

Why Children's Rights Are Critical For Climate Policy And Environmental Activism

09-10-2024 ~ *Birth equity is essential for ecological security.*



The *actual* cause of the climate crisis is the anthropogenic emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere since the start of the industrial revolution. But the *proximate* cause—the underlying activity that sparked the climate crisis and the intertwined environmental crises—is how we have built society, starting from when humans are born.

Despite the threat of the [sixth extinction](#), [ecosystem collapse](#), [air](#) and [water pollution](#), and the numerous associated [health impacts](#), few environmental activists or politicians recognize the proximate cause.

The climate crisis has fundamentally been fueled by countries treating future generations as a means to sustain their economies instead of as an intrinsic part of their nations. Society is set up to view children as workers, consumers, and taxpayers rather than as empowered citizens with an influential voice in their democracies. This ill-advised social doctrine is the proximate cause of the climate crisis. We must take remedial measures and seek justice for the natural world—humanity and all species—through legal means that [address children's rights via birth equity](#).

By shifting the focus to children's rights as a fundamental aspect of policy evaluation, we can reshape climate policy, save countless lives, and redefine wealth entitlements.

This is especially important since extreme temperatures will lead to more suffering for already vulnerable populations worldwide. According to

international studies, these extreme weather conditions are likely to [impact](#) ethnic minorities more and will lead to the “[greatest risks](#)” for people from developing countries. To protect future generations from heat waves, the [attenuation of democracy](#), and the [reduction of representation ratios](#), children’s rights and the rights of individuals must drive policymaking.

If we addressed these factors, particularly [intergenerational justice](#), climate policy would be different, saving [countless lives and trillions of dollars](#).

Why Advocacy Organizations Need to Focus on Family Planning

Advocacy organizations working to bring about positive social, economic, and environmental changes should consider including family planning in their goals. Including birth and development equity in their work is essential to ensuring meaningful changes for future generations. Ignoring this aspect might undo the positive impact these organizations might otherwise have.

The climate crisis goes beyond emissions; it is a multifaceted catastrophe, with efforts to mitigate it being undone on all levels as children enter the world without access to birth and development [equity](#). For example, [not using children’s rights as the basis](#) for family planning systems has allowed ecocidal growth and also diluted the role of each person in governance and their capacity to halt the crisis.

Family policies should be integral to animal protection, child welfare, environmental protection, human rights, and democracy to secure children’s futures.

Impact Fraud: Good Work Is Being Undone

Instead of focusing on increasing the economic wealth of nations, governments should ensure that women and their families have access to child welfare resources consistent with the Children’s Rights Convention. Unfortunately, family planning policies have failed to achieve this. Instead, children (primarily of color) enter the world with [no functional protections](#) and are exposed to environmental and socioeconomic conditions that are not conducive to helping them survive and thrive.

According to a July 2022 Pew Research Center [study](#), almost half of U.S. parents felt the government was doing “too little” to resolve issues that concerned them, while 54 percent gave the same reply regarding the government’s response to

addressing problems faced by children.

Evidence [of ubiquitous and horrific child abuse worldwide demonstrates this](#), along with the push for mindless growth, which comes at the cost of environmental damage. According to a 2020 [study](#) published in the Journal of Population and Sustainability, “more than three-quarters of the reductions in carbon emissions achieved since 1990 by increased efficiency and reducing carbon dioxide emissions from energy production have been canceled out by the effects of a growing population.”

[Studies](#) also show that the increasing financial burdens and “climate change fears” are deterring people from having children. According to a 2021 article in the Lancet, 39 percent of young people globally were reluctant to have children due to climate change.

This constitutes fundamental [threshold harm](#) on at least seven distinct or incommensurable levels (welfare, equity, human rights and democracy, environmental, reproductive rights, efficiency, and trust).

A February 2024 press release by UNICEF is a reflection of how we are failing child welfare globally, with 1.4 billion children not having any “[basic social protection](#).” “Fewer than one in ten children in low-income countries have access to child benefits, leaving them vulnerable to disease, missed education, poor nutrition, poverty and inequality.”

The family policies many support are quietly doing more harm—[undoing climate mitigation efforts](#) that will lead to 4 million people [dying](#) between 2000 and 2024—than other policies are doing good. This dynamic can be labeled “impact fraud.”

“Overall, the effects of global climate change are predicted to be heavily concentrated in poorer populations at low latitudes, where the most important climate-sensitive health outcomes (malnutrition, diarrhea, and malaria) are already common, and where vulnerability to climate effects is greatest. These diseases mainly affect younger age groups, so... the total burden of disease due to climate change appears to be borne mainly by children in developing countries,” [research](#) by Australian epidemiologist Anthony McMichael and his team concluded.

