

ChildFund Youth Speak Out on Climate Action

Key ideas, challenges, and demands from over 400 youth across 7 countries

In advance of the 2024 UNICEF-NGO consultation “Partnering for children in the climate crisis”, ChildFund invited young climate advocates across our operating countries to participate by sharing their ideas on four thematic areas: Climate-Resilient Education and Green Skills; Youth-Led Initiatives and Accountability; Community Empowerment and Local Partnerships; and Child Protection in Climate Resilience.

From February to March 2024, over 400 youth between ages 18-24 (230 females, 155 males, and 25 gender undeclared) from seven countries (the Philippines, The Gambia, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Bolivia, Mexico, Brazil) provided small-group and individual responses to questions covering the four thematic areas. The following sections highlight key summaries from the youth’s responses.

Climate-Resilient Education and Green Skills

In today’s rapidly changing world, the urgency of addressing climate change is echoed by youth voices from diverse backgrounds advocating for a sustainable future. Young people stressed the need for relevant knowledge and skills to address environmental challenges effectively. This includes understanding “what [climate change] is” and how to “fight it” as well as “early awareness of the future problems caused by climate change, in addition to presenting solutions for the short, medium and long term” as noted by Mexican youth. There is also the need for “An understanding of renewable energy and critical thinking [that] would be useful in dealing with climate challenges,” as one Brazilian youth mentioned.

“Every movement or action we make as humans affects the environment including the climate. We better be careful about our actions and movements. Negative human activities will always have consequences, it depends on us. Don’t wait for nature to have a big effect on our lives because of our bad practices.” ~21-year-old female, the Philippines

This knowledge and these skills must be able to cascade into the community. These youth recognize that to make real change, action is required, and this will require communities to change activities such as deforestation that contribute to climate change effects.

Comprehensive Education

Young people called for comprehensive environmental education in schools and communities to equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to tackle pressing environmental issues. They want climate change integrated across all subjects and easily accessible beyond the traditional science subjects. Curricula should include learning basic actions such as recycling, how to reduce and reuse, and projects on how to take care of plants and the land around them.

Young people also want programs that give them a space to talk about climate issues and to collaborate on ways to solve them together, building critical problem-solving and resilience skills to tackle climate effects. They envision a curriculum that goes beyond theory, emphasizing practical solutions and hands-on experiences, with safety protocols to protect themselves from severe events.

Schools have an important role, but they can lack effective and relevant information and resources for youth to develop the necessary skills to be ready for different climate challenges. One Filipino youth said, “Preparing students for climate challenges is crucial. Skills like environmental literacy, sustainable

practices, critical thinking for problem-solving, and resilience building can be very helpful. Additionally, knowledge of renewable energy conservation techniques, and understanding climate science can empower individuals to address and adapt to climate change effectively.” Additionally, “a workshop on the importance of loving and caring for the earth” was suggested by a female Mexican youth.

Advocacy and Communication Skills

Youth also noted the importance of building skills in advocacy, communication, and mobilization for positive change. For instance, a Gambian youth noted the need to “train students to advocate for [addressing] climate change, proving that the correct way to combat climate change is not only with words, but with action that comes with those words.” Additionally, youth mentioned innovation, business, and financial skills to support their actions and ideas as helpful towards affecting change. Water management and renewable energy were commonly mentioned along with skills in urban and rural sustainable agriculture, waste and energy management, and natural resource conservation.

In order to build skills while also working and learning, some youth suggested design classes on how to innovate recyclable products and green/environmental internships and networking opportunities with companies that buy recyclable material. They also see adults and the community as integral parts of the solution, emphasizing the importance of acting within schools to foster effective climate learning.

Imaginary, Ideal School

Many youth envision schools with strong environmental policies, green spaces, and clean energy solutions such as solar panels. As one female Filipino youth imagined, “The school would look like a meditation learning camp. Where trees are everywhere, and green leaves are dancing in the cool breeze of the wind. Shade protects the students sitting in the grass, with the relaxing sound of birds chirping, and blooming flowers everywhere. This is a place where students can think and learn without distraction from polluted air and endless cars beeping.”

Youth-Led Initiatives and Accountability

Young people resonate with the call for urgent action to confront environmental challenges and advance sustainability. This section sheds light on their perspectives on leadership, technology integration, and the support needed for effective environmental initiatives.

The Vital Role of Youth Leadership in Environmental Action and Sustainability

These youth consultation findings underscore young people’s indispensable role as change agents in environmental action. “Young people are the future and if we don’t take care of it, our world will deteriorate,” said one youth participant in The Gambia. Their enthusiasm, ingenuity, and inherent stake in the planet’s future position them uniquely to drive transformative initiatives. Another young woman from the Philippines emphasized, “It is important for young people to take the lead in protecting the environment because they are the ones who will inherit the planet and face the long-term consequences of environmental degradation.”

A common thread among the responses is the belief in the power of youth to mobilize and inspire action. “Young people are more willing and more influential in these matters,” stated one focus group participant from Mexico, aged 15-18. At the grassroots level, young people are acting individually and collectively. They plant trees, organize beach clean-ups, and rally communities. Their actions transcend borders, connecting disparate landscapes.

