



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

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Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development

Sub-Committee on Children

Minutes

Public hearing on "Inaction on climate change – a violation of children's rights", held in a hybrid manner on Friday, 25 June 2021

In the framework of the report currently in preparation on "Inaction on climate change – a violation of children's rights" by Ms Jennifer De Temmerman (France, ALDE), the Sub-Committee held a public hearing on climate change and the rights of the child with the participation of:

- Burntwood School, London, United Kingdom UNICEF Rights Respecting School, represented by Rose, Roha, Cato & Harriet, accompanied by Ms Katelyn Farrenson and Ms Samantha Clerke;
- Joan of Arc High School, Colombes, France, represented by Philomène, Flavie and Louison, Ecodelegates, accompanied by Mr Najib Benarafa, Associate Teacher of Earth and Life Sciences & Sustainable Development Co-ordinator;
- Romains Primary School, 5th grade class Strasbourg Koenigshoffen, France, accompanied by Mr Thomas Kaybaki, Themis Association and Mr Benjamin Corvi, Teacher;
- *Foróige*, Youth Development Organisation, Ireland, represented by Mae and Finlay, accompanied by Ms Sandra McIntyre;
- Youth for Climate, represented by Ms Adélaïde Charlier and Ms Rita Monteiro Daniel;
- Ms Simone Jordan, Division for Democracy Education, Austrian Parliament.

Ms Wonner, Chairperson of the Sub-Committee, opened the hearing and welcomed the numerous guests as well as the members present. This hearing was organised in the framework of the World Forum for Democracy and it was the first time that children played a key role in the work of the Sub-Committee. It was hoped that this experience could be replicated in future.

Ms De Temmerman pointed out that this event was an opportunity to reflect on the link between participatory democracy and the protection of the environment. These subjects affected all generations. Across the world, there was a growing awareness of the climate emergency, thanks to the voice of scientists and the actions of young people. In France, 83% of young people did not take part in the departmental and regional elections in June 2021, which was a clear sign of disenchantment with democracy among young people. The hearing should help explore avenues for re-connecting young people with democracy. There were 2.2 billion children in the world. Global warming deprived children of essential elements for their well-being, including health, food, shelter, and quality education. States could and should act through protective, inclusive, and empowering approaches, which was why it was important to hear what young participants expected from policymakers.

Session I. Children's right to a healthy environment: What is at stake?

Ms Charlier, presented her work as an activist in Youth for Climate/Fridays for Future, a movement through which millions of young people occupied parliaments and ministries, took part in demonstrations and strikes, some of them crossed the Atlantic by boat like she had done, and attended international events such as COP. During the Covid-19 pandemic they stopped major gatherings, but continued to hold strikes, organise webinars and create videos. She had written a letter to the world leaders, together with Greta Thunberg, Luisa Neubauer, and Anuna de Wever. Following the letter, they had met several European leaders, including Ms Angela Merkel,

¹The minutes were approved by the Sub-Committee on Children at its meeting on 22 November 2021, and declassified by the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development at its meeting on 1 December 2021.

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German Chancellor, and Ms Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, to transmit to them directly the "message from the streets". The Earth had limited resources. It was crucial to denounce the definition of consumption as a way to prosperity and happiness. The growth of public health and public transport had to be promoted, but not the growth of fossil fuel and CO₂, massive transportation by airplanes, intensive farming, and any type of mass production. Young people were full of energy, and they wanted to have a future. They had asked policymakers for strong actions and clear strategies that allowed for more sustainable agriculture, and a carbon neutral society, which ensure respect for the environment and human rights. Everyone was welcome to join the movement, their help was needed.

Flavie and **Louison** spoke about their dreams, passions and projects being thwarted by their fear of global warming, natural resources depletion, disappearance of species and damage to the biodiversity, and lack of action on the part of governments. The figures were alarming: 1.7 million children under 5 died each year due to pollution, not to mention the disabilities and illnesses which were the consequences of the climate crisis. According to WHO, 3 out of 4 children breathed toxic air in France. Worldwide, 93% of children under 15 years of age were exposed to levels of fine particles that exceeded the limits recommended by WHO. Children were among the main human victims of global warming. True to the motto "be the change that you want to see in the world", children tried to act, for example through participating in climate strikes. Societies and schools had a responsibility for promoting healthy environment.

