protect the rights and futures of children and young people.



photo: Gustaf Hellsing/Ikon

Margareta Koltai
Senior Policy Adviser for Climate Justice,
Act Church of Sweden

1. Introduction

An estimated 1.3 billion people, or 15.6 % of the total world population, were aged between 15 and 24 in 2024[3]. Despite having contributed comparatively little to climate change, today's youth and generations yet to come will bear a disproportionate share of its consequences. Intergenerational justice in the context of climate change requires that climate policies safeguard the rights, well-being and opportunities of present and future generations to live a minimally decent life[4]. As climate risks intensify and greenhouse gas emissions continue to drive global warming, integrating intergenerational justice into climate change adaptation is an urgent policy priority.

" ... integrating intergenerational justice into climate change adaptation is an urgent policy priority."

Current adaptation policies and decision-making processes do not adequately account for the long-term needs of children, young people and future generations. Their perspectives remain underrepresented in climate negotiations, adaptation planning and monitoring often fail to recognise their specific vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities. Considering the immense consequences the climate crisis will have and the fact that emissions are still increasing[5], the inclusion of youth in climate change adaptation negotiations and the implementation of youth-specific adaptation targets becomes especially important.

The direst consequences of climate change will be felt in the Global South, where existing vulnerabilities and limited adaptive capacities heighten the risks faced by many communities. Ensuring the meaningful participation of youth from the Global South is therefore vital. Without the inclusion of marginalised groups, such as youth, there is little hope that equitable solutions will be reached. This policy brief has the purpose of informing, influencing and advocating for more ambitious adaptation strategies where intergenerational justice is an integral part of and considered in decision-making processes and strategies.

This policy brief advances five key messages for future policy:

- Institutionalise intergenerational justice.
- Integrate child- and youth-responsive adaptation indicators.
- Ensure meaningful youth participation in adaptation planning.
- Prioritise inclusive, youth-led adaptation initiatives.
- Strengthen the support for young delegates, especially from the Global South, in global climate negotiations.



2. Climate Change Adaptation as an Intergenerational Justice Issue

Intergenerational Justice

"Intergenerational justice is realized when the chances of future generations to satisfy their own needs are at least as great as those of the present generation. This means a fair distribution of resources as well as of burdens and obligations between the generations."[6]

– Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations

Protecting youth, children and future generations

Youth, children and future generations need to be considered and protected in international and national climate change adaptation strategies and legally binding treaties. This is the essence of intergenerational justice. However, current climate adaptation strategies often fail to consider the long-term needs and rights of future generations creating a significant intergenerational justice gap. The Paris Agreement makes no reference to future generations, and intergenerational equity appears only once in its non-binding preamble.

"The Paris Agreement makes no reference to future generations, and intergenerational equity appears only once in its non-binding preamble."

An analysis of 160 National Adaptation Plans found that few included child related measures, with 28 % failing to mention children at all. No theoretical framework for the well-being of children, which takes the state of the environment and the future of the planet into account, has yet been developed[7]. The access to education, access to meaningful livelihood, economic security, health and the possibility for self-actualization will all be impacted by climate change, hence in need of adaptation efforts to ensure that youth and future generations can live meaningful and safe lives.

Meaningful inclusion of excluded groups

To drive more long-term, sustainable adaptation, more inclusion of historically marginalised groups is needed. Since such a large part of the world's population is excluded from negotiations and decision-making processes, their needs will undoubtedly not be considered or included to an adequate extent. If current young people and children are not included, how are adaptation strategies supposed to meet the needs of and give a voice to future generations? The importance of including historically excluded and marginalised groups has started gaining traction in international climate negotiations. This trend includes but is not limited to women and girls, indigenous peoples, migrants, people from the Global South, young people and children. The fact that Youngo, a youth network devoted to climate change issues, is included in various UNFCCC processes, the implementation of the Belém Gender Action Plan and the establishment of the Baku Workplan of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform show some of the progress that has already been made. However, many initiatives lack proper governance and institutionalization, excluded groups are expected to be accountable for their own engagement and there is often a lack of support from political leaders and government officials. By including marginalised communities, especially youth, a step is taken toward ensuring that generations to come will have their needs and rights respected.

Specific responsibility to youth from the Global South

The vast majority, 90 %, of young people and children live in low- and middle-income countries[8]. Youth from the Global South are far more likely to be excluded and prevented from being included in international climate negotiations. There are both practical constraints for young participants from the Global South, such as long visa processes that could end in rejection, and institutional and structural ones[9]. Without equal representation and participation from the Global South, where the most disastrous consequences

of climate change will be felt, there is no hope that just solutions will be found or met.

"Without equal representation and participation from the Global South, where the most disastrous consequences of climate change will be felt, there is no hope that just solutions will be found or met."

Effective climate adaptation strategies require global cooperation and partnerships. Young people around the world from the most vulnerable communities on the frontline of the climate change battle are leading organisations and mobilising people around them. Yet, exclusionary practices affecting young activists from the Global South are a sign that youth engagement in UNFCCC processes remains tokenistic and is not designed to yield meaningful results. Climate change adaptation initiatives have a distinct responsibility to consider lived experiences and demands from youth in the Global South.

"For decades, international climate conferences have been dominated by high-level rhetoric, delayed timelines, and superficial promises. For the Global South and Africa in particular these summits have too often translated into endless waiting while our communities bear the devastating brunt of a crisis we did little to create. The youth of the Global South are officially exhausted by empty words and unfulfilled pledges. The time for deliberation has expired; we have reached a critical threshold where there are no more chances left for waiting, stalling or bureaucratic hesitation. We demand an immediate, transparent and aggressive transition from historical pledges to tangible, ground-level implementation. Furthermore, we insist on structural transformations in how climate decisions are made, demanding authentic grassroots representation, equitable climate finance, and a rights-centered framework that protects the most vulnerable among us."