Through social media, advocacy, and grassroots movements, young people are leveraging their platforms to raise awareness and affect change. They see themselves as agents of transformation, capable of galvanizing their peers and communities towards sustainable practices. However, there is also strong interest and effort put towards collaboration with adults. As noted by a 21-year-old female from the Philippines,

“We need to be environmental warriors who engage with adults and young people alike!”

Inclusivity and representation are also imperative in decision-making processes. "Young voices should be heard in environmental decisions," remarked a female youth participant from Ethiopia, aged 17. By actively engaging in forums and policy dialogues, they aim to influence environmental policies and drive meaningful action. Government transparency, accountability, and meaningful participation in decision-making processes are paramount to ensuring that environmental policies are equitable and effective. "It's important to hold governments accountable for their actions," said an 18-year-old male respondent from Mexico. They advocate for holistic approaches to sustainability, recognizing the interconnectedness of environmental, social and economic issues.

Harnessing Technology for Impact

The integration of technology into environmental initiatives has provided young people with innovative tools and platforms to comprehend and address pressing ecological challenges. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram are popular channels for disseminating information and inspiring collective action. "Social networks are very useful for spreading news and attending seminars/webinars," said a 17-year-old female participant from Mexico, underscoring the reach and impact of digital advocacy.

Technology also gives young people access to educational resources and collaborative platforms for climate-related projects. **"Online platforms and mobile apps offer educational resources on sustainability,"** said a 13-year-old participant from Bolivia. The potential of technology extends beyond education to practical solutions and innovations. Respondents envision a range of tech-enabled projects, from recycling initiatives to renewable energy adoption. They cite examples like Ecosia, a search engine that plants trees with user searches, as innovative approaches to leveraging technology for environmental conservation. In addition, young people highlight the role of emerging technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI) in creating immersive learning experiences and forecasting environmental trends. These tools not only enhance understanding but also empower young people to envision and implement solutions to complex environmental challenges.

However, challenges persist, including the need for greater access to technology and digital literacy to maximize the potential of technology in environmental initiatives. **"There is a lack of technology to use resources effectively,"** said a 17-year-old respondent from Ethiopia.

Mobilizing Support for Environmental Action

The young people reaffirmed the need for support from adults, whether in government or business, to turn their ideas into actionable projects. "Financial support can help turn ideas into reality," stressed a young female respondent, 18-25 years old, from the Philippines. Apart from financial support, young people also mention the need for access to tools, materials and technology. This might include acquiring seedlings for tree planting, purchasing equipment for clean-up drives, and accessing technological tools for data analysis and information dissemination.

Mentorship and guidance from experienced adults are also valued by respondents as they navigate their projects. They seek advice on project implementation, technical know-how, and strategies for effective communication. As a focus group participant from The Gambia said, **"Mentorship, guidance, and advocacy can be valuable for young people's projects."**

Policy support from governments is also important to facilitate their initiatives. They emphasize the need for ordinances supporting environmental actions and advocate for increased budgetary allocation for climate change-related activities. As a young person from Sierra Leone noted, **"Grown-ups, such as those working in government or business, can play a crucial role in supporting young people with resources."** Another young woman from the Philippines suggested that resource mobilization can be achieved through effective collaboration "not just in the government but also in other organizations, business sectors, and households," which are seen as essential for the success of projects and impact.

There is a call for empowering young people through skill development programs, training sessions, and platforms for youth engagement. **Respondents believe that investing in youth initiatives and providing opportunities for skill enhancement can amplify their impact on addressing environmental challenges.**

Community Empowerment and Local Partnerships

Many youth shared their perspectives, often based on personal experiences, on how local communities, governments, and NGOs can meaningfully include them in the decision making, project design, and implementation of climate initiatives. Common themes touched on the importance of youth leadership and early engagement in the design process, creating space for youth action, the importance of education and awareness raising about the issues, and providing resources to support action.

Youth Leadership and Space for Youth Action

"Including youth in decision-making and project design for climate initiatives can be highly beneficial, as it ensures that their perspectives, ideas, and concerns are taken into account", said a youth focus group member from the Philippines.

Having a space in which to engage in climate action is essential for leadership roles. "Local communities, governments, and NGOs can meaningfully include young people in decision-making, project design, and implementation of climate initiatives by **creating spaces for active participation, such as youth councils or advisory committees, where our voices are heard and valued,**" shared an 18-year-old female respondent from Mexico. Ensuring that communities listen to young people, however, is crucial. As members of one youth focus group from Brazil stated,

"The participation of young people is important, but they do not listen to us. We have to bring all the groups together, when we are more, we can move more. As they say, there is strength in numbers. Promote the goal of saving the environment so that everyone hears it, and to make everyone know about it."

Youth respondents from Sierra Leone emphasized that **"what works is when communities provide meaningful opportunities for young people to get involved in projects and what doesn't work is when young people are not given the opportunity to participate, or their voices are not heard."** Communities should offer space for youth to be included in dialogue and learning about climate issues, and how to work together to solve some of the challenges.

