**Healthy Ecosystems and Human Rights: Sustaining the Foundations of Life**

Submitted to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment

Inputs submitted by Child Rights Coalition Asia (CRC Asia)

31 May 2019

**Question 1.** Please provide examples of ways in which declining biodiversity and degraded ecosystems are already having adverse impacts on human rights. Adversely affected rights could include, among others, the rights to life, health, water, food, culture, non-discrimination, a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, and Indigenous rights.

**Question 2.** To protect a wide range of human rights, what are the specific obligations of States and responsibilities of businesses in terms of addressing the main direct drivers of harm to biodiversity and ecosystems (e.g. land conversion, loss and degradation of habitat, climate change, overexploitation, pollution, invasive species) and the indirect drivers (unsustainable production and consumption, rapid human population growth, trade, conflict and inequality)?

For the two questions, we refer to the rights of the child and States’ obligations enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC):

* Article 3: Best interests of the child

Significant evidence shows that children are the most vulnerable group to environmental harm and that the impacts on children are irreversible, long-lasting, and even transgenerational. Decisions and actions of States and businesses must not be economically driven, but must be for the best interests of children.

* Article 2: Non-discrimination; Article 23: Children with disabilities; Article 30: Children from minority or indigenous groups

The COVID-19 pandemic is connected to the climate and biodiversity crisis, and while children have been mainly spared by the virus, the pandemic has several impacts on the realization of children’s human rights. All children are affected, but in varying ways.

The COVID-19 crisis increases the risk of gender-based violence, disproportionately affecting girls. Teenage pregnancy rates and maternal and child death rates may rise because of school suspensions, limited access to sexual and reproductive health information and services, and increased levels of sexual violence and exploitation. Children in street situations and some children living in remote areas or living in a slum do not have access to clean water, increasing their risks not only of contracting the coronavirus and but also of experiencing stigma due to the difficulty to maintain good hygiene. Moreover, with the schools forced to shift to distance learning, children with disabilities face the risk of exclusion. Similar to their marginalization in public discourses on climate change, children in indigenous communities are disproportionally affected by the pandemic due to their lack of access to information and health care. This also applies to children in conflict-affected areas, children in the context of migration, and children in other situations of vulnerability.

* Article 6: Right to life, survival, and development; Article 24: Right to health, water, food, and environment

Pollution, climate change, and other forms of environmental harm disproportionally affect children who are undergoing a unique period of physical and mental development during childhood and adolescence. Several studies have shown that air pollution shortens children’s life expectancy and lack of access to clean water contributes to child mortality. Children are also more vulnerable to vector-borne diseases, which are brought about by a number of factors including deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and poor waste disposal. Moreover, malnutrition has irreversible damage to children’s physical and cognitive development. Children and pregnant and lactating women must have access to affordable and nutritious food, but the loss of diversity threatens the global food security.

Moreover, with the argument that exposure to natural environments can improve mental health, climate and biodiversity crisis can negatively impact children’s mental health and psychosocial well-being. As in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic and response, physical health risks, isolation, school closures, loss of income, and uncertainty of the future due to the pandemic cause stress and anxiety to children.

* Article 27: Adequate standard of living

The reduction of coastal protection due to loss of coastal habitats and coral reefs increases the risks of floods that displace homes and communities. The forced displacement could lead to the household’s loss of income and interruption on children’s education. These could result to children dropping out of school completely and children being subjected to sexual exploitation, child labor, child marriage, and child trafficking.

* Article 19: Protection from violence

States must take appropriate measures to protect children from all forms of violence brought about by declining biodiversity and degraded ecosystems. These include gender-based violence triggered by displacements or disruption of livelihoods due to extreme weather events that cause floods, fires, and droughts. Also, as the COVID-19 pandemic situation evolves, the threats of violence against girls, boys, and other children come into view. Confinement measures may increase the risks of children witnessing or experiencing domestic violence. Children in street situations and children who violate imposed curfews or movement restrictions may be subjected physical and humiliating punishment by authorities. Children may be exposed to cyberbullying, online abuse, and online sexual exploitation, as they spend more time online.

* Article 31: Right to rest, leisure, play, and culture

Degraded ecosystems and land conversions take away children’s space for play and recreational activities. Jumping to the river became dangerous because the water became polluted due to mining activities. Areas that serve as playgrounds disappeared when the lands were sold for industry and agricultural purposes.

* Article 28: Access to Education; Article 29: Aims of education

Emergency situations brought about by extreme weather events provide evidences to the possible negative impacts of declining biodiversity and degraded ecosystems to children’s access to education. States have the obligation to ensure children’s attendance to schools and to prevent dropping out of school. States also have the obligation to ensure that children’s education are directed to “the development of respect for the natural environment.”

* Article 12: Respect for children’s views; Article 13: Freedom of expression; Article 15: Freedom of association; Article 17: Access to information

Declining biodiversity and degraded ecosystems are issues that affect children and, as such, their views on these should be given due weight. They should be given the space to express their thoughts and opinions, and these should be taken into consideration in decision-making processes. To help them shape their views, children should be provided with information in a language that they can understand and in a manner that is inclusive and culturally-sensitive. They should be made aware of other children’s experiences and their knowledge on direct and indirect drivers of drivers of harm to biodiversity and ecosystems must be developed.

**Question 6.** Please identify specific gaps, challenges and barriers that your government, business, or organization has faced in attempting to employ a rights-based approach to preventing, reducing, or eliminating harm to biodiversity and ecosystems.

