North America Consultation on the Right of Children and Youth to a Healthy Environment: Building an Agenda for Justice, Equity and Empowerment

From the inextricably linked climate emergency and biodiversity crisis – visible in historic wildfires, drought, hurricanes and the precipitative decline in wildlife populations linked to habitat loss and degradation – to air and water pollution, deforestation, mining, pesticides and waste, the breadth and diversity of environmental challenges confronting North America is both astounding and sobering. All of these issues are tied to fundamental inequities relating to race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, and other bases. Social, racial, and environmental justice are deeply connected as the most disadvantaged populations are those most affected by environmental catastrophes and the most marginalized in public policy decision making.

No group is more vulnerable to these forms of environmental harms and injustices than children and young people, especially those from already disproportionately burdened communities. And no group will be more affected by the unravelling of core elements of the natural environment on which all life depends. At the same time, children and youth have crucial perspectives, expertise, and agency to be powerful change agents. The human right to a healthy environment brings together and protects these elements – defined as the right to breathe clean air, a safe climate, clean water and adequate sanitation, healthy ecosystems, non-toxic environments, and healthy and sustainably produced food. The right also encompasses participation rights, including; the rights to environmental education and information, freedom of expression and assembly, including to defend the environment, to engage in the environmental policy dialogue, and to access remedy for environment-related harm. A healthy environment means that these rights are upheld, while centering efforts to address systemic injustices.

David Suzuki Foundation (DSF), the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD) and the Children’s Environmental Rights Initiative (CERI) are partnering to host a virtual child, youth and intergenerational consultation on the right to a healthy environment for the North American region- as part of a series of regional consultations with children and youth across the world. “Children”, in this context includes young people up the age of 18 and “youth” refers to young adults. By including both groups we aim to reflect (1) ongoing discussions about the need to strengthen children’s rights as they are enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child from an environmental perspective and (2) the social reality that children and youth face similar challenges in this context.

Taking place in Spring 2021, it will convene a wide diversity of environmental activist youth leaders, adults and Elders for an interactive and generative dialogue on their concerns, solutions and recommendations on the rights of children and youth with respect to the environment. There will be proactive efforts taken to ensure that the participants reflect the most over-burdened populations, and that discussions represent society in its diversity. Likewise, the content of the events will address strategies for transforming social and environmental disparities.

Key findings from this unique and rich exchange will be captured in a regional report, providing a framework for further joint advocacy initiatives at the regional level, and contributing to CERI’s broader mission under the auspices of the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment to shape and secure international recognition by States of a Global Charter on Children’s Rights and the Environment.

Young people and their allies will be empowered to use this opportunity to build relationships that link local, national and international levels and foster intergenerational dialogue and collaboratively plan follow-up actions, next steps and initiatives that directly nurture the momentum of the youth-led climate and environmental movement.
An Intergenerational Advisory Committee (IAC) will be convened to advise in the planning and implementation of the consultation, providing space for young people, adults and Elders (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) to work together through critical issues.

Consultation outcomes include:

- **Young People’s Environmental Network**: The first ever intergenerational network of climate and environmental activists and organizations across North America forming and collaborating on advocacy initiatives and exchanging best practices and resources.
- **Coalition of universities and researchers**: A collaboration on research initiatives centered on children’s rights and the environment across North America.
- **North American Regional Report**: Youth-led and intergenerational key findings on concerns, solutions and recommendations on children’s right to a healthy environment in North America as a framework for further advocacy initiatives.
- **Global Charter on Children’s Rights and the Environment**: A set of key guiding principles on children’s rights and the environment informed by the North American Regional Report, other regions consultations and a [global online poll](#).

**Dates**: Spring 2021

**Platform**: Zoom

**Attendance target**: 100 total (2-3 tiers of participation)

**Participants (TBC)**: The event will bring together actors from across the region to explore ways to deepen collaboration and alliances. In particular, we would like to invite children and youth who face varying levels of adversity and who may have more limited access to such leadership opportunities.