Education and Awareness Building

One 16-year-old youth from Mexico voiced the importance of continuing to educate young people about climate issues, "...teaching them the value of the environment and the importance of taking care of the planet since the planet will be in their hands."

Interactive – Not Didactic – Climate Education

“It would be better to approach the topic in a more inviting way with young people, not only with traditional classes, but by innovating another way of debating the subject. It would be interesting to have, for example, classes with simulated immersion technology, or organizing cultural events on the subject, such as a photo exhibition or poetry presentation.” ~Youth participant from Brazil.

The youth also expressed the importance of using their voices to promote engagement and action, for example, through youth-led campaigns that involve them taking their voices to decision makers and raising awareness about climate issues. As one 15-year-old from Mexico shared, “It would be great if we had a recycling center in our community or a nearby location where we all had access, and if there were ads put up about pollution. **As young people, we have information about climate change and the consequences of it, we also know about some activities that we can do in our community to care for the environment.** It would be a good idea for community leaders to take us into account to share this information with adults, since many times, they are the ones who pollute the most.”

Partnerships and Resources

Schools and other government agencies could provide opportunities to develop projects and put them into practice. A participant from Mexico shared that, “Young people can join local or national environmental organizations, participate in beach, forest and street clean-ups, and attend demonstrations and events to raise awareness of environmental issues.” Put simply by one female focus group participant from the Philippines, “...the government must involve youth and adolescents in projects to save the environment.” They also advocated the need for climate response resources, stating, “**It doesn't work to ignore what needs attention.**”

Child Protection in Climate Resilience

Many youth highlighted ways that communities and young people can promote the safety and wellbeing of children under 18 during climate-related disasters. One participant from The Gambia focus group (ages 18-24) summed up the sentiment of many saying, “Communities should develop emergency plans tailored to children's needs, provide shelters and ensure access to clean water and healthcare during disasters. Youth can volunteer in disaster preparedness programs and support vulnerable peers.”

Safe Spaces and Support

Young people identified the need for safe places, or shelters, that provide protection and necessities like food, water, clothing and first aid, and psychological support in emergencies. As one 21-year-old female from the Philippines put it, “Communities must provide safe facilities, build a safe comfort room, and young people must teach children how to be resilient, how to be strong, and provide them a safe space where they can play and have fun regardless of what they experienced from the disaster.” Young people also have a role to play in response efforts. “Normally, during a disaster, there are people who helped the community to evacuate and lead them to safer places... **I can contribute my manpower** to pack relief goods that will be distributed,” said another 21-year-old female from the Philippines.

Education and Disaster Preparedness

Youth focus group members in Brazil, ages 15-17, agreed that “[Community members] can implement preparedness plans for emergencies, provide training in first aid, guarantee effective communication of alerts and information on security. Young people can participate in disaster preparedness awareness programs, sharing knowledge with their peers, and collaborating with local organizations.” Other recommended actions from a focus group in Sierra Leone included, “massive community sensitization, weekly or monthly meetings on climate change actions, formation of climate change ambassadors, and training youth on preventive measures.”

Environmental Protection Activities

Communities can encourage good environmental stewardship practices that contribute to the safety, resilience, and wellbeing of their communities such as reducing trash, planting trees and avoiding unnecessary consumption of resources. A male respondent from Mexico, aged 17, emphasized “**no more polluting, no more littering**” and the importance of “taking care of water and cleaning green places.”

In Bolivia, the focus group members (ages 16-23) also recognized the role of government authorities to engage youth, “for example, to make games to train children in recycling,” and their own ability to mobilize themselves around initiatives to protect the environment. They agreed that “**Young people could organize ourselves better with the support of institutions. We are a group, and we should start organizing ourselves on this issue.**”

Conclusion

This learning brief provides a snapshot of youth voices from seven ChildFund operating countries on climate change--an issue that deeply concerns their generation. The ideas shared in the focus groups and individual responses show that young people have big and ambitious ideas, including how to effectively incorporate climate education into schools, ways to raise their voices and advocate for change they believe in within their communities, use technology to maximize impact, how to prepare for emergencies from a child and youth-centered perspective, and how to practically care for the environments around them.

Key Takeaways:

- Including youth through meaningful participation in the decision-making processes that support climate action initiatives in their communities.
- Providing learning opportunities in schools to build climate knowledge and develop solutions.
- Increasing awareness-building initiatives to address the complex social-development challenges associated with climate change.
- Equipping youth with the right skills and tools to ensure their safety and protection in diverse spaces, to tackle the challenges faced now and in the future.

Overall, the young people included in the consultation understand that the status quo is not good enough to meaningfully address the climate crisis. However, by harnessing their energy, creativity, and leveraging technology, today’s young people can collectively work towards building a more sustainable future for all. The imperative now lies in heeding their call, empowering their initiatives, and holding ourselves accountable for meaningful change. Because we need each other.

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About ChildFund International

Founded in 1938, ChildFund works throughout Asia, Africa and the Americas — including the United States — to connect children and youth with what they need to grow up healthy, educated, skilled and safe, no matter where they are. Last year, we reached 21.1 million children, youth and family members through more than 150 local partners in 23 countries. Find out more at www.ChildFund.org.

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