Children are active citizens. They are rights-holders and can participate actively in civil and political discussions. However, the rights and views of children are not taken into consideration in environment-related decisions, impacting the full realization of their rights. Empowering children to voice out their opinions and take action is crucial to the prevention, reduction, or elimination of harm to biodiversity and ecosystems. Government, businesses, and organizations must give due weight to children’s voices and actions. Children, together with the communities and civil society, must be given a space for participation and collaboration to ensure inclusive, coherent, and coordinated policies and actions.

**Question 7.** Please specify ways in which additional protection is provided (or should be provided) for populations who may be particularly vulnerable to declining biodiversity and degraded ecosystems (e.g. women, children, persons living in poverty, members of Indigenous peoples and local communities, older persons, persons with disabilities, ethnic, racial or other minorities and displaced persons). How can these populations be empowered to protect and restore declining biodiversity and degraded ecosystems?

For this question, we submit the recommendations of the children and young people from two previous consultations we organized.

**Recommendations from the child delegates of the *Global Initiative on Advancing Children’s Right to a Healthy Environment: Regional Expert Consultation for East Asia and the Pacific* held in October 2019 in Bogor, Indonesia[[1]](#footnote-1)**

On Healthy Environment

1. For Governments: Integrate environmental education in the curriculum; Cross-sectoral collaboration in the government towards a healthy environment; Capacity-building support from the government
2. For the private sector: Need to be more aware of their impact on the environment and children’s rights
3. For the public sector: More awareness to take measures to reduce their emissions
4. Support from general public: Platform to build youth movement to support each other
5. Regional collaboration, regional social media campaigns
6. Collaboration in local youth networks

On Ecological Child Rights

1. Governments should provide funding for environmental and child rights programmes
2. Asian governments should know about injustice connected to the environment, climate change, and children’s environmental rights
3. Governments should organize more exchange possibilities for youth

On Youth Initiatives

1. Increase awareness via social media
2. Support people to change their lifestyles and personal behaviors connected to environmental issues
3. Collaboration: opportunities for exchange, creating an action day for youth to work together on a campaign, for example Sunday’s for Change (SFC)

On Child Rights, the Environment, and the Business Sector

1. Governments must observe and restrict companies in using natural resources
2. Government must regulate the production of disposable plastic products
3. Government must regulate dangerous goods (pesticide, mercury products)
4. UN should urgently issue a treaty related to child rights, the environment and corporations
5. Collaboration with every community around the world to make a petition regarding children’s right to a healthy environment for the business sector. Use of #MyPlanetMyRights
6. Six monthly report from civil society organisations and community support

**Recommendations on the theme of “Children’s Right to a Healthy Environment” from the child delegates of the *2019 Asian Children’s Summit* held in November 2019 in Bangkok, Thailand[[2]](#footnote-2)**

On Industries

* + International organizations should set standards and restrictions for multi-national corporations
  + Heavy taxes on non-renewable resources
  + Subsidy on installation and price of clean energy sources.

On Education and Awareness Program

* + Develop curriculum towards resilience building
  + Encourage campaigns and competitions
  + Youth Forum

On Psychosocial Support

* + Compulsory trauma care teams should be deployed with every rescue team
  + Government should include child therapists to follow up on the children
  + Children should be given psychosocial rehabilitation

On Transportation

* + Government should encourage to cut down the usage of fossil fuel cars
  + Electric car and other sustainable transport systems

On Child Participation

* + A platform for children to speak

On Alternative Energy

* + Levy taxes on pollutant sources
  + Increase availability of alternative sources

On Garbage and Waste Management

* + The use or applying 3Rs

On Government and Law

* + Be Strict!
  + Make sure the law is being implemented well
  + Government should have strong mechanism and specific program management

On Forest and Tree

* + Plant more trees
  + Implementation of law about protection on the trees

In addition to these recommendations, the child delegates would also like authorities to reflect on the following:

1. How do we bring about cross-country collaborations while holding governments, especially of developed countries accountable for their actions and failure to uphold their promises?
2. While most countries have some sort of legislation of advocating climate change we aren’t seeing any affects, how do we assure empowerment of such laws?
3. When actions towards climate change collide with religious and culture practices of the people, how do we find common ground?
4. When many economies depend on fossil fuels, how do we balance economic and environmental priorities?

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**About Child Rights Coalition Asia (CRC Asia)**

CRC Asia is a network of child rights organizations working together to be a strong voice for child rights in the region by leading in strengthening child rights movements, promoting innovative approaches, and advocating better policies for and with the children.

For information, please contact:

Amihan Abueva, Regional Executive Director

Hazelyn Joy Bitaña, Program Manager

secretariat@crcasia.org

[www.crcasia.org](http://www.crcasia.org)

1. Global Initiative on Advancing Children’s Right to a Healthy Environment: Regional Expert Consultation for East Asia and the Pacific held in October 2019 in Bogor, Indonesia. Outcome report available at <https://child-health-research.centre.uq.edu.au/files/5523/2020_Outcome%20Report%20-%20Advancing%20Children%27s%20Right%20to%20a%20Healthy%20Environment_East%20Asia%20and%20Pacific%20Region.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The 2019 Asian Children’s Summit is a space for children from Southeast Asia, South Asia, and East Asia to come together to form their opinions and give recommendations on the realization of their rights. It gathered 47 children, aged 13 to 18 years old, from 21 countries in Asia. More information available at <https://www.crcasia.org/2019-asian-childrens-summit/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)