

**Discussion of South Korean Children on
Children's Rights and the Environment
with a Special Focus on Climate Change
in Relation to General Comment No. 26**

The discussion that is the subject of this summary, co-hosted by Good Neighbors, the KCCO, and the office of Assemblywoman Yangyi Won-yeong (Democratic Party of Korea), took place in the National Assembly of South Korea on April 20, 2022, with the participation of seven children volunteering with Good Neighbors' child advocacy group, Good Motion, and the National Children's Congress.

You will find here an English translation of the summary of the views and thoughts shared by the participating Korean children in the discussion that was held in relation to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No. 26 ("General Comment on Children's Rights and the Environment with a Special Focus on Climate Change").

Participating children

1. Kim Yu-rim (Jeollabuk-do Dream Youth Group leader, age 17)
2. Kim Eun-seo (Good Motion member, age 15)
3. Park Gang-eun (Good Motion member, age 15)
4. Choi Jin-won (Good Motion member, age 11)
5. Kim Su-ah (18th National Children's Congress subcommittee member, age 13)
6. Ryu Sae-bom (18th National Children's Congress chair, age 15)
7. Cho Seong-il (18th National Children's Congress vice-chair, age 16)

South Korean Children's Discussion on Children's Rights and the Environment with a Special Focus on Climate Change

Q1. In your opinion, does climate change affect children's rights? If so, how?

Park Gang-eun (hereinafter "Park"): I believe climate change affects children's rights thoroughly, including their rights to life, protection, development, and participation. As children, we all have the right to safety, learning, and playing, but climate change stands in the way of enjoying all these. First, it makes farming more and more difficult, threatening food security which is crucial to the healthy and safe growth of children. Extreme weather also makes it difficult and even impossible to go to school and deprive us of the leisure we need to rest and learn. Insofar as children do not feel protected against the negative effects of climate change, I think they have a right to express their opinion and participate actively in policymaking on climate change.

Choi Jin-won (hereinafter "Choi"): I think climate change does affect children's rights to life and protection. Children have the right to grow in a safe and healthy environment, but climate events like extreme heat, floods, and air pollution make it difficult to exercise that right. According to a study by Memorial University of Newfoundland in Canada, 88 percent of climate-induced illnesses affect children.

Ryu Sae-bom (hereinafter "Ryu"): I think climate change most definitely affects our right to life. Climate change has begun to reshape ecosystems in numerous countries already. There are many children who lose their lives to floods, wildfires and other such events around the world. As the climate crisis deteriorates, more and more countries will face far starker consequences than they have imagined, with extremely severe effects on children's rights to life and livelihood.

Cho Seong-il (hereinafter "Cho"): Climate change affects children's rights through and through. Children are all the more vulnerable to effects of climate change, such as pollution and sickness. Political and military disputes caused by climate change also expose children to great violence. Climate change, environmental pollution and ecological destruction also affect children's right to development by depriving them of learning and rest. These problems seem to affect poor countries disproportionately, but wealthy nations are not immune, either. Children are the biggest victims of climate change and also have the most to say about how to solve the crisis for the present and future generations. Yet their voice is consistently ignored.

Q2. What aspects of climate change worry you most?

Kim Eun-seo (hereinafter "Kim E."): The Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically increased the demand for deliveries and online shopping as people had to stay home. As a result, the amount of garbage has also increased exponentially. Plastics are a significant source of greenhouse gas

emissions starting with their manufacturing. After being disposed, plastics also pollute the sea and harm marine organisms in the form of microplastics. As humans eat marine species that have fed on the garbage and microplastics, it all comes back to hurt us as well.

Park: I'm most worried about the effect on atmosphere. Air pollution and temperature rises affect not just the natural environment, but also our daily lives. Air polluted by industrial activities contains lots of toxic chemicals, which play a lot into the pneumonia and asthma affecting growing numbers of children worldwide. Climate change also accelerates global warming. Arctic amplification is a phenomenon in which glaciers made of seawater thaws at a faster rate than glaciers made of freshwater. This phenomenon makes the Arctic warmer faster, threatening the lives of polar bears and raising the sea level that fatally affects human communities.

