

A Reaction to the Paris Agreement on climate change from the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts

On 12 December 2015, leaders of 195 countries came together to adopt an historic agreement to combat climate change, representing the culmination of many years of hard work.

The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) recognises the magnitude of this achievement, and we are encouraged that nations have agreed to limit the global temperature rise to well below 2 °C, aiming to limit temperature increase to 1.5°C. We are also pleased to see climate change education included in the operative language of the text, given its crucial role in fostering awareness, building skills and supporting action to combat climate change.

However, WAGGGS feels that celebrations must be tempered by recognition of the ground lost in the final days of the negotiations and the weak language contained in many areas of the Paris Agreement. We, as civil society, expected an agreement that would be ambitious, equitable, and binding - one that would safeguard the rights of the most vulnerable. Yet in many respects, the Paris Agreement falls short of what we had hoped for and what today's young people deserve.

On ambition

In the months leading up to COP21, we called on nations to commit to limiting global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, as a safer goal than the previously agreed international aim of 2°C. We therefore welcome the fact that countries have now committed to 'pursue efforts to limit temperature increase to 1.5°C' in the Paris Agreement. Yet while this explicit reference to a 1.5°C goal is a significant achievement, it is not supported by adequate commitments in other areas of the text. The current Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) submitted by countries still put the world on track for 3-4°C of warming, and many of those NDCs are contingent on financial support that is not guaranteed in the Agreement. The much-heralded goal of 1.5°C will be meaningless without more substantial financial support from developed countries and more ambitious NDCs from all.

On a long-term goal

If we have any hope of limiting warming to 1.5°C and avoiding the most devastating impacts of climate change, it is imperative that we commit to quickly and fully transitioning away from fossil fuels. WAGGGS joined many NGOs and countries in calling for emissions to peak by 2020 and for transitioning to 100% renewable energy by 2050. Yet the Paris Agreement includes no clear or specific target for emissions to peak in the short term, calling only for a peak 'as soon as possible.' The Agreement also includes weak language on long-term ambitions, only aiming to reach "net zero emissions" at some point between 2050 and 2100, and asking countries to commit to strengthen their pledges to cut emissions every five years. What was needed in the Paris Agreement was a more clear and indisputable signal that the era of fossil fuels must rapidly come to an end, to provide more impetus to the transition to renewable energy.

On human rights, gender equality, and intergenerational equity

Climate change does, and will continue to, impact the most vulnerable and its effects will be felt across future generations. Therefore climate change must be recognised as not only a technical or environmental issue, but fundamentally as a human rights issue. For this reason, WAGGGS was extremely disappointed to see reference to human rights, gender equality, intergenerational equity, the rights of indigenous peoples, and other rights-based principles lost from the operative language of the Agreement over the course of the negotiations.

While we appreciate that these rights are at least recognized in the Preamble, we believe that protection of human rights should have been centred within Article 2 as part of the core purpose the Paris Agreement.

Relatedly, we were disappointed to see the gradual erosion of references to gender equality. While earlier drafts contained more than eight references to gender considerations, only two explicit references to “gender-responsive” approaches survive in the final text of the Paris Agreement, specifically in the sections on adaptation and capacity-building.

And as a youth movement, we were particularly dismayed to see that the concept of intergenerational equity is not recognized anywhere in the operative language of the Agreement and there is a general failure throughout the text to consider the rights of young and future generations to inherit a liveable planet.

Climate change education and youth participation

One bright spot in the Paris agreement was a reference to education, training, and public awareness raising was retained in the operative language of the Agreement in Article 12. Education and training – both formal and non-formal – are essential to equip today’s young people with the knowledge and the skills to respond to climate change. Moving forward, we call on nations to invest in climate change education and to work with youth organizations, to enable young people to understand climate change and its impacts and to build their capacity to participate effectively in decision-making processes.

Nations would benefit from the creation of more space and opportunity for young people to have their voices heard and their interests represented in national action planning, decision-making and implementation. Girls and young women, in particular, should be consulted and substantively involved in the design, delivery, and implementation of nations’ response to climate change to ensure girls’ unique and specific needs are adequately addressed. Recognizing that vulnerability to climate change is exacerbated by existing gender inequality, climate change response programs must be fully gender-responsive, developed in consultation with girls’ and women’s organizations and incorporating efforts to build support for girls’ and women’s rights.

Conclusion

Representing ten million girls and young women around the world, WAGGGS has an obligation to think about the future that our members will inherit. We call on nations to be bolder and more ambitious in their plans, to surpass what is asked of them in the Paris Agreement. We ask that the Paris Agreement be seen not as the conclusion of a process, but as a starting point – as only the first step on a journey to a more sustainable, secure future for today’s children and young people.

Simultaneously, we call on members to hold their governments to account for the pledges they have made in Paris, to push from below for transformative change in not only how we source our energy, but how we organize our societies. It is only through collective effort that we will be able to respond effectively to the climate crisis and ensure that tomorrow’s young people enjoy lives of security, dignity, and opportunity.