

For fair participation of children, adolescents and youth in socio-environmental governance

Recognizing that children, adolescents, and young people are not only passive actors in the face of the triple planetary crisis climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution but, in addition to being among the most vulnerable to its impacts, are in fact key players in establishing long-term solutions; their participation must therefore be incorporated effectively, inclusively, and with an intersectional approach into decision-making processes at the local, regional, and global levels; in order to guarantee democracy and to contribute to protecting the right of every person, of present and future generations, to live in an environment that guarantees their health and well-being.

In this sense, childhood, adolescence and youth:

Affirms that the legitimacy and effectiveness of environmental decision-making is strengthened when a genuine dialogue of knowledge is promoted between different knowledge systems. This not only expands and diversifies available knowledge but also opens a space to recognize that, although this knowledge coincides on many principles, it is expressed in different languages and worldviews. It also recognizes the work of the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC) and the *Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* (IPBES).

Reaffirms its commitment to the *Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Escazú Agreement), adopted in 2018, in particular its Article 7, which establishes guidelines to guarantee public participation in environmental decision-making processes; Article 8, which ensures access to justice in environmental matters; and Article 9, which recognizes and protects human rights defenders in environmental matters.

Recalls the *Declaration on the Implementation of Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration*, formulated by the governments of Chile, Costa Rica, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic and Uruguay at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 2012, which reaffirms the commitment to the rights of access to information, participation and justice in environmental matters, recognizes the need to reach commitments for the full implementation of those rights, and expresses the will to initiate a process to explore the feasibility of having a regional instrument open to all countries in the Region and with the meaningful participation of all interested citizens.

Recognizes with concern that some of the countries that promoted the *Declaration on the Implementation of Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration* have not yet ratified the Escazú Agreement and highlights the importance of advancing its full implementation as a fundamental tool for strengthening democracy and socio-environmental governance, in order to guarantee human rights and protect territories and those who defend them.

Recognizes that adequate protection of the environment is essential for human well-being, as well as for the enjoyment of fundamental rights, in particular the right to life.

Reaffirms the provisions of the 1998 *Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters*, which states that: "Citizens should have access to information, be empowered to participate in decision-making and have access to justice in environmental matters, and recognizing in this regard that citizens may need assistance in exercising their rights, Recognizing that, in the environmental field, improved access to information and greater public participation in decision-making lead to better decisions and more effective implementation,

contribute to raising public awareness of environmental problems, enable the public to express its concerns and assist public authorities in giving them due consideration.”

Reaffirms Principle 10 of the 1992 *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* , which states: “Environmental issues are best addressed through the participation of all interested citizens at the appropriate level. At the national level, everyone should have appropriate access to environmental information held by public authorities, including information on hazardous materials and activities in their communities, as well as the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. States should facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available. Effective access to judicial and administrative procedures, including compensation for damages and appropriate remedies, should be provided.”

Reaffirms Principle 22 of the 1992 *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* , which states: “Indigenous peoples and their communities, as well as other local communities, play a fundamental role in environmental management and development because of their traditional knowledge and practices. States should duly recognize and support their identity, culture, and interests and enable their effective participation in achieving sustainable development.”

Reaffirms the general principles of the *World Charter for Nature*, as set out in United Nations General Assembly resolution 37/7 of 28 October 1982; as well as those set out in the European Charter on Environment and Health adopted at the First European Conference on Environment and Health in 1989, recognising the interdependence between human health and the environment, and promoting integrated policies that protect both areas.

Recalls the first principle of the 1972 *Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment*, which states: “Every person has a fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life in an environment of a quality sufficient to permit him to live with dignity and well-being, and has a solemn obligation to protect and enhance the environment for present and future generations. In this regard, policies which promote or perpetuate apartheid, racial segregation, discrimination, colonial and other forms of oppression and alien domination are condemned and must be eliminated.”

Reaffirms the provisions of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* adopted in 1948 and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* which came into force in 1976, whereby everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. ■

Guiding principles

1. The principle of *recognition and autonomy*, based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Art. 12), requires that children not only be heard but also recognized as autonomous actors with the capacity to freely express opinions on all matters affecting their present and future; they cannot be reduced to a symbolic and instrumental representation.
2. The principle of *intergenerational justice* based on the Brundtland Report Chapter 2, where developments that meet the needs of the present generation should not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.
3. The principle of *inclusion, diversity, and non-discrimination* in line with Article 26 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR), ensuring that: “All persons are equal before the law and are entitled, without any discrimination, to equal protection of the law. In this

regard, the law shall prohibit all discrimination and guarantee all persons equal and effective protection against discrimination based on race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status,” thus avoiding structural exclusion.

4. The principle of *non-instrumentalization* based on the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (Principle 10) and the IPCC AR6 Synthesis Report (2023) in its section C.6. Where; effective multi-level governance for climate mitigation, adaptation, risk management and resilient development is achieved through inclusive decision-making processes that prioritize equity and justice in planning and implementation, allocation of adequate resources, institutional review and monitoring and evaluation.
5. Principle of *continuous critical training and education* that allows for understanding the complexity of socio-environmental problems as well as strengthening leadership for effective impact.
6. The principle of *protection and security of environmental defenders*, in line with the Escazú Agreement (Art. 9), it must be guaranteed that those who participate in environmental governance are protected against reprisals, threats or any form of violence.
7. The principle of intergenerational and multisystemic knowledge dialogue. This principle recognizes the need for respectful dialogue between diverse knowledge systems, promoting the co-creation of solutions based on plurality and cultural respect.
8. The principle of transparency and accountability, in order to guarantee the principles of governance in socio-environmental matters and the legitimacy of decision-making processes.

Therefore, childhood, adolescence and youth:

- 1. We affirm that the full, equitable, inclusive, effective, and gender-sensitive participation of children, adolescents, and young people in socio-environmental decision-making is a right and an essential condition for achieving effective governance in the face of the triple planetary crisis.**

Therefore, we propose the following recommendations:

- Incorporate binding mechanisms that guarantee genuine, diverse, effective, and non-token participation of children, adolescents, and young people in the formulation, implementation, monitoring, and follow-up of socio-environmental policies, negotiations, and socio-environmental decision-making spaces. This is a fundamental pillar for maintaining spaces for construction with binding decision-making capacity, accompanied by legal and budgetary mechanisms that guarantee their real and permanent inclusion, especially for children, adolescents, and young people from different social, cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds.
- Implement ongoing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that guarantee transparency and accountability, ensuring that participation goes beyond symbolic considerations and translates into concrete actions that recognize children, adolescents, and young people as subjects of rights and active agents in capacity building. This includes implementing participatory, inclusive, and culturally relevant methodologies from an early age, both in educational and community settings, and using digital tools to expand reach and representation.
- Avoid tokenism and instrumentalization, as practices that limit authentic and meaningful participation. Engagement must be free from coercion and manipulation that distort the genuine expression of participants.
- Provide the financial and logistical support necessary to ensure their safety, well-being, and effective participation in multilateral decision-making forums, eliminating economic and accessibility barriers.

- Strengthening intergenerationality implies a profound transformation of socio-environmental governance spaces. In some processes, children, adolescents, and young people are often considered a homogeneous group, which renders their diversity invisible. Recognizing this plurality is essential to moving toward fair representation. Likewise, there is an urgent need for proactive engagement with leaders in the areas most affected by climate change and armed conflict.

Recommendations aligned with:

Research such as Hart's (1992) "Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship" by the International Child Development Centre of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), in the Roger Hart Ladder of Child Participation, expresses that symbolic participation is often confused with effective participation, without guaranteeing impact or institutional recognition. Although the participation of children, adolescents, and youth has been promoted in various multilateral spaces, concrete public policies that recognize them as full political actors have not been developed. Therefore, it is a priority to strengthen regulatory frameworks and public policies that guarantee effective and sustained participation in socio-environmental decisions, especially for those who are vulnerable.

Studies such as the report of the *UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment* (Knox, 2018) point out that the exercise of human rights, including the rights to freedom of expression and association, education, information, participation and access to effective remedies, is fundamental for the protection of the environment, with human rights and environmental protection being interdependent, as recognized in various agreements .

In this sense:

- Although there are internationally recognized participation mechanisms for children, adolescents, and youth in socio-environmental decision-making — such as YOUNGO within the UNFCCC framework and UNMGCY in other UN processes — these are not binding spaces, but rather consultative in nature. In many cases, youth participation tends to be symbolic. Despite instruments such as the Escazú Agreement recognizing the right to participate in environmental matters, its effective implementation remains weak. The participation of children, adolescents, and youth often lacks real decision-making power, and structural barriers persist, such as lack of training, accessibility, and the cultural and linguistic adaptation of participation spaces.
- The right of everyone to participate in the management of public affairs includes, among other aspects, participation in decision-making related to the environment. This participation should extend to the formulation of policies, laws, and regulations, as well as to the design and evaluation of projects and activities, which must be made available to the public, ensuring that society has the opportunity to comment, either directly or through its representative bodies. This participation should be supported by monitoring committees that account for the impact and actual follow-up of proposals, with transparent institutional feedback explaining how these proposals are integrated or rejected. Likewise, "the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous peoples or traditional communities is generally required before the approval or implementation of laws, policies, or measures that may affect them ."

2. We affirm the importance of decentralization and territorialization of governance as key to reducing inequalities.

Therefore, we propose the following recommendations:

- Decentralize the processes of management, decision-making, implementation, evaluation, and monitoring of socio-environmental public policies, promoting the effective coordination of multiple stakeholders and consolidating collaborative governance spaces that foster shared responsibility and collective development. In this sense, designing socio-environmental public policies from the perspective of someone who doesn't understand the reality of a region is almost like doing so without a clear view of the context. Therefore, a planning process is required that allows for the design of long-term strategies that extend beyond the government that created the public policy.
- Rethinking traditional notions of state and sovereignty in the face of the challenges posed by the global climate crisis, integrating pluralistic approaches that recognize the diversity of territorial governance forms, particularly in those states threatened by territorial loss, while strengthening territorial sovereignty as a fundamental condition for reducing inequalities, ensuring a fair distribution of benefits, and contributing to regional and global stability.
- Consider the creation of spaces with voting and decision-making power.
- Promote the creation of observatories, established as a network of collaboration and cooperation between various actors, whose central purpose is to promote a concrete regional and global agenda for climate action and a just transition, as well as to generate effective accountability mechanisms for governments and private actors, both at the global and local levels,

Recommendations aligned with:

Research such as Escobar's (2015) "Territories of Difference: The Political Ontology of Rights to Territory," highlights that: "For many communities, territory is conceived as something more than a material basis for the reproduction of the human community and its practices. In order to grasp that something more, it is crucial to attend to ontological differences. When one speaks of a mountain, a lagoon, or a river as an ancestor or as a living entity, one is referencing a social relationship, not a subject-object relationship." For Mario Blaser (2013) a "political ontology" is necessary, that is, a way of understanding the world that recognizes the coexistence and legitimacy of multiple realities (not just points of view); only in this way can we avoid reducing the diversity of the world to a single way of being and knowing.

In this sense:

- The global climate crisis challenges the traditional sovereignty of the nation-state, given that phenomena such as climate change and biodiversity loss do not recognize political boundaries, necessitating a reconsideration of environmental governance models. In this sense, the full recognition of local sovereignty is key, considering the framework of plurinationalism, which emphasizes the coexistence of diverse ways of understanding the relationship with nature, where cultural and spiritual ties to ecosystems are fundamental to conservation and sustainable management.
- The implications of inequality in the context of the exploitation of nature, utilitarian representations of nature, and the processes of (global) environmental change are substantial. In Latin America, for example, social inequalities are historically associated with highly unequal systems for distributing land rights and mineral rents. Currently, the growth of investments in the region, oriented toward common natural resources—such as land, minerals, metals, hydrocarbons, and forests—tend to even increase multiple patterns of inequality. It is understood

here not only as an environmental problem, but as a social, political, and cultural phenomenon that demands a profound transformation in governance patterns, recognized in gaps in power, technical capacity, infrastructure, and access to resources in the areas most affected by climate change. *"Not all territories have the same tools or conditions to exercise informed and meaningful participation."*

- There is resistance from central power centers to loosen control over strategic decisions, especially those affecting economic interests such as mining, agribusiness, and/or extractive infrastructure. Decentralization is thus entering into tension with an economic model that prioritizes centralized control to maintain the stability of large capital. This centralism is also sustained by both economic interests and a hierarchical view of knowledge. Added to this is the criminalization of environmental leaders and the insecurity in exercising rights in violent contexts.
- The existence of a disarticulation between the different levels of the State, where local decisions are not articulated with national policies, and vice versa, and the multiplication of uncoordinated entities generate chaos, duplication of functions, and inefficiency. *"There are no bridges between the local, regional, and national levels,"* hindering an effective response to conflicts and perpetuating what participatory processes end up being symbolic.
- Decentralization alone does not guarantee social, climate, or environmental justice. In many territories, there is clientelism, private interests, or structures that capture participatory processes and exclude the most vulnerable actors. *"Decentralization without democratizing territories only changes the center of power, but not the logic of power."* Therefore, decentralization must be accompanied by mechanisms for transparency, accountability, and the strengthening of social organizations.

3. We affirm the importance of corporate accountability and regulation.

We are facing a climate emergency with devastating potential for life on Earth . The scientific and political consensus, evidenced in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C, indicates that global warming, if it continues to increase at its current rate, could reach 1.5°C between 2030 and 2052. This, for some experts, would pose a serious threat to the survival of humans and other living beings . In the context of a climate emergency, States have failed to generate significant results in the global economy and to effectively regulate business activities that substantially contribute to climate change. In this sense, the effects of climate change have impacted different actors unevenly.