Kim Su-ah (hereinafter "Kim S."): I am most worried about the fact that people are not fully aware of climate change and its consequences. To me, the fact that people do not take climate change as a serious, pressing problem is most worrisome. Such denial will hold us back from responding promptly and effectively when even more serious disasters hit us as a result of climate change, increasing the extent of damage we will suffer.

Ryu: The most significant problem is that today's children will be the biggest victims of climate change. Yet few, if any, attempts are made today to investigate and discuss how severely the future generation will be affected by the climate crisis. Few governments worldwide have also legislated policy that specifically serves children and the impact that climate change will likely have on them. Children are still developing their immune systems, and lack the knowledge and resources to fight the direct impact of climate change on them. As long as society at large continues to ignore how climate change will affect children, children stand to lost the most in the battle against the crisis.

Cho: I am most worried about the fact that climate change is unstoppable. As we all know, climate change began a long time ago. As the third wave of industrial revolution began and states rushed to develop their natural resources and environments, ecosystems have witnessed unprecedented destruction worldwide. People continue to eradicate natural habitats and generate carbon emissions today, even going so far as to destroy tropical forests that have served as the lungs of the Earth. Politicians and developers continue their destructive pursuits even all the while pretending to protect the environment.

Q3. Have you ever felt the impact of climate change in everyday life?

Kim E.: Before the pandemic, I remember the spring lasting in Korea for about three weeks. Autumn also lasted about a month or so. During the two years of the pandemic, however, I noticed that fall has nearly disappeared, while spring was felt for only a week or so. In the

meantime, summer has grown extremely long and hotter. I experienced suffocating heat in the last couple of summers because my own neighborhood was trapped in a heat dome.

Park: I have always been susceptible to bronchitis, and I’m also allergic to dust and air pollution. My allergies are particularly bad in springtime as the annual Asian dust storms sweep across Korea. These climate events make me cough and feel itchy and make hospital visits necessary. On days with particularly bad air pollution levels, we were forced to keep masks on our faces all day long. Schools even shut down in some cases.

Choi: The price of Asian leeks skyrocketed last year. It is news on the rapid fluctuations in the prices of these household items that makes me feel the effect of climate change all the more acutely. The price of Asian leeks was so high that Koreans began to grow their own in their homes. The unusually long monsoon season, furthermore, decimated the amount of tomatoes harvested in Korea, even driving hamburger franchises to stop putting tomatoes in their burgers.

Ryu: As children, we must spend a good amount of time outside, exercising and playing, to be healthy. Yet the chronically high levels of air pollution in Korea forced my school and others to keep students indoors even during the physical education class. It is actually becoming rarer for us to go outside and play during physical education. Schools have to operate air-conditioning and heating systems. Running these systems cost fuels and electricity, which, in turn, keep the level of demand for fossil fuels high, worsening climate change as a result.

Cho: I feel the effect of climate change most keenly in summer and winter. It seems to be getting hotter and hotter with each new summer, forcing schools, private academies, and malls to try to keep indoor temperatures at 18°C. Monsoons and floods keep causing rising numbers of fatalities in Korea. I live in a high-rise apartment building, but my family and I have not been immune to these weather events. Water began to pour into one of the rooms in our apartment, forcing us to redo our walls. Typhoons are also growing more frequent and more violent, breaking the branches and even trunks of trees in front of our building. Extreme cold has become as frequent as heatwaves, leading many families to keep heating their homes constantly. I have seen my family and friends use heat pouches in their pockets in winter to commute to schools and work.

Q4. How would you rate the severity of today’s climate crisis? Why would you rate it so?

Not severe at all		Not so severe		Neither		Severe		Very severe	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Kim E.: I would score it a 9. I don’t recall getting education in schools or elsewhere growing up about climate change and its impact on the environment. These days, hardly a day goes by

without me watching some videos or getting a lecture about the climate crisis. I'm in the science club at my school, and most of the club's activities are dedicated to climate change and eco-friendliness. As I keep getting these lessons, I think adults are trying to educate children about the imminent dangers of climate change so as to prepare them for the future. My activities in the club have opened my eyes to how widespread and frequent climate change and related events are. So I give it a rating of 9.