Benjamin spoke on behalf of his classmates from Romains Primary School. They agreed that climate change occurred because humans did not respect the environment. More than half of the students were worried about climate change. They had made a list of issues that they were concerned about. It included forest fires, diseases (such as Covid-19), global warming, pollution, the use of chemicals in agriculture, floods, toxic fumes, and lack of oxygen. Another student then asked how we were going to live if we did not act.

Ms Charlier responded that it was one of the biggest fears of her generation, which would have to deal with the consequences of the climate change to a much greater extent than their parents and grandparents. The decisions made today could still be a "game-changer" and have an impact on our lives tomorrow. It was important to imagine a new world, and to ensure that adults took into consideration children's voices. It was a complex question how the climate crisis could be resolved, but it was possible to call on the adults to do all they could.

Ms De Temmerman responded that it was not possible to maintain the present lifestyle. It had to be changed urgently. The adults attending this event were already convinced about this, and they tried to get the message across, especially among other parliamentarians who were sometimes sceptical. Directly transmitting the words of children to these parliamentarians would carry more weight.

Another child from Romains Primary School asked how one could ensure that people respected laws that aimed to address the climate change. **Mr Grin** said that it was important to ensure that everybody respected laws, especially on climate change. Young people should speak up, and politicians should listen to them. Climate change would bring big changes in our everyday life. In agriculture, local commerce should be encouraged by avoiding the transport of exotic foods to the other side of the planet. For example, the transport of 1 kg of mutton from Australia to France, which consumes 17 kg of kerosene, was a major source of CO₂ pollution. Young people had good reasons to be anxious about climate change and politicians had to address it. There should be solidarity between different groups of population to ensure that the future of the Earth was viable. Young people should not lose hope, because if the necessary measures were taken promptly, their future would be safe.

A child asked if it could be possible to introduce fines to make people respect a law. **Ms Wonner** answered that it was a good idea in principle, but it could be difficult to put this into practice effectively. It was important to ensure that schools raised awareness about climate change among young people. Above all it was necessary to be pedagogical. The question of the sanction was important as well, but only to achieve the objective and not as an objective in itself. A child asked what polluted the Earth the most. **Ms Monteiro Daniel** answered that research had found that transport, construction, and agriculture sectors polluted the most.

Session II. Knowledge is power: What can schools do to equip new generations with the skills and motivation to protect the planet?

Ms Monteiro Daniel said that it was the role of schools to transmit skills to understand the world. Too often there was no education on climate change at school level. Youth for Climate had set up a forum (in accordance with measure C5.2.2 of the Citizen's Climate Convention) to offer a transdisciplinary slot of a minimum of one hour per week with a reinforcement of climate themes in all subjects. In nursery and primary schools, children should have time to learn to garden and thus create a bond with the land. The earlier we did this kind of work, the faster we internalised it. Students should not only be spectators but also actors. National education system should ensure that there was space for this. In some schools, there were already projects, for example to demonstrate what biodiversity meant in practice. Canteens were important for healthy and local alimentation. Unfortunately,

vegetarian meals were often lacking. Reading was important and it was vital for school libraries to have more books about climate change. Ecology should become a habit, with the help of national education.

Philomène enquired how to act if you were not informed, and how to have a positive impact on the planet if the problem and the consequences of global warming had never been explained to you. School had power of information. Without information it was difficult to act. Activities should be put in place to raise awareness among young children, especially in elementary school. At this age, they appreciated being in contact with nature. It was important to explain to the children how and why biodiversity was threatened and to encourage them to protect the environment. Fun activities should be designed according to the age, such as games, visits to the forest, collecting litter, and planting trees. Children could spend 20 minutes per day sorting waste or doing recycling. Every month, a debate or a project could be organised, and associations could go to classes to answer questions and inform children about possible actions. Teachers could integrate climate change in all subjects.

Mr Benarafa shared his experience with the "eco-delegates" programme at the Joan of Arc Secondary School in Colombes. Knowledge was essential because it was impossible to protect something that was not known. Too little time was devoted to Life and Earth Sciences, with only 1,5 hours per week at the college level. This subject was important for understanding climate change, its consequences, and possible actions. Regretfully, a recent reform of the Lycée (high school level) in France had removed this subject from the core curriculum. As a result, future generations would not be able to understand the mechanisms and interactions of living organisms. Each year, at the Joan of Arc Secondary School in Colombes, students selected a new theme, such as waste or energy, and the eco-delegates voted in each class on who would pursue projects on this theme. It was important to get students involved in concrete action. Eco-delegates had been made compulsory in all middle and high schools in France. It was also important that there was someone who guided the eco-delegates and had relevant knowledge. It was therefore necessary to appoint a co-ordinator, who was remunerated, to lead interactions with eco-delegates, parents, management and - why not - parliamentarians. Schools should be laboratories for green innovation.