These policies position us to benefit from a coercive legal system of entitlements without paying the high costs. We can also meet our obligation to future generations by ensuring children are [born and raised in conditions that protect their rights and guarantee birth and developmental equity](#).

Impact fraud can be measured against a few simple metrics, like whether we invest enough in children, whether states are capable of holding functional constitutional conventions, or the concept of child rights-based legitimacy (the idea that children's rights logically precede and enable human rights and are thus the basis of political obligation and state legitimacy).

A Fatal Decision: The United Nations Human Rights Conference of 1968

The climate crisis is less about emissions or population growth. It should be viewed as more of a [policy mistake made by world leaders in 1968](#) (when the United Nations held its International Conference on Human Rights in Tehran) that allowed society to benefit at a fatal cost to future generations. At the time, politicians and policymakers conflated the disparate acts of having children and choosing not to as covered by autonomy rather than birth equity and children's rights.

The human rights policy of 1968 hid actual costs and favored wealthy families that relied on a growing class of workers and parental autonomy. Therefore, it chose cyclical inequity and unsustainable growth over the [inclusivity that creates genuine political autonomy](#). This obscured the overriding nature of birth equity as the first human right.

At the most fundamental level, the policy cemented by United Nations agencies in 1968 limited the interventions regarding the decision to have children—their number, the resources they deserve, the conditions in which they are born and raised, their level of influence in [setting the rules of democracy, and the actual impact of population on the nonhuman world, etc.](#)

Indeed, no one can justly benefit from a system when the reason for preventing intervention is based on the value of autonomy, pointing to the misconceived logic behind this thinking. It placed greater value on the rights of people to decide whether or not to have children rather than the rights of children.

People—Not Documents—Constitute Nations

The current and widespread concept of reproductive autonomy is the antithesis of

self-determination—an inversion of autonomy where some children are born into horrible circumstances, and others live in extreme wealth but are controlled by others.

People, not documents, constitute nations. If liberalism has struggled to find a way to include oneself in a system yet remain free, the easy answer would be this: You have to care enough about each child born into the world to position them so that you will both be empowered. You must be empathetic enough to care about the children born into unfortunate circumstances and their impact on the nonhuman world they need to survive.

The Act of Having Children Is Not a Private Act

Our current policy [treats children as means to be used by others](#), substitutes coercion for inclusion in rulemaking, and is the genesis of the fallacy of personal autonomy irrespective of our accessibility to intergenerational wealth. Any person having a child does so while being part of a political system, making this choice hardly a personal or private act for parents.

[Maintaining the status quo family policy](#)—including the greenwashing that hides its impacts—has killed many simply because we hid liability and did not move the extreme wealth that was made at the cost of pursuing these policies.

Because of these mistakes, people were not valued, which allowed consumption, population growth, inequity, and exclusive political systems to grow, which fundamentally drove the current child welfare crisis. Some (primarily white people) benefited at a cost to others (and controlled the basic criteria for cost/benefit analysis) by never meeting their most fundamental obligations: Ensuring birth and development conditions consistent with children's rights.

A few benefitted from a coercive legal system of entitlements, [the legitimacy of which was falsely premised](#) as a form of inclusive freedom.

'Distractivism'

The animal law/animal rights movement can lead us toward ecocentrism and help shift the focus to nature's integral role in ensuring the survival of future generations.

We cannot protect nonhuman animals without accounting for how the children we have and raise will individually and collectively relate to them as vulnerable

entities outside of functional legal protection and as the inhabitants of the ecologies that allow humans to be free and thrive.

Protecting animals requires more meaningful action than prosecuting animal cruelty, setting a precedent through legal cases, or introducing a new vegan product. This means animal law implementation should not be limited to discussions or hijacked by “[distractivists](#).” We must recognize that animal personhood is integral to human reproductive rights, and our family planning policies must reflect that.

A more fundamental vision aligns animal rights with other social justice movements because it shifts focus from legal coercion to ensuring that all beings inhabiting the planet are treated well.

The anthropocentric approach we currently follow perpetuates a cycle of growth and environmental destruction instead of concentrating on reversing the climate crisis by adopting a bottom-up approach centered around ensuring that children and animals thrive.

The animal rights movement’s claims of success are the most inaccurate when we [factor in the impact of family policy on animals](#). More animals have [died](#) from unchecked human population growth than have been saved by dietary change. Focusing on food without first focusing on family, inclusion, and legitimacy turns a fundamental justice movement into a racket of selling vegan products to a tiny percentage of consumers and leads to low-impact campaigns that are examples of distractivism.

Moreover, funders have driven animal organizations toward growth-based food because they are invested in the companies that make it. This is another example of turning the focus away from pressing issues like animal welfare.