Park: I would rate it an 8. I saw news about the grim prospects for the Paris Agreement, which governments worldwide signed onto in an effort to manage global warming. The news report I saw stated that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its sixth report, projecting that the average global temperature would reach the 1.5-degree-higher mark sometime between 2021 and 2040. This makes me worry that climate change is really serious.

Choi: My rating is a 9. I hear something about climate change and its impact on almost all news shows I listen to or watch. The costs of food and other everyday essentials are skyrocketing in part due to climate change. News of heatwaves, extreme cold, floods, or some other such events dominate the media. Even schools in Korea have made environmental education part of their regular curriculum, making me think that we are at a critical point.

Kim S.: Climate change rates a 10. The sense of urgency to take some action is greatest at the moment because we have recognized the serious nature of this crisis and are still able to act, at least to some extent. If we wait just a little longer until there is no fresh air to breathe, it will be impossible to reverse the effects of climate change or to stop it from running our everyday life. I think we are standing on the verge of the climate crisis turning into the climate disaster. I wonder why Koreans, who have responded so well and systematically to the pandemic, aren't as united and interested in taking action against climate change.

Ryu: My rating is a 10. It appears that almost all news shows and programs today discuss climate change and the environment. All the activities for children's rights that I have participated in also discussed climate change and possible solutions.

Cho: I score it a 9. Climate change is at a tipping point, and it is critical for everyone, including the state, society, corporations, and individuals, to act. We must all together form a united front and take diverse measures against events like the rising sea level, the destruction of the ozone layer, heatwaves and extreme cold. Yet not everyone is participating. Climate has begun to threaten our survival and livelihoods all around the world. Nevertheless, I refrain from rating its severity as a 10 because I see more and more people are acknowledging the problem and taking action. I hope to maintain my hope that everyone can come around and join the efforts to fight the effects of climate change.

Q5. What does your school teach you about climate change? What do you think is needed to make climate change education more useful?

Park: Whatever curriculum my school has on climate change is very short. Much of secondary education in Korea focuses disproportionately on preparing for university admissions. Social issues like climate change are therefore seen as a waste of time. Few of my friends are interested in climate change. I took an interest early on because my mother is very interested in this issue as well. She and I have volunteered on various occasions to learn more about climate change. I think one way kids can learn effectively about this problem is to go out there with their friends and actually tour their neighborhoods to feel and assess the impact of climate change. Maybe they can write reports on their findings.

Ryu: I don't recall investing time and effort in learning about climate change at school. I watched some videos as part of my science or social studies classes on the subject, but no teacher has dedicated a session to addressing the environmental issues involved. As Koreans become more concerned about the environment, climate change may become an official part of the public education curriculum in the future. But quality classes that deliver a wide range of information on the subject are still lacking. I think engaging children in debates will urge them to research on their own and share their knowledge and opinions. I think children can also learn about climate change more effectively through hands-on, interactive classes.

Cho: Korean schools are not very eager to teach climate change and its impact. Much of the existing lessons on the environment and ecology consist largely of one-way lectures or videos that discuss some theories superficially. Students do not participate or pay attention in these sessions because they take place as part of extracurricular activities rather than as part of the regular curriculum. I believe all education about climate change should involve active student participation. It should also be featured as part of all regular subjects so that students can recognize its seriousness. Local governments and communities should also organize environmental education and campaigns for the general public. Learning about climate change should be interactive and geared toward building a strong consensus based on communication.

Q6. What campaigns, activities, or lifestyle changes related to climate change have you or people close to you participated in?

Kim E.: While volunteering in Good Neighbors' Good Motion last year, I proposed policy ideas for the environment. Specifically, I had ideas about particulate matter in air and another on how to keep it cool indoors and outdoors. I also began using a tumbler in ordering beverages from cafes. I try to recycle disposable plastic cups by rinsing them and reusing them as cups or using them as planters. I also thoroughly rinsed plastic food containers before putting them in the recycling bin.

Choi: Tree planting is a major trend in my neighborhood these days. I enjoy seeing flowers blossoming on the shrubs and trees planted by various local groups. Tree planting is, in fact, in

vogue around the world, with South Korea being the seventh-most active participant in the worldwide trend. The global movement has led to the planting of over 15 billion trees so far.