– Jovinus Justinian Kagaruki,
Youth Representative,
ACT Alliance Tanzania Forum

Intergenerational justice: Avoid dine and dash

Intergenerational justice is the obligation to ensure that current young people and future generations are guaranteed at least a minimally decent life. Whilst we should aim for far more than just minimally decent lives for young people and future generations, this is the path that current decisions make us head towards. Youth and future generations will come to suffer hardships that are inherited rather than self-imposed. While the conditions of future generations have always been subject to decisions by current generations, this imbalance of power becomes more significant with the massive change of living conditions caused by climate change. Therefore, it is fundamental for decision-makers to address the risks, through concrete actions, that are presently being created. Currently the world spends roughly $190 billion per year on 20 key adaptation measures that protect roughly 1.2 billion people[10]. Extending protection to all exposed places would require $540 billion annually, meaning that there is a gap of $350 billion.

These costs are going to increase due to the inaction and failure to mitigate climate change from decisionmakers. The costs of adapting to climate change are going to impose a heavy financial burden on governments of the future. Also, from a mere economic standpoint the only logical choice is to prioritise climate change adaptation instantly. At 2°C warming compared to pre-industrial levels; the world would need to spend $1.2 trillion annually to protect everyone exposed to climate hazards by 2050. $1.2 trillion is more than double compared to the current figure ($540 billion)[11]. This creates a dine and dash dynamic where decades of greenhouse gas pollution force newer generations to adapt to declining living conditions created by their parents' and grandparents' generations. More ambitious adaptation financing in the present day is required to ensure that the burden of adapting to climate change is more equally divided between generations.

3. Recommendations

Embedding intergenerational justice in climate change adaptation requires moving beyond symbolic recognition towards institutional commitments, measurable progress and equitable access to decision-making and resources.

We urge the Parties to take the following actions to embed intergenerational justice in climate change adaptation:

- Ensure the meaningful inclusion of children and young people, particularly from the Global South, in National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and adaptation decision-making, providing the technical, institutional and logistical support necessary for their participation.
- Institutionalise intergenerational justice as a cross-cutting principle in UNFCCC negotiations and climate change adaptation frameworks, supported by monitoring and accountability mechanisms, developed in cooperation with children and youth, to track progress on meaningful participation and climate outcomes.
- Integrate child- and youth-responsive indicators across all thematic targets of the UAE-Belém Work Programme on Indicators, capturing their distinct vulnerabilities, adaptive capacities, participation and adaptation outcomes while accounting for the long-term interests of future generations.
- Expand access to adaptation finance and targeted support for marginalised communities, prioritising locally led, community-based initiatives that incorporate the knowledge, needs and lived experiences of children, youth and other marginalised groups.
- Address structural and practical barriers to the participation of young delegates, particularly from the Global South, in UNFCCC negotiations by improving access to formal negotiation processes and providing targeted logistical support.

Endnotes

1 The Bishops of the Church of Sweden, 2020.
2 UNEP, 2026.
3 United Nations, 2024.
4 IPCC, 2022.
5 IPCC, 2023.
6 Bessant, Prost & Watts, 2025.
7 United Nations, 2024.
8 United Nations, 2024.
9 Heiba, 2022.
10 McKinsey Global Institute, 2025.
11 McKinsey Global Institute, 2025.

References

Bessant, J. Prost, A. & Watts, R., "Intergenerational Climate Justice: Applying Theory to Policy in the Anthropocene". Journal of Applied Youth Studies, vol. 9, nr 2, June 2026, p. 213–28. Springer Link, https://doi.org/10.1007/s43151-025-00191-0.

The Bishops of the Church of Sweden (2020). A Bishops' Letter About the Climate. Revised edition. Uppsala: Church of Sweden https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/a-bishops-letter-about-the-climate

Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations, "Intergenerationally Just Climate Policy; Position Paper", 2019, https://intergenerationaljustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Position_Paper_Climate_FRFG.pdf

Heiba, S. "Young Climate Leaders from the Global South Excluded from UN Conferences" 2022, https://earth.org/young-climate-leaders/

IPCC, 2022: Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Löschke, V. Möller, A. Okem, B. Rama (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA, 3056 pp., doi:10.1017/9781009325844

IPCC, 2023: Summary for Policymakers. In: Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Core Writing Team, H. Lee and J. Romero (eds.)]. IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland, pp. 1-34, doi: 10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647.001

McKinsey Global Institute, 2025, "Climate adaptation more than covers its cost" https://www.mckinsey.com/mgi/media-center/climate-adaptation-more-than-covers-its-cost

UNEP (2026). Emissions Gap Report 2026. Nairobi: United Nations Environment Programme. https://www.unep.org/en/publications/report/emissions-gap-report-2026

United Nations (2024). World Population Prospects 2024: Summary of Results. UN DESA/POP/2024/TR/NO. 9. New York: United Nations https://population.un.org/wpp/assets/Files/WPP2024_Summary-of-Results.pdf

Young people and future generations will bear the heaviest costs of a climate crisis they did little to create. Yet their voices remain under-represented in climate change adaptation planning and decision-making. This policy brief argues that intergenerational justice must be at the heart of adaptation policies and presents five recommendations to ensure that climate action protects the rights, well-being and opportunities of current and future generations.



Act Church of Sweden
Mailing address: 751 70 Uppsala, Sweden
Phone: +46 10 181 93 00
Email: givarservice@svenskakyrkan.se
Swish: 900 1223
PG: 90 01 22-3
BG: 900-1223
svenskakyrkan.se/act/en

SK26258 · November 2026