Animal rights should thus not ask how humans should treat nonhumans, which is the arrogant and anthropocentric mindset that led to the climate crisis and threatens the existence and survival of humans and nonhuman animals alike.

Major animal protection organizations have been [publicly called on to assess whether their approach to family policy](#) harms animals more than their other work does good, and they have had no response. Activists like Wayne Hsuing have [advocated for truth and change](#) in this area to avoid undoing the work done to

protect nonhuman animals.

Animal law must concentrate on policies, like family law, which have the most significant impact, not sensational or profitable policies premised on our ability to replace other species. It is the most unifying form of justice around a zero baseline to avoid harming others.

But this will not work if wealthy funders silo the movement and base assessments of legitimacy on whether the law protects their current entitlements or focus on low-impact precedent, sensational victories, or on cases and statutes, the benefits of which are being undone by inequitable families. These funders live in a fictitious juridical world where calling something nature or saying it has rights has some magical impact, while in the real world, [pro-natal policies](#) have been [undoing the work](#) done to create more equity and hiding life-saving reparations.

Living in that top-down fantasy world clouds the high ideal of a legitimate system that protects nonhumans. Such a system would need to be more inclusive [and thus aligned with minimal “social sources” conceptions of positive law](#), consistent with reasonable representative ratios.

Most people define law as unique because it comes from the participation of its subjects. But of course, that depends on several factors, like how many people are involved, whether they are represented, whether their votes are diluted, etc. By most measures, current legal systems are [far too crowded and attenuated from their members to be participatory and legitimate](#).

Redefining State Sovereignty Around Birth Equity

A [petition before the United Nations](#), filed by our group, Fair Start Movement, would redefine state sovereignty and legitimacy around the most primary value, child rights/birth and developmental equity, as defined by the metrics above, and require certain things of member nations. This is not altruism but creating freedom through equitable relations that ensure we show the trust democracy or relative self-determination requires.

Today's extreme wealth was made at a cost to that value and is [owed to those who have paid the most to ensure “increased economic prosperity.”](#) This way of functioning has also violated the fundamental human right to matter. [And those who have benefited are trying to hide this fact](#) to ensure they continue to gain from this unequal system.

This policy and outlook change would set a baseline for any climate harm evaluation that does not scam victims out of what they are owed—self-determination, prioritizing reparations as the first human right, and providing conditions that ensure maximum protection for children.

Reforming the baselines can be accomplished through existing programs that invest in women. Examples include [Environmental, Social, and Governance \(ESG\) policy](#) reforms, requiring an objective standard for social and environmental claims that match the actual harms to infants and mothers, and getting high-profile entities to admit their prior use of terms like sustainable was inaccurate given the growth they embraced.

In the field of family planning, storytelling has had an enormous impact and can be used to increase demands for equity reparations as activists model them.

[Tax reforms](#), baby bonds, child welfare, and minimum income policies are also geared to incentivize and support the birth of children at a time, place, and with resources that ensure each child's development conditions are minimally consistent with the Children's Convention and ensure birth equity. Children's rights must also be aligned with animal rights or ecological restoration rather than human rights.

Even if ethicists cannot agree on this standard, it should be used provisionally to avoid more irreparable harm. All of this work cascades from an action currently before the [United Nations seeking to concretize equity/self-determination as the basic norm underlying human rights](#). There are a [variety of national, state, and local model statutes to implement this change](#).

At a corporate level, nonprofit and for-profit companies can be certified, ensuring they are not benefiting at a deadly cost to others.

Requiring restorative or [ecocentric](#) environmental policies and birth and developmental equity, as included in constitutional rights to personal freedom or the ability to control the influence others have over us is another step in this direction. Environmentalism failed because it treated the environment as a human resource rather than the homes of nonhuman families and communities that value autonomy.

Creating a system of child welfare entitlement, consistent with [intergenerational](#)

[justice](#) and [political legitimacy](#), would require identifying a [series of thresholds](#) for [family planning entitlements](#):

- A [minimum level of welfare](#).

- A [minimum level of equity](#).

- [Restoration of the nonhuman world](#) and climate.

This work could, in the long run, help prevent mass violence where those who lash out feel disempowered and are unable to access the justice system because they were never included in it in a meaningful way.

We can avoid continuing to make the deadly mistake described above by asking ourselves and others one question: What are we doing to ensure that the conditions all children are born and raised in, including their environment and resources, help them become self-determining individuals? Also, what are we doing to ensure that the benefits of our work are not undone?

We must make conscious choices to improve the planet on which we raise our children by respecting nonhuman beings and the environment. Learning the importance of co-existing in harmony is essential to breaking away from our unhealthy lives and policy choices. We must also choose to place greater value on individuals over senseless growth.

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