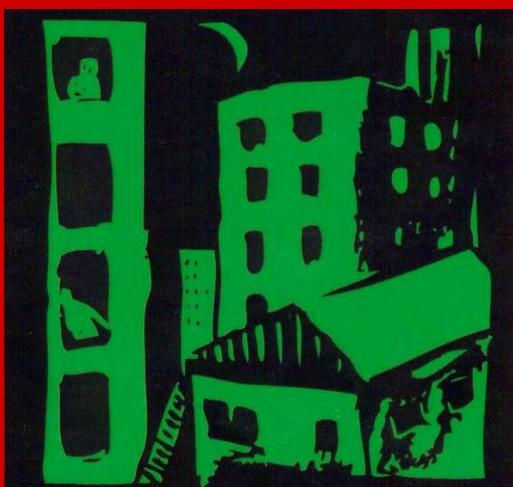


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Minority voices heard: Child participation in environmental decision-making in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

In this article we explore the significance, complexities, and potential of child participation in environmental decision-making by juxtaposing Greta Thunberg's activism and the Cape Town water crisis in South Africa. Although child participation in environmental activism, as exemplified by Thunberg, has gained global prominence, it remains underexplored in South Africa. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasises the right of children to participate in decisions affecting their lives, yet the practical implementation of this right varies widely. In South Africa, legal frameworks such as the Constitution of the Republic of

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South Africa, 1996, and the Children's Act 38 of 2005 provide a basis for child participation but often fall short, especially in environmental decision-making. Using the example of Thunberg's global activism, we attempt to illustrate the transformative potential of child-led activism, and argue that similar approaches could benefit children's participation in a local context, such as during the Cape Town water crisis in 2017–2018. Thunberg's bold actions, including filing a complaint with the United Nations, demonstrate what children can achieve through activism. In contrast, the Cape Town water crisis lacked meaningful involvement with children, thus missing out on potentially innovative solutions. We conclude with recommendations to improve children's participation in environmental decision-making in South Africa, including through policy interventions, institutional reforms, educational initiatives, and community-based campaigns. Embracing child participation could not only bring fresh perspectives to environmental challenges, but also ensure a more inclusive, democratic and sustainable future for South Africa and beyond.

Keywords: minority rights; minority group; children; environment; decision-making; child activism; child participation

1 INTRODUCTION

As environmental challenges intensify globally, the imperative to involve all societal stakeholders in decision-making processes becomes not only desirable but essential. One often overlooked but crucial demographic in this discourse is children, who, despite being the segment of the population most affected by environmental decisions, often have the least say in them.¹ This article examines the intersection of environmental decision-making and child participation rights in the specific socio-environmental context of South Africa. The purpose of this exploration is to examine the significance and complexities of child participation in environmental decision-making in South Africa through an analysis of Greta Thunberg's activism and the Cape Town water crisis. The foundation of such an analysis lies in the recognition that children constitute a distinct minority group whose voice is indispensable but frequently marginalised.² Although our objective is not to draw definitive conclusions about interregional disparities in general, the article seeks to reveal two different approaches to child participation in environmental issues, thereby highlighting both the potential and the challenges of integrating children's voices in diverse socio-environmental contexts.

Furthermore, we acknowledge the distinction between "activism" and "participation". These are two nouns that generally denote different actions, but we see them as

¹ Hart R *Children's participation: The theory and practice of involving young citizens in community development and environmental care* London: Routledge (2013) at 2–23.

² Vissing Y *Children's human rights in the USA: Challenges and opportunities* Switzerland: Springer (2023) at 273.

separate yet intersecting concepts.³ The activism of Greta Thunberg, for example, illustrates how active advocacy can drive greater participation in environmental decision-making.⁴ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) captures the significance of acknowledging children's thoughts and opinions, particularly in its article 12.⁵ Although South Africa ratified the UNCRC, like many other nations it struggles to translate this provision into practice in various societal domains, particularly in environmental issues.⁶ This analysis is motivated by the acute vulnerability of children to environmental change and their relative silence in the decision-making processes that shape their environment. The necessity to involve children in environmental decision-making is underscored by their unique perspectives, experiences and vulnerabilities that distinguish them as a minority group.⁷ The

³ In general, "activism" involves taking direct action to advocate for change, often through public demonstrations and campaigns, while "participation" refers to the involvement of individuals in decision-making processes.

⁴ See also the discussion in Shukra K, Ball M & Brown K "Participation and activism: Young people shaping their worlds" (2012) 108 *Youth & Policy* 36.

⁵ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3. South Africa ratified it on 16 June 1995.

⁶ South Africa is not the only country grappling with actualising article 12 of the UNCRC. Many other countries face similar challenges in various contexts, particularly that of the environment. These include Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. See Stahl RM "Don't forget about me: Implementing article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child" (2007) 24(3) *Arizona Journal of International and Comparative Law* 803; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child "Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic report of Canada, adopted by the Committee at its sixty-first session (17 September – 5 October 2012)" UN Doc CRC/C/CAN/CO/3-4 at para 36; Bala N & Houston C *Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and children's participatory rights in Canada* (2015) 70; McCall-Smith K "Entrenching children's participation through UNCRC incorporation in Scotland" (2023) 27(8) *The International Journal of Human Rights* 1181; McCafferty P "Implementing article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in child protection decision-making: A critical analysis of the challenges and opportunities for social work" (2017) 23(4) *Child Care in Practice* 327; Lundy L "Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child" (2007) 33(6) *British Educational Research Journal* 927.

⁷ A minority group is defined not necessarily by its size but by its lack of power and the discrimination it faces. Sociologist Louis Wirth defined a minority group as "a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination". See Wirth L "The problem of minority groups" in Linton R (ed) *The science of man in the world crisis* New York: Columbia University Press (1980) at 347; Perkins K & Wiley S "Minorities" in Teo T (ed) *Encyclopedia of critical psychology* New York: Springer (2014) at 1192–1194. This definition applies to children, as they often have limited power and face various forms of discrimination and marginalisation. See Vissing (2023) 271. In the context of this article, children in South Africa constitute a significant portion of the population. However, despite their numbers, they are often considered a minority group in terms of power and influence. Children are frequently dependent on adults for their needs and protection, and their voices are often underrepresented in decision-making processes. This aligns with the broader sociological view that minority status is about power dynamics rather than numerical representation. Therefore, recognising children as a minority group could help in advocating

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discourse on minority rights often emphasises empowering voices that are historically disadvantaged, under-represented or excluded.⁸ Although they constitute a significant proportion of the population, children remain largely excluded and unheard in critical societal decisions, especially those concerning the environment.⁹

To navigate the complexity of children's participation in environmental decisions in South Africa, we use the example of Greta Thunberg's activism to illustrate the potential impact of youth participation in environmental decision-making. By juxtaposing this with the South African context of the Cape Town water crisis, we attempt to highlight the facilitators, obstacles and potential impacts of child participation that were present in Thunberg's case but largely absent in the local scenario. This juxtaposition underscores the need for more inclusive practices in South Africa and provides insight into how child participation can be effectively integrated in environmental governance.

The examination of Greta Thunberg's activism alongside the Cape Town water crisis is rooted in a shared emphasis on youth participation in the resolution of environmental challenges. Both cases highlight how young people can influence public discourse and policymaking – Greta Thunberg through her global climate strikes and advocacy, