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Around the World:
The Rights of Children in Our Changing Climate

By Lori Probasco

The Paris Agreement aims to bolster the global response to climate change. It is also the first international treaty on climate change that mentions human rights. In the preamble, the Paris agreement states “Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights.” 133 countries have signed on to the Paris Agreement, including the United States. However, during his campaign, President Donald Trump pledged to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. He also pledged to renew coal, oil, and natural gas production, all of which largely contribute to the negative effects of climate change. Many environmental advocates have concerns if President Trump follows through on his campaign promise, as to what the impact from this will be. One thing is clear, however – the impact of climate change will have far reaching effects seen all over the world. In order to minimize the harm caused by such policy changes, the United Nations should consider climate change issues to be a children’s rights issue.

Some climate change and children advocacy groups are pushing the United Nations to hold countries that do not abide by appropriate climate change standards to be in violation of the rights of children, promulgated by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). A proposal submitted to the United Nations pushes for a climate change agreement that specifies a “scientific standard for protecting children and children’s rights from the dangerous threats posed by unabated climate destabilization.” As the climate change crisis becomes more urgent, children will be disproportionately impacted by the consequences.

As the Earth’s climate changes, droughts and other weather crises will occur, and food and water will become more and more scarce. This scarcity will disproportionately affect children. For example, children living in areas with limited access to water and food are likely to suffer from a lack of education. There are many factors that explain why droughts and food scarcity are linked to education. First, the school itself may have to close due to a lack of water. Even when schools are available, families may be unable to send their children. Droughts and food shortages lead to poverty, which can render parents and children unable to pay their school fees. Furthermore, children may have to forgo schooling in order to complete tasks such as fetching water from long distances, or supplementing their families’ income with their own employment.

Studies show that education decreases poverty rates, decreases the spread of diseases, and increases life spans. It can also decrease conflict and promote gender equality. Education can also help people cope with the effects of climate change. Studies have shown that improved education can help people prepare and recover from natural disasters brought on by climate change. Education improves people’s ability to perceive risks and process information. This allows communities to manage and cope when natural disasters may hit. When children are denied education because of the effects of climate change, they are more susceptible to the other effects of climate change.

In addition to decreased educational opportunity, climate change impacts the childrens’ health. Water scarcity can force families and children to drink unclean water in order to survive, leading to disease. Climate change disrupts natural ecosystems, which also leads to the spread of diseases. Changes in temperatures can lengthen the time that parasitic diseases live in certain

areas. Children have more exposure to these pesticides and pollution because they drink more water and breathe more air per unit of body weight. Therefore, children generally have a greater chance of catching these diseases. Children are also more likely to catch these because children's immune systems are not yet fully developed and they typically have a harder time fighting these diseases off. Furthermore, because climate change is leads to diseases emerging in places where they have never appeared before, physicians are not always able to respond correctly to outbreaks, as they have not had the training or experience in these emerging diseases.

With drought comes food scarcity, which can also occur because of floods and other extreme weather conditions brought on by climate change. Heightened food scarcity leads to malnutrition. This malnutrition also greatly increases the risk of disease in children, and can make them incapable of fighting off infections. As climate change continues to worsen, malnutrition and its effects will increase rates of childhood mortality.

Droughts and famine caused by climate change can also result in extreme poverty, especially in developing countries. This poverty is harmful to children for many reasons including, as discussed above, lack of education and decreased health. But children can be harmed by poverty in many other ways, as families are sometimes forced to take drastic measures in order to survive.

A study done in Bangladesh showed that extreme poverty – which has been partially due to natural disasters and climate change – has led to a high rate of child marriages. Parents interviewed in Bangladesh said that marrying off a child was a way to save the family from starvation, as the family would have one less mouth to feed, and the child would be provided for elsewhere. Fear of natural disasters also motivated families to marry off children. In one instance, a family feared losing their home to river erosion. For many families, marrying off their daughters seems like the best option for both the daughters and the families. However, many of these child marriages lead to abuse, early pregnancy, and lack of education.

These are just some of the many disproportionate effects climate change has had on children that have led advocates from Our Children's Trust, Earth Guardians, and Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to submit a proposal to the United Nations. The proposal echoes the Paris Agreement's recognition of the effect of climate change on human rights as an important first step, the CRC to take further steps. The proposal states that the emission standards set out in the Paris Agreement would actually increase emissions and lead to a catastrophic temperature increase. Instead, the proposal urges governments to use scientific standards that would stabilize the climate and protect children from the effects of an increased temperature. Under the proposal, the failure of States to abide by these standards should be considered "a violation of the rights protected by the CRC, of the current and future children of the world."

Climate change affects and will continue to affect everyone. However, it is our children that will suffer the greatest as the earth warms, causing widespread poverty, disease, and water scarcity. It's time that the world hold countries that cannot abide by international climate agreements responsible for the damage done to the lives of the world's children.

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