- Environmental child and youth activists
- Civil society organizations
- Regional and national institutions
- Youth Journalists
- UN Agencies
- Academia
- Governments
- Private Sector

**Format**

The format will utilize participatory, youth-centred engagement and leadership methods which help to facilitate multi-generational dialogue and maximum participation by all during the consultation. These would include the use of arts-based, storytelling, relational and Indigenous methods. The organizers have extensive experience in designing safe, respectful and culturally relevant spaces for dialogue and creative action. Ensuring the dialogue is grounded in the lived experience and land-based traditions of Indigenous peoples and other marginalized communities will be critical. Central to our approach will be the design of activities to support the core principles of reconciliation, anti-racism and decolonization.

**Roles**:

- Host or MC
- Group session Note Taker
- Photographer/ Recorder/ Social media
- Speakers
- Break out session Facilitators
- Break out session Note takers
Moderators

Support group

Participants

Group sessions: Group sessions are when all of the participants are in the same session. We will encourage speakers to use the interactive features of Zoom regularly to make the session as engaging as possible.

Break out sessions: Break out rooms are the more interactive portions of the workshop that can be divided by topic and languages.

World-cafe: There will be a dedicated session bringing together children and youth from around the world for networking/lessons learned discussion, utilizing break out rooms and potentially live streamed.

Public session: For one of the group sessions, the public will be invited to watch a live stream and have the opportunity to provide comments or ask questions via chat. This portion ideally highlights the results of the online poll inputs, has a compelling moment- i.e. spoken word, etc.

Focus areas

Points for discussion:

- Key challenges in the region that hinder progress on fulfilling children’s and youth’s environmental rights
- What measures are required and what opportunities exist (good practices, policy frameworks)?
- What are the issues that need to be prioritized/addressed (topics, groups, rights)?
- Measures/strategies to support children’s and youth’s environmental rights in the region, including youth activism

Environmental and children’s rights topics relevant to North America:

- Environmental justice (intersectionality, equity)
- Climate change
- Indigenous rights
- Intergenerational collaborations (children, youth, adults and Elders) and mentorship
- Youth movements and human rights (links between youth action and implementation of rights) and empowerment of children

Other key elements

CERI Online Poll (one month before): An online poll will be promoted approximately one month ahead of the consultation aiming to gather inputs from a wide range of children and young people in North America, so as to reach out to communities beyond those participating in the consultation. These inputs will be integrated in the North American Regional Report and the Global Charter on Children’s Right to a Healthy Environment.

Young People’s Environmental Network: We will invite young participants to a digital convening space (Facebook/Slack) to facilitate collaboration outside of the virtual consultation. This space will be open for organic networking, however, ideally a moderating structure is built for the group’s longevity and for it to function independently.

University/Research Coalition: A coalition of researchers from across North America will come together across disciplines to develop a research summary document on children’s rights, the environment and climate change. This newly formed North American regional research network will collaborate on key research areas identified by young people during the consultation. Enhanced strategic links between
research institutions and child and youth activists will provide an excellent platform for child-adult partnerships going forward.

**Important considerations**

**Children and young people:** In order for children and young people to participate fully and meaningfully it is important for us to take special steps:

**Languages:** We will take necessary steps to accommodate the diversity in languages, including French and Spanish, by integrating Zoom live translators and translating event materials.

**Accessibility (Resource):** It is critical to make efforts to accommodate participants with limited access to specific Zoom features, such as those with different abilities or joining from the phone.

**Communications**

A communications plan will be developed integrating the use of media, social media, influencers, multimedia, blogs and websites to:

- Outreach to as many children and young people as possible to participate in the online poll
- Raise visibility of the voices of children and young people at the event and messages from the online poll
- Facilitate collaboration and communication among event participants

**Follow-up**

**North American Regional report:** The regional report, highlighting key discussion points, will be developed shortly after the consultation and shared with participants as a tool to move forward with advocacy efforts. The Young People Environmental Network can be the space for young people to lead this.

**Global Charter:** A Global Charter setting out key guiding principles on children’s rights and the environment will be developed based on the inputs of the North America and other CERI regional consultations around the world. Work will begin on the draft Charter in 2020 and culminate in 2021/2022. States will be asked to adopt the Charter to inform child-centred environmental standard-setting and policy development at global, regional and national levels. It is anticipated that participants and organizations in various regions will support this call to action through their networks.