Mae and Finlay pointed out that climate change affected children's right to life and development, right to health and right to play. Everybody must adapt to a new way of living (e.g., electric cars, green energy) and start reducing "fast fashion". Climate change impacted children's rights as they saw their quality of life reduced, and they felt "climate anxiety", which had severe effects. The issue of greatest concern to them was mass consumerism. It was important to change the way we did our purchases. Rising sea levels were also a major issue, as Ireland was a relatively small territory surrounded by sea. Climate awareness should be promoted in schools, for example through "green school" projects. Young people could also educate themselves by joining youth clubs and following climate activists such as Greta Thunberg on social media.

Governments could reform relevant policies, ban harmful practices, support education and renovation, listen, and evolve. They should sanction "fast fashion", invest in solar panels and green energy. They could build more turbines, especially in seas. The Council of Europe could lead by example and make sure its functioning was eco-friendly. It could also take firmer stance on fossil fuels companies and become carbon neutral. It was crucial to listen to young people. Children are often more educated on climate issues than adults. Unfortunately, most conferences failed to produce practical results. Governments and international bodies must actively pursue youth participation. There was lack of dialogue between generations. Youth had a lot to learn from the older generation of environment activists. Children's frustration with governments' failure to act was the most important thing to include in the report. Children cared about action; they wanted to see strong, effective, and fair legislation.

The pupils of **Burntwood school** stressed that climate change was the biggest threat to children. Although children were the most affected by it, they had no say in relevant decisions. Legislators did not seem to understand the urgency. Children had high levels of "climate anxiety". The only way to channel their frustration was to speak up. Children were more likely to experience health complications caused by the climate change, such as under-nutrition due to increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere reducing food quality. Development hindered by malnutrition could also slow economic productivity. According to WHO, by 2030 there would be more than 95,000 deaths per year in children aged 5 and under owing to undernutrition, and an additional 24 million undernourished children by 2050. These distressing forecasts highlighted how climate change put at risk the rights enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Governments must ensure that children survive and develop to their full potential. It was regrettable that the UK had not blocked a new coal mine and had granted new oil and gas licenses despite huge backlash and thus contributed to active destruction of the planet and money wasting. While there had already been many efforts to address climate change, they were not sufficiently significant nor systematic to truly make an impact. Because of the pandemic lockdowns and slow recovery, there was an opportunity to introduce a new way of tackling climate change. It had to be swiftly implemented. Long-lasting change could be facilitated by educating both youth and adults on skills needed in a carbon-free future and the importance of addressing climate crisis. Providing free training courses to people employed in oil and gas industries to support their transition to more sustainable energy sectors, would help preventing job losses. Housing could be made more climate-friendly by adding solar panels

and water efficiency devices. Positive change was possible, but for it to happen the older generation should listen to what young people had to say and follow through.

Baroness Massey underlined the importance of improving life not only for the present generations but also for the future ones. It would be good to know to what extent young people were aware that they had rights under the UNCRC, especially the right to life, the right to health and the right to education and social activities. It included vulnerable children such as migrants, disabled, and refugee children. The rights of children were crucial, and they should have the confidence to claim these rights, and refer to the UNCRC, as it was an important document that also applied to climate change.

Mr Schennach pointed out that as young people were calling governments and international organisations to act, they should not forget the parliaments. The claims for rights and requests for action must pass the parliament. There should be an obligation for all laws to be checked for their impact on climate change. Politicians must fight for upholding children's rights in the context of climate change. As this was a new and important topic there should be a Council of Europe Convention on this subject. The speed of change was too slow. Some countries, such as Luxembourg, had made public transport free. It was important to find new ways in agriculture because the ecological footprint of agriculture was catastrophic. Trade agreements, such as MERCOSUR, which allowed to use lands in Latin America to produce food for animals in Europe, had to be reviewed.

Mr Grin stressed that many sectors had to make efforts. It was important to fight against food waste. In his report on food waste in the Francophone countries, he had found that about 30% of food was wasted. Children should encourage their parents to consume what they buy. The use of disposable plastics that pollute seas must be stopped and pyrolysis system that turned these plastics into biofuel should be introduced. It was important to switch to green and renewable energy. Agriculture was a big polluter. Efforts had been made in Switzerland to reduce the use of antibiotics by 50%. In a recent study on pollution of the Rhine in Basel, 65 tons of industrial and household chemicals were detected in one year, 20 tons of drugs, 20 tons of artificial food additives and only 1 ton of agricultural phytosanitary products. Agriculture must still make efforts, but it was important to identify the main sources of pollution such as industry, drugs, food additives, overconsumption, and transportation.