Therefore, we propose the following recommendations:

- Establish a clear and robust regulatory framework that ensures that the actions of current corporations do not compromise the rights of future generations, that adopts a climate justice approach, and that integrates children, adolescents, and young people as key stakeholders in the design, implementation, evaluation, and monitoring of compliance with public strategies that address this need.
- Create auditing and evaluation processes in which youth are a key part, ensuring that companies comply with rigorous sustainability standards that prioritize human rights and environmental protection. Mandate significant and corrective sanctions for their contributions to environmental degradation, in order to guarantee a culture of corporate responsibility and sustainability.

Recommendations aligned with:

IPCC research indicates that climate change has already begun to generate adverse impacts around the world, including ecosystem loss, reduced food security, increased migration and displacement, human rights violations, and increased inequality. If global warming is not limited to a maximum increase of 1.5°C in accordance with the Paris Agreement, these adverse effects would be exacerbated and humanity would approach a point of no return, including loss and damage, especially in scenarios of insufficient climate action. The course of our common history as humanity depends on immediate action to address this challenge at the global level. For its part, in its February 2022 report, the IPCC estimated that the increase in temperature and extreme climates generated by human action are causing irreversible impacts much faster than our capacity to adapt to these changes.

In this sense:

- States must establish, maintain, and effectively monitor legal and institutional frameworks for the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. States must therefore refrain from violating human rights by causing or permitting environmental damage; protect against harmful interference with the environment from other sources, such as businesses and other private actors; and take effective measures to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of ecosystems and biological diversity, on which the full enjoyment of human rights depends.
- Prior assessment of the potential environmental impacts of projects and policies should be conducted as early as possible in the decision-making process for any proposal that may have significant effects on the environment; the assessment should provide meaningful opportunities for participation by various stakeholders, consider alternatives to the proposal, and take into account all potential environmental impacts, including transboundary effects and cumulative effects that may arise from the interaction of the proposal with other activities; the assessment should result in a written report clearly describing the impacts; and the assessment and final decision should be subject to review by an independent body.

4. We affirm the need to ensure protection and security for environmental defenders

Therefore, we propose the following recommendations:

- It is imperative to recognize nature as a subject of rights as well as to protect human rights defenders in environmental issues, in this sense, each State has the duty to provide a safe and enabling environment so that especially children, adolescents and young people, groups and bodies of society that work on human rights and environmental issues, can act without threats, impediments and insecurity. To strengthen this commitment, it is essential to implement specific protection protocols, with an approach based on the Escazú Agreement, ensuring their physical, emotional and psychological integrity; e defenders, facilitating access to justice and reparation mechanisms. These networks should be supported by international organizations and should foster intergenerational and transnational cooperation in the defense of environmental rights.
- Promote critical education in human and environmental rights

Recommendations aligned with

Research such as that by Global Witness (2023) reports “records of up to 196 documented cases of defenders killed for exercising their right to protect their lands and the environment, although the actual

number of cases is likely higher. This brings the total number of murders committed worldwide since Global Witness began reporting on them in 2012 to more than 2,000: the estimated number is 2,106.

In this sense:

- Corruption and the risk of reporting abuse are silent barriers that limit safe participation.
- States must prohibit discrimination and guarantee equal and effective protection. To address both indirect and direct discrimination, States must strengthen and adopt effective measures against the underlying conditions that cause or contribute to perpetuating discrimination, which produce disproportionately severe effects on communities that primarily depend on ecosystems. In the case of transboundary environmental damage, States must provide for equal access to information, participation, and remedies, without discrimination based on nationality or domicile.
- Human rights defenders, especially individuals and groups of people who strive to promote environmental human rights, are among the people most at risk. Like other human rights defenders, environmental human rights defenders are entitled to all the rights and means of protection set forth in the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Declaration on Human Rights Defenders), including the right to be protected in their work and the right to seek the protection and realization of human rights at the national and international levels.
- Among the most frequent risks facing human rights defenders are threats, harassment, physical and psychological violence, criminalization of their actions, and stigmatization by state actors, illegal armed groups, extractive companies, and even the media. Children, adolescents, and young people, especially in rural and peri-urban contexts, live in situations of extreme vulnerability when defending their territories, water, or ecosystems, which can lead to forced displacement, disappearances, repression, and, in critical cases, murder.
- Weak institutional presence in territories, especially rural ones, leaves a protection and justice gap. The absence of specific legal frameworks to protect children and young environmental defenders, as well as the lack of effective implementation of instruments such as the Escazú Agreement, limits the possibilities for protection and security. Added to this is corruption, impunity for environmental and social crimes, and the complicity between state and corporate interests, which makes it impossible for complaints and demands to be addressed. This reinforces the cycle of vulnerability.
- The voices of children, adolescents, and young people are often dismissed as inexperienced or unnecessary, which not only renders them invisible but also violates their fundamental rights. Some report being ignored, publicly discredited, or delegitimized in the spaces where they seek to influence. In some cases, they face legal retaliation under restrictive laws, particularly in Indonesia with the Electronic Information and Technology Act, which allows young advocates to be prosecuted on defamation charges. Added to this is the constant psychological pressure resulting from threats, isolation, and emotional overload.
- Activism has been seen as a threat to public order.

