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Climate change: What price will future generations pay?



VIEWPOINT
Lord David Puttnam

Climate change poses a huge barrier to a fulfilling future, argues Lord Puttnam, an ambassador for Unicef UK. In this week's Green Room, he asks what price children will have to pay for three or four carbon-happy generations?

When world leaders sit round the table in Copenhagen next month to try and tackle what has become possibly the greatest moral crisis of my generation, a unique responsibility rests on their shoulders as they try to decide what kind of world future generations will inherit. What price will children have to pay for the three or four carbon-happy generations that have lived before them? The prognosis is not good. In the past month alone, the world has been shaken by a series of disasters, such as typhoons and floods in the Philippines.

With weather-related disasters predicted to only increase in severity and frequency, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stresses



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the grave consequences others will face if we continue down the high emissions pathway we appear to have chosen - increased child poverty, inequity and death.

Carrying capacity

There is no doubt that my generation has uniquely contributed to this increasing chaos, and the burden my grandchildren and those of others will have to carry because of it. What is less clear, however, is what price today's decision makers will place on the well-being of future generations when carving out their response to climate change.

A new paper released by Unicef UK - Climate Change, Child's Rights and Intergenerational Justice - makes it clear that their responsibility is huge, particularly when it comes to protecting the rights and future well-being of children.

Climate change is not just an environmental problem, it is a human rights issue. In fact it's the biggest child rights problem of our time.

With the potential rise of up to 160,000 child deaths a year in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia directly resulting from climate change, it is children, the most vulnerable children, who will be caught at the centre of the storm.

They will unquestionably carry the greatest burden - both as children and as future adults - and yet they are the least culpable for its damage.

Unicef UK and the Children in a Changing Climate coalition have been working tirelessly to put intergenerational justice and child rights on to the climate change agenda.

Fair play

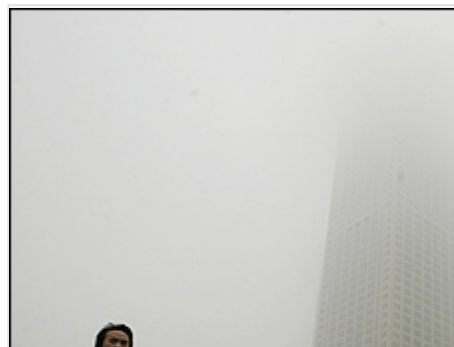
World leaders are increasingly beginning to reference this in their speeches; President Obama, in his first address to the UN, acknowledged that we "risk consigning future generations to an irreversible catastrophe" if we fail to respond today.

But despite this, the idea of ensuring justice between those generations responsible for the effects of climate change and those who will have to pay the heaviest price for it, is still not being adequately reflected in climate change policy, with world leaders instead choosing to focus only on solutions that can accommodate their short-term national interests.

But as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recently celebrated its 20th anniversary, Unicef UK is urgently pushing for the rights of the child along with



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those of future generations to be acknowledged in the UN climate change negotiations. Not as a cursory afterthought, but as being central to all negotiations and policy making decisions.

Failure to do so will leave an indelible mark on whether the rights of the child, which have been enshrined in the UN CRC for two decades and have been ratified by 193 countries, will ever be realised.

All signatories to the CRC have a legal and moral duty to remove any barriers which could prevent children from fulfilling the rights they were born with, no matter where in the world they live.

Climate change poses a huge barrier to a fulfilling future. Before it becomes an insurmountable one, global leaders must seize the opportunity Copenhagen offers, and acknowledge their obligation to children by putting them at the heart of the global response. So what exactly does this mean? It means that the implications of climate change for children must be at the top of the agenda at Copenhagen, and that the voices and opinions of children and young people are heard, respected and represented - a key right as outlined in the CRC.

The youth delegates being granted official recognition in Copenhagen are a welcome and crucial step forward in ensuring this happens, but more needs to be done to embed children into the core of the outcome of negotiations.

At a global and national level, climate change responses must focus on long-term sustainable solutions to ensure the well-being and needs of future generations are met. This means minimising the impact on future generations caused by the current level of CO2 emissions from the industrialised world.

So we must stop borrowing from the future and act now, with world leaders putting the rights and needs of children at the core of the climate change policy framework.

Our children and those as yet unborn deserve to live in a world that is healthier, more equitable and which offers a sustainable future - exactly the type of world we ourselves would want to live in. Copenhagen offers the opportunity to ensure that happens; we must grab it, before it is too late.

Lord David Puttnam is an ambassador for Unicef UK