Kim S.: I took part in the 18th National Children's Congress (NCC) in Korea in 2021 and drafted a policy resolution with my peers on environmental issues. As part of the watch group for the 18th NCC, I also write for the official blog and help organize surveys to raise awareness of the issues. The resolution that my teammates and I drafted specifically addressed issues of environmental education, highlighting the lack of awareness and resources that prompted us to emphasize the need to increase environmental education for children. I'm also active in my school's ecology club. The club's members observe and analyze changes caused by pollution and climate change in our everyday environment, such as those manifested in flowers and trees. I also try to live eco-consciously on a day-to-day basis, recycling plastic bottles by removing labels and compressing them before throwing them in the bin, and using switch-type power strips to switch power off for plugs not in use.

Q7. What should corporations do to mitigate the effects of climate change?

Kim E.: As governments worldwide have pledged to achieve carbon neutrality, corporations ought to minimize their carbon footprints, by outfitting their factories with new and renewable energy facilities, such as photovoltaic power generators and solar panels, and also introducing technologies that maximize energy efficiency, such as heat recovery for assembly line cleaning. Corporations should lead the effort to reduce their reliance on fossil fuels by adopting more and more renewable energy, reducing their carbon emissions and providing low-carbon products to consumers.

Park: Corporations ought to reduce production of products that do not use sustainable energy and leave big impacts on the environment. They should also refrain from excessive production and help consumers grow more eco-friendly habits.

Kim S.: Corporations should lead the efforts to increase the use of renewable energy instead of conventional energy. They should stop their relentless pursuit of profits at any cost and form a market environment where businesses cannot expect to survive as long as they keep emitting carbon.

Cho: Companies should emulate eco-friendly examples, harness their environment, society and governance (ESG) structures, and prioritize sustainability over profitmaking. They ought to refrain from unthinking development, and invest actively in developing and producing eco-friendly products and technologies. Labeling recyclables and producing more recyclable products are among the most basic obligations of companies today. Multinational corporations must also stop degrading the environment and exploiting child labor.

Q8. What should states do to mitigate the effects of climate change?

Park: As numerous governments around the world have pledged to achieve net zero by 2050, other countries that have not made such a pledge should strive to do the same. Governments everywhere should also encourage companies and consumer organizations to produce and consume eco-friendly products. Finally, all governments must increase climate education for children so that the future generation grows with appropriate awareness of the involved issues.

Cho: Governments should support environmental projects and businesses. They should provide more climate education and reinforce laws and policies, including those that require recyclable labeling, extra charges on disposable containers, and promote carbon neutrality. States ought to regulate corporations' efforts for development, and ensure that the interests of the general public, including children, are reflected on their laws and policies. Governments ought to aim at sustainable development, commission research on environmental issues and their severity, and publish findings with transparency. Korea and other countries should organize opportunities where children nationwide can speak up about their concerns for the environment and share and raise awareness. Nations, corporations, societies, and individuals should all work together toward such an end.

****Kim Yu-rim, who could not join the live discussion in person, sent a video recording of herself in which she shared her own views on climate change and related issues. Below is a summary.***

Kim Yu-rim: If global warming were to continue unabated, we would not be able to live our lives without air-conditioners. The more we use air-conditioners, however, the warmer our planet will get. Soon enough, polar bears and penguins would go extinct and be remembered like mythic creatures, such as phoenixes and dragons. By the time we children become parents, we might have to tell our kids about the polar regions as if they were some fantasy worlds made up of ice that were once inhabited by species that no longer exist.

Although we children are the ones who have to face and live the future, there is very little we could do at present to shape the future as we see fit. We children have no power to legislate laws and regulations. Neither do we have the power to bring anyone to trial and punish them. All we can do as children now is to speak up. When we try to make our voice heard, though, hardly anyone listens.

This time, though, I hope adults are listening.

You, as adults, probably know better than we do how to protect children's rights to clean environment and health. There are hardly any adults today who do not know how to protect the environment. Knowledge, however, cannot change anything. We need to act. We need to practice what we know. We can no longer afford to treat environmental issues with complacency. We should acting right now right here to stop the planet from getting warmer and warmer, and to save whatever possible hopes remaining for the future world. Only with such action can we children continue to hope for a future to come.