

## THE REVOLUTION WILL BE UNDERWATER

By: Cathleen Jeanty

The Earth is warming rapidly. And by the time you see this message, it will likely be too late. This may sound dramatic. But it likely is not.

Last year marked the halfway point to The United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals: the most pronounced and visible global blueprint for the bolstering of human rights across the world.

Though it sits near the bottom of the 17-point list, Sustainable Development Goal number 13, Climate Action, is, arguably, the one whose necessitated existence feels the most manifestly obvious.

As the date of the halfway mark to 2030 came and went, so did the belief that the tepid incrementalism we've taken to address climate change is sufficient: it's become abundantly clear that we need more robust climate action. At last year's United Nations High-Level Political Forum, a weighty sentiment permeated the statements of nearly every major civil society, government, international organization, and private sector leader alike: we are running out of time.

Over the years, Earth's temperature has risen markedly. [To be more exact, Earth's temperature has risen by an average of 0.14° Fahrenheit \(0.08° Celsius\) per decade since 1880.](#) This number on its own may seem trivial, but it has potentially devastating impacts. The rise in fluctuating weather patterns, flash floods, sea level rise, and melting sea ice serve as a mere harbinger of the catastrophe that lies at the other end of the climate spectrum. [Climate science \(IPCC\) consensus adheres that we maintain global temperatures well below 2° Celsius, ideally 1.5° Celsius. But, 2023 exceeded 1.5C of warming on average for the first time, making it the hottest year on record.](#)

As global GHG emissions continue to rise, we veer further off the track of meeting the goals of The Paris Agreement and closer to potentially catastrophic risk to human societies, economies, and natural systems. In effort to palliate these impacts, leaders and stakeholders around the globe are stepping in and proposing the use of policy as a stopgap between the impacts of climate change and increasing devastation.

In an effort to help mitigate the catastrophic damage climate change is causing to our

ecosystems, developed countries are mobilizing many things: namely their financial coffers. In 2009, at the 15th Conference of Parties (COP15) of the UNFCCC, developed nations proposed [\\$100 billion USD per year](#) by 2020 for climate action in developing countries. Another measure, The [Green Climate Fund Board](#) adopted and approved 775.8 million USD of the Fund's plan to finance for new climate projects in developing countries. The UNDP pledged [\\$500 USD million to support 88 countries](#) in funding through its \$1.4 billion Trust Fund and the Least Developed Countries Fund.

Leaders are mobilizing funds to invest in everything. Everything, it seems, except for youth.

## **The Kids Are Not Alright**

Herbert Hoover once said, "Blessed are the young, for they shall inherit the national debt." Nearly 60 years after his death, Hoover would likely look at today's planet and say, wryly, "blessed are the youth, for, if they're lucky, the Earth may still remain."

Though young people have historically borne the least impact on policymaking processes, they bear the greatest burden of its impact. The United Nations has been at the forefront of that policymaking, hosting the eponymous United Nations Climate Conference, or COP, each year. But since The United Nations' inception, the world has largely become two things: younger and more globalized. Our conflicts span borders. Our greenhouse gasses float in and across country lines. And young people are venturing further and further from their homelands.

[In a lecture at Cairo University in 2017, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Gutteres noted, "The best hope \[to address these\] challenges is with the new generations. We need to make sure that we are able to strongly invest in those new generations."](#) But, despite protestations from leading figures inside The United Nations that we need all hands on deck to solve the climate crisis, youth voices have been marginalized and sidelined. This is, at the very least, unfair: leaving youth out of the most pivotal parts of climate policymaking processes is also a terrible misuse of the nimbus energy, talent, creativity, and resources young people can bring to the table.

As the old adage goes, "if you're not at the table, you're on the menu." And with the profundity with which youth are left out, the menu is slowly revealing itself to be, at best, a one course meal. When most people think of the issues that most impact young people, at the forefront of their minds are things like the omnipresence of social media, job security, or even college debt. But, surprisingly, what is likely the most important issue hits closer to

home. Well, that is, if you can imagine expecting your home to move in the next 20 years. [The Council on Foreign Relations recently noted that climate change is fueling migration. According to UNICEF data, in 2020, nearly 1 in 3 children were refugees.](#) At face value, these statistics are alarming. This alarm, tragic enough, is magnified by the fact that the earliest years of one's life are the most primary and foundational. So, what is climate migration?

According to the International Organization for Migration, [“environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affects their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad.”](#)

In 2016, [The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' research found that an annual average of 21.5 million people were forcibly displaced each year by weather-related events, and that we may see as many as 1.2 billion climate refugees by 2050.](#) Climate-induced migration has the capacity to completely reorient our planet. And, if youth are being left out of these pivotally important processes, the issues that impact them most will not be brought to the table. [In a world that, as a whole, is becoming increasingly young,](#) this has the potential to blunt an entire generation's progress. This assessment may seem far-fetched, but Tayba Jamil, a Dubai-based climate activist completely agrees.