Ms Günay said that this event gave an amazing picture as young people were sharing and giving hope and energy to the parliamentarians. Climate change and global warming were human made problems and were deadly for many people. Awareness had to be raised amongst citizens of all ages. Youth participation in decision making was important. Information, participation, and justice were fundamental rights, the participation of young people was valuable for putting them into practice.

Session III. From words to actions: How can children, parliamentarians and local authorities co-operate on tackling climate change?

Ms Jordan shared her experience of activities for children and young adults in the Austrian Parliament. The Parliament offered a broad range of programmes, including Democracy Workshops. Activities included workshops in media literacy and participation and role-playing activities simulating the parliamentary processes. There was a web portal for children. In several activities members of parliament directly interacted with children. These programmes were considered as a platform for exchange. Learning by doing, making complex issues comprehensible and processing the experience were key elements of this didactic work. Examples from the daily lives of the participants were used to facilitate the understanding of political processes and concepts. Current topics were included in the programmes, including climate change and children's rights. The aim was to empower the participants for democratic participation in their society, to provide them with relevant tools to search for information, form their own opinions and make their own conclusions. Another element of the programme was the processing of the experience, whereby the participants created their own newspaper or podcast or video in which they expressed in their own words the information researched. This also helped them foster their media skills both from the perspective of a media consumer and a media creator and improve their understanding of the role of media. The children understood better not only how parliament worked but also how important democracy was for their daily life and what opportunities were there to participate. There was also increased awareness of their responsibility to engage with relevant issues and to make their own contribution.

The children of the **Romains Primary School** presented their ideas for fighting climate change: planting trees, not throwing litter on the floor, stopping the use of chemical fertilizers, reducing the use of cars and favouring non-polluting means of transport, reusing instead of buying new products, avoiding use of polluting machines, leaving more room for nature rather than building, increasing wages of garbage collectors to make this profession more attractive, putting flowers in houses, putting solar panels on car roofs, not killing so many animals and reducing meat consumption.

Flavie suggested that for co-operation between politicians and children it was important to develop democracy in schools around projects on sustainable development. In her school every class had at least one eco-delegate, who led actions within the school and went to the class council to express their views. This was a very important

initiative because it allowed the students to speak up. The eco-delegates met every three weeks with the co-ordinating teacher to debate and coordinate actions. It was possible to invite parliamentarians to these debates. Every year they focused on a different theme, such as energy, water, or biodiversity. They then set up a steering committee together with parents and teachers to work out a strategy on how specific goals on these themes could be achieved in their school. Some mayors had participated in these committees. This year the eco-delegates started using social media to share their work with their classmates. Cooperation between parliamentarians, local actors and youth could be easily facilitated through social media for example through polls and debates. Communities had already developed policies for youth, for example through youth city councils in France. Other initiatives had yet to be developed to improve youth participation in national or European policy making. Youth should be able to benefit from their rights and liberties, and states should answer adequately to their demands. Having youths voice heard should not be a privilege, but a right.

Ms Farrenson presented the Burntwood school eco-group, which supported such actions as reducing the use of plastic, promoting recycling, and going paperless, in their school. Two years ago, the students set up a project "Swap it up", which allowed people to donate clothes and swap them, so that less clothes went to the landfill. This helped countering the climate impacts of "fast fashion" clothing. It was hoped that similar projects would be set up not just in the UK but in other countries as well.

Mr Schennach spoke about the Democracy Workshops that Ms Jordan had presented. The Austrian Parliament held these workshops on different themes, with an on-line participation option. There was dialogue between children and parliamentarians. Many questions related to energy, climate change, and our way of life. It was not easy to answer children's questions. When talking about climate change, one had to bear in mind the problem of plastic pollution in oceans. Fish that was fed plastic plankton, could not grow, and reproduce, which this had direct impact on humans. Children should never stop exerting pressure on politicians.

Baroness Massey said that in the UK there was a parliamentary unit for schools and young people, which went out to schools and had schools come in. She wondered if the schools represented had school councils where children made up a kind of a parliament and tried to resolve problems brought to their attention.