- Murder remains a common strategy for silencing human rights defenders, and it is undoubtedly the most tragic.
- States must establish a safe and enabling environment for defenders to operate free from threats, harassment, intimidation, or violence. Such an environment requires States to: adopt and implement laws that protect human rights defenders in accordance with international human rights standards; publicly recognize the contributions of human rights defenders to society; ensure that their work is not penalized or stigmatized; establish, in consultation with human rights defenders, effective protection and early warning programs; provide appropriate training to security and law enforcement officials; ensure prompt and impartial investigation of threats and violations and the prosecution of alleged perpetrators; and provide effective remedies for violations, including appropriate compensation.

5. We affirm the importance of training and education spaces that guarantee democratic access to socio-environmental information.

Therefore, we propose the following recommendations:

- In accordance with the Escazú Agreement, it is a priority to guarantee democratic and timely access to complete, reliable (relevant), and appropriate (intercultural) information, as well as maximum transparency in decision-making and processes, in order to guarantee a fair, equitable, and inclusive participation process. The competent authorities, entities, and/or agencies must ensure that socio-environmental information is reusable, processable, and available in accessible formats, and that there are no restrictions on its reproduction or use.
- Promote technical and political training opportunities for informed participation and decision-making.
- Strengthen leadership with a diverse and intersectional approach so that children, adolescents, and young people play a meaningful role in shaping public policies and environmental governance at the local, national, and international levels.
- Democratize access to information through education and awareness-raising, strengthening capacities in rights, leadership, and environmental management, as well as promoting the autonomy of youth initiatives to define their priorities and methodologies.

In this sense:

- Education is a key pillar and must be contextualized with territorial ownership. Thus, higher education institutions must consolidate themselves as spaces for the dialogue of knowledge, co-creation of solutions, and coordination with diverse social actors, particularly those vulnerable to the processes of knowledge production and validation. Only in this way will it be possible to move toward education conceived as a public good, a fundamental human right, and a tool for social and ecological transformation, as established by the World Declaration on Higher Education.
- The most common barriers identified by children, adolescents, and young people revolve around inequality in access to digital technologies, the centralization of data production and management, censorship or manipulation of information by public and private actors, and the absence of robust legal frameworks that guarantee the right to access environmental information in a timely, understandable, and culturally relevant manner.

- The human right of all people to seek, receive and impart information includes information on environmental issues.
- Public access to environmental information enables individuals to understand the extent to which environmental damage may diminish their rights, including their rights to life and health, and supports the exercise of other rights, such as the rights of expression, association, participation, and redress.
- States must regularly collect, update, and disseminate environmental information; actual or threatening environmental impacts on the health and well-being of humans, other species, and ecosystems; and relevant laws and policies. In particular, in situations involving an imminent threat of harm to human health or the environment, States must ensure that all information enabling the public to take protective measures is immediately disseminated to all affected people, regardless of whether the threats are due to natural or human causes.

Children, adolescents and youth, we call for urgent climate action and ambition from governments, international organizations and civil society at the global, national and local levels. ***We call on all states and actors to take priority measures*** to address climate denialism, as well as to ensure the effective, inclusive and intersectional participation of children, adolescents and youth in the management of socio-environmental policies, guaranteeing their integrity and safety in all senses. Through ***the intergenerationality*** , ***democratization*** and ***decentralization*** , a fair, equitable, inclusive and resilient future will be built, where younger generations will not only inherit the socio-environmental problems, but also the skills, knowledge and tools to go beyond solving them, to rebuilding the social fabric and the recognition of ecosystems as subjects of rights. Likewise, it is key to establish clear indicators and effective monitoring mechanisms that allow for periodic and transparent evaluation of compliance with the commitments assumed in this manifesto. This is the only way to ensure that the proposed actions do not remain mere rhetoric, but are translated into reality.