

CHILD RIGHTS and CLIMATE CHANGE

WHAT ARE HUMAN RIGHTS? Human rights are the rights and freedoms that we all have. Our rights include: the right to life, to be free from torture and abuse, to go to school and to work. We have the right to shelter and to food, the right to practise a religion, and the right to think and say what we want as long as we don't hurt anyone. Every person has every human right because we are all born equal and should be treated with equal dignity and respect.

WHERE DO RIGHTS COME FROM?

Human rights are based on fairness, dignity, justice, equality and respect. These are values that everybody can understand, and that have existed for hundreds of years in different societies all over the world. Human rights were officially recognised as universal values by the world when the United Nations (UN) was set up.

WHY DO HUMAN RIGHTS MATTER TO CHILDREN IN THE UK? Human rights matter to us all, even if we sometimes feel that they are only important to people in other countries. There are plenty of children in the UK whose rights are not being respected: one child in three lives in poverty, one child in four is physically abused, and one child in seven does not have a proper home. Children may not know that their rights are being ignored or how they can change their situation. All young people should know their rights and understand how they can use their rights to protect themselves. All adults have a responsibility to uphold the rights of all children.

WHAT IS THE UNITED NATIONS?

The UN is an international organisation made up of 192 countries known as 'member states'. It was created in 1945 as the world emerged from the Second World War. Its founders were shocked by the destruction of the war and the horrors of the Holocaust. They wanted to create an international organisation that they hoped would be able to prevent such catastrophes from happening in the future. So promoting human rights, along with maintaining international peace and reducing poverty, became an aim of the UN.

"Only when the last tree has died and the last river been poisoned and the last fish been caught will we realise we cannot eat money." Cree proverb

WHAT EXACTLY IS CLIMATE CHANGE?

In the past, human beings have responded to changing climate by adapting, for example by migrating or developing different types of farming. In other words, the climate changed us. Today, we are changing the climate. Fast! The rate at which we are burning coal, oil and natural gas is much higher than ever before. This is changing the balance of gases in the atmosphere and making the world warmer. The situation is made even worse because we are also changing many other aspects of our world: by cutting down forests, destroying the habitats of birds and animals, and creating huge amounts of rubbish.

Climate change is one of the biggest threats that we face today. It is not only an environmental problem. Climate change will also affect international peace, development and human rights.

HOW WILL WE BE AFFECTED?

This question is not about the future. It is not only about how many icebergs will melt or how many species of animal will be wiped out. Climate change is already affecting the lives of many human beings. Across Africa, Asia and the Pacific region, people are struggling to adapt to rising sea levels and changing weather cycles, which affect crops, animals and economic growth. Some people are even having to deal with conflict as water supplies start to run out and fighting breaks out. The effects of climate change can be seen far away and closer to home:

➤ *On the Pacific islands of Tuvalu rising tides have washed over main roads, covered coconut trees and made crop land unusable. Tuvalu's government predicts that it could be the first country to be wiped off the map by climate change.*



➤ In recent years, the UK has also had to deal with more extreme weather – like more flooding and storms – because of increases in temperature and in sea levels around the UK coast. In 2000, the UK had its wettest autumn in almost 300 years. Heavy rainfall and flooding damaged over 10,000 homes.

CHILDREN AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change can affect children in different ways. One consequence is a lack of safe water. This could lead to:

- **Malnutrition** – A lack of water could hurt crops and mean that less food is grown. This affects the **right to food**.
- **Poverty** – Less food from crops would mean that farmers would make less money and that food prices would go up. This affects the **right to an adequate standard of living**.
- **Inequality** – In many rural areas across Africa and Asia, it is women (and girls especially) who collect water. If there is no water nearby, they may have to travel for days. They are often attacked by people or animals. They also have little time left for school. This affects the **right to education** and the **right to rest and leisure**.
- **Disease** – Diseases spread easily when water is dirty. This affects the **right to health**.
- **Displacement** – Families and entire communities could be forced to move to find water. This affects the **right to shelter**.
- **More conflicts** – As communities move to find safe water, competition over these water supplies could turn into armed conflict. This affects the **right to security**.

CLIMATE CHANGE = HUMAN RIGHTS PROBLEM

When we talk about how humans will be affected by climate change, we are already thinking about climate change as a human rights problem. Human rights can also help shape our thoughts and actions on how to respond to climate change. The **right to participate** can help young people make sure that their ideas on how to solve this problem are heard by those in power.

WHERE DOES THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE COME FROM?

The right to participate is one of the rights included in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The CRC was adopted by the United Nations in 1989. It is the first human rights treaty to contain a set of special rights for children. The CRC strives to ensure that every child in the world is protected from harm and exploitation; can develop to his or her fullest potential; and enjoys all human rights, such as the rights to food, shelter and education. One of the most powerful rights in the CRC is the right to participate. This means that children should have a say in all decisions affecting them.

All over the world, children show a high level of knowledge and concern about climate change. In 2005, the UK government did a survey of 10- to 18-year-olds and 24% of those who responded said that climate change is the greatest threat to the future of the world – bigger than crime or terrorism. The box below shows one example of how vital it is for children to be involved in the fight against climate change:

Nine-year-old Hanh lives in Vietnam, a country with many rivers and a long coastline. It is in danger from climate change because of rising sea levels. Save the Children worked with the local community to find ways to lessen the impacts of future disasters. The team asked children for their ideas. Hanh and his friends were part of a group of children that saw the repair of an evacuation road as a priority. Hanh lives in the Go Cong Dong district, an area which has many floods and storms. Improving the evacuation road will enable him and his friends to continue going to school even when there has been flooding or a typhoon. Save the Children also taught the children first aid and evacuation processes to help them feel in control and prevent panic when disasters strike. **Read more in 'Face of Disaster: Children and Climate Change' on www.savethechildren.org.uk**