Ms De Temmerman pointed out that she had been trying to address the issue of education for sustainable development in France since the start of her mandate. However, there was certain denial on the part of some administrations. Even when laws got adopted, there was a need for decrees and for financial means to ensure their implementation. Parliamentarians supporting such education were still in the minority and the voice of children was very important for improving the situation. It was essential to ensure that there was sufficient funding for the work on this topic, and it was important to provide opportunities for young people to develop their projects.

The children of the **Romains Primary School** explained that they had a class council, as well as delegates for the school and delegates for the district. Policies that they proposed included a ban on plastic packaging, obliging factories to reduce pollution, and banning the use of chemicals in agriculture. **Ms Farrenson** explained that Burntwood School London had about 1,800 students and had several school councils. When students came to the school at age 11 and until the age of 16, they had every year an opportunity to vote for their class representatives, and then these representatives could elect the whole school council representatives. Every term, they decided which issues they wanted to work on, such as recycling. They also had a sixth form leadership group, where older students worked with younger children to help them express their concerns. There was an eco-group and a UNICEF Rights Ambassador group. At any time, the students could raise a particular issue. They held consultations about changes to be introduced in the school and students had possibilities for sharing their ideas.

Mr Grin then responded to the proposals shared by the children. Indeed, it was very important to plant trees, as they were the lungs of our planet and absorbed CO_2 through photosynthesis. As for the proposal to ban plastic packaging, in Switzerland, for example, grocery stores were opening bulk sales, where customers could come with their own containers. It was time for politicians and parliaments to make laws supporting such practices.

Ms De Temmerman thanked all the participants. The discussion with young people was important as they drew the attention of politicians to this important subject, which had not been discussed in this way when the politicians themselves were young. The criticisms concerning the report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) were shocking. It was beyond comprehension why the words of IPCC scientists were, for some, less important than the words of scientists during the health crisis. Young people had a vital role to play in convincing those adults who were not yet taking these concerns seriously. It was necessary to continue to propagate this discourse among young people. All the means should be used for making their voice heard.

Ms Wonner concluded that the climate crisis was a violation of children's rights and it was urgent to address it. She thanked all the participants and expressed her conviction that Ms De Temmerman's report would be a useful contribution to this cause.

Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development *Commission des questions sociales, de la santé et du développement durable*

Sub-Committee on Children

Sous-commission sur les enfants

List of participants / Liste des participant.e.s

(28 seats / 28 sièges) 25.06.2021

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Vice-Chairperson / Vice-Président : M. Jean-Pierre GRIN, Switzerland / Suisse

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1.	Mr	Mikayel MELKUMYAN	Armenia / Arménie		ZZ
2.	Mr	Stefan SCHENNACH	Austria / Autriche		ZZ
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5.	Ms	Alena GAJDŮŠKOVÁ	Czech Republic / <i>République</i> <i>Tchèque</i>		ZZ
6.	Ms	Tarja FILATOV	Finland / <i>Finlande</i>		ZZ
7.	Mme	Martine WONNER	France	Ms	Jennifer DE TEMMERMAN
8.	Mr	Ulrich OEHME	Germany / Allemagne	Mr	Matern VON MARSCHALL
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10.	Mr	Joseph O'REILLY	Ireland / Irlande		ZZ
11.	Mr	Gianluca PERILLI	Italy / Italie	Mr	Manuel VESCOVI
12.	Ms	Françoise HETTO GAASCH	Luxembourg		ZZ
13.	Ms	Reina de BRUIJN-WEZEMAN	Netherlands / Pays-Bas		ZZ
14.	Mr	Zbigniew GIRZYŃSKI	Poland / Pologne	Mr	Tomasz LATOS
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18.	Ms	Carmen LEYTE	Spain / Espagne		ZZ
19.	Ms	Susana SUMELZO	Spain / Espagne		ZZ
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21.	М.	Jean-Pierre GRIN	Switzerland / Suisse	Mme	Ada MARRA
22.	Ms	Emine Nur GÜNAY	Turkey / <i>Turquie</i>		ZZ
23.	Mr	Richard BACON	United Kingdom / <i>Royaume-</i> <i>Uni</i>		ZZ
24.	Baroness	Doreen E. MASSEY	United Kingdom / <i>Royaume-</i> <i>Uni</i>		ZZ

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Mr / M. Peter Frick......Liechtenstein Ms / Mme Diana StoicaRomania / Roumanie Mr / M. Pierre-Alain Fridez......Switzerland / Suisse

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