Tayba Jamil is a Dubai-based climate advocate and member of YOUNGO: the official children and youth constituency of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Climate Change's Migration and Climate Change Working Group. She attended COP28 on a mission to help bring more conversations around climate-induced migration to the forefront of these global processes.

[Though the UAE as we know it is fewer than 60 years old,](#) it serves as evidence of the enormous impacts of climate change. And, with its high expat population, it's not hard to see why the ramifications of climate migration are so apparent to Jamil.

“It's crucial for people to recognize that climate-induced migration isn't just an environmental issue but a complex humanitarian challenge. Communities forced to relocate due to climate-related factors often face social, economic, and political challenges in their new locations. For instance, the Pacific Island nations like Tuvalu or Kiribati, are facing the threat of disappearing due to rising sea levels,” said Jamil.

“Residents from these islands may need to relocate, and it's essential to acknowledge and address the challenges they'll face in adapting to new environments and cultures. Youth are disproportionately affected by climate-induced migration. They often bear the brunt of

disrupted education, loss of livelihood opportunities, and mental health stressors due to displacement. For example, in Bangladesh, recurrent flooding forces families to move. This situation particularly affects young people, disrupting their education and exposing them to health risks.”

With ramifications that are damaging, one might expect that these issues would sit at the forefront of negotiations. However, they’re really not.

“Currently, there is a lack of comprehensive international measures specifically designed to address climate-induced migration,” says Jamil. However, discussions within The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have highlighted the need for a more inclusive approach. Proposed solutions include creating legal frameworks for displaced persons, establishing financial mechanisms to support affected communities, and integrating migration into climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction strategies.”

Still, more needs to be done. Since the inception of The United Nations, it has navigated civil wars, famine, political crises, the prospect of nuclear war, and genocide, and yet, a more meaningful and sustained mechanism for the inclusion of youth continues to evade some of the brightest, most expansive minds in the world. This is disappointing.

Thirty-five thousand miles away from Dubai in Madrid, Spain, Hector Poveda agrees. Poveda is, in essence, on the frontlines of climate change. Madrid, Spain, where he calls home is rising rapidly: in every definitional term. [Touristically, Madrid is hot!](#) In fact, [The Washington Post even called it Europe’s best-kept secret.](#) What’s not a secret? Climatically, Madrid is hot, hot, hot too! Despite its designation as [one of the world’s greenest cities, Spain remains one of the most climate-vulnerable countries within the EU.](#) Poveda is hoping to change that.

Hector Poveda is the Climate Mobility Team Lead at Migration Youth and Children Platform, part of The Major Group for Children and Youth: one of the main mechanisms available for youth to engage with policy adjacent to The United Nations. More than a few years into this work, he still finds himself surprised by the omnipresence of the impacts of climate change - specifically on the most marginalized sectors of society.

“Children and youth; especially girls and children with disabilities; those in Indigenous, Pastoral, and Local Communities; youth confronting multiple forms of discrimination; those marginalized at the intersections of various challenges; youth actively navigating climate frontlines; and those resilient souls persistently on the move, bear a disproportionate burden of the impacts of climate change,” he says.

“Climate change intensifies their vulnerabilities, bringing about long-term consequences

that affect their human rights and self-determination. In this breath, children and youth who are driven to migrate are at risk of abuse and violence, including sexual and gender-based violence; unsafe and irregular migration; lack of access to physical and mental health resources; and lack of education. This, in many instances, adds to the psychological trauma of their journey.”

Md. Khorshed Alam Likhan, a former Assistant Information Management Officer at The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Bangladesh, has witnessed this from the frontlines of Bangladesh’s rising seas.

“Over the past 15 years, Bangladesh has faced significant challenges due to climate change, exacerbating the Rohingya refugee crisis. The Rohingya, a stateless Muslim minority group from Myanmar, have been forced to flee their homes due to persecution and violence and seek refuge in neighboring countries, primarily Bangladesh,” he says.

“Climate change has compounded the difficulties faced by Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh in several ways. Firstly, it has increased cyclone vulnerability. Bangladesh is prone to cyclones, which bring heavy rainfall; storm surges; and strong winds, exacerbating flooding and causing extensive damage to refugee camps and settlements where the Rohingya reside. Bangladesh’s extensive coastline and low-lying deltaic regions are highly vulnerable to sea-level rise, storm surges, and coastal erosion,” he continues.

“Despite concerted efforts by the Bangladeshi government, international organizations, and humanitarian agencies to address the Rohingya refugee crisis, the compounding effects of climate change continue to pose significant challenges to the well-being and livelihoods of both refugees and host communities. As climate change continues to worsen, proactive measures must be taken to mitigate its impacts and build resilience among vulnerable populations like the Rohingya in Bangladesh.”

Ultimately, Likhan believes climate-induced migration has the capacity to profoundly reshape Bangladesh over the next 10-15 years. And young people will be the most impacted.

“Young people are often disproportionately impacted by climate-induced migration. They are more vulnerable to the health risks associated with climate-induced migration, including exposure to waterborne diseases, malnutrition, and inadequate healthcare services. Limited access to healthcare facilities and sanitation exacerbates these risks. They may face difficulties in finding employment opportunities in areas affected by climate change, leading to economic insecurity and reliance on informal or precarious livelihoods. Limited job

prospects exacerbate poverty and social exclusion among youth migrants.”

All across the world, young people are watching their entire community transform before their very eyes. Dionna Brown, the National Director of Youth Environmental Justice Programs at Young, Gifted, and Green knows this firsthand.

As a native of Flint, Michigan, she is no stranger to the impacts of climate change. “Flooding has become very frequent. In Flint and Detroit, it is becoming a problem.” And when that flooding destroys homes, residents are often left to suffer.

“It’s becoming so frequent. And so many people can’t afford the cleanup, so they just decide to move. Nothing is being done with the infrastructure.”

## **The Sun Is Setting: An Entire Generation is Left in the Dark**

At the very end of 2023, nearly 100,000 civil society leaders, celebrities, youth activists, world leaders, philanthropists, and international organizational leaders met in Dubai, UAE to take stock of our climate’s current climate. But at the most significant of these events, climate migration was barely on the lips of the most powerful players in the world. As a byproduct, one of the issues slated to most harm young people went virtually ignored.

Despite the COP28 leadership’s claim that it [“delivered a lasting legacy for youth,”](#) most youth in attendance at the conference did not seem to agree.

To get a firmer grasp of how young people feel this legacy will look like, I surveyed 50 youth activists across the globe about the state of climate policymaking. These youth were all aged 35-and-under, [per the official children and youth constituency of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change’s definition of youth.](#) Of the 50 youth activists surveyed, only 10% felt that the COP28 Global Stocktake was sufficient enough to keep global warming at or below 1.5 degrees Celsius by 2030. And of that same pool of 50 youth activists, only 14% felt that clear pathways exist for young people to get involved in the climate-policy making process.

Balkis Chaabane, a Tunisia-based peace and security practitioner and researcher, attended COP28 as a youth delegate interested in the intersection between peace, security, and climate. Though she is seasoned in navigating these spaces, she knew to arrive armed with well-tempered expectations. Nevertheless, she still left disappointed.

“I think theoretically, in the most tokenistic way, youth were heard. However, I also saw a lack

of representation of young people from the MENA region,” said Chaabane. It saddened me that, despite how qualified they are, young, brilliant people from Middle Eastern and African countries could not attend simply due to the origins of their passports.”

“I saw a gap between policymakers and the realities on the ground. Leading senior officials cannot seem to fathom that a policy with no connection to the local community has very little chance of succeeding. Youth were siloed to the Youth and Children Pavilion, while the final draft and oil deals were being made behind securely closed doors - where youth had no real chance to speak up. I saw many young people, sadly, lacking the tools to have an impact in spaces that systematically marginalized us.”

The ramifications of this systematic marginalization are catastrophic.

“In my case, my country is facing very critical water scarcity,” said Chaabane. “I can no longer enjoy the same access to water as before as there are more water cuts. Throughout 2023, there were months where my home did not get one drop of water. My community has been suffering

from the lack of access to water: and the government has no offered no tangible solutions or response. We have been suffering from historic heat waves – namely last summer. It eventually burned agricultural crops and the lack of water severely damaged many farmers’ crops.”

The degradative impact climate change has on less-developed countries is, in very literal terms, a death knell. Holly Harwood, a California-based climate organizer and COP28 youth delegate concurs.

“The COP28 outcome demonstrates how the policy world is behind on the realities of the climate crisis. It is a start to include fossil fuels in The Global Stocktake, but, for many countries, this insufficient GST is a death sentence,” Harwood says. “It is up to us as civil society to add value to the text and advocate for the world we want to see.”

The problem is, many times, the inclusion of youth in these processes is merely ornamental. But in this global race to save the planet, the pressure is on. More and more studies have evidenced that our current measures are not enough. Many young activists have been fed the same palliative, oft-repeated maxims akin to “just go with the flow.” But with sea-levels rising nearly [twice as much as previous decadal trends](#), going with the flow, in essence, means allowing ourselves to be washed over by the inexorably catastrophic impacts of climate change.

The United Nations notes that [“climate change is the single biggest health threat facing](#)

[humanity.](#)” With a threat this large constantly looming, can we afford to keep leaving a crucial segment of the population out of the mitigation processes?

At [The 2023 Student Energy Summit](#), Jude Acidre, Member of the Philippines House of Representatives spoke on the importance of ushering youth into more of these rooms. In a moment of emotional lucidity, he noted, “We are the first generation to have a chance at ending absolute poverty but the last to have a real chance at saving the planet from destruction.” This evidences the real duality that young people today face. We are - in many ways - the luckiest generation the planet has ever seen. But we bear a huge burden. Young people have the capacity, energy, vision, and drive needed to lead us into the next phase of climate advocacy.

We just need a chance: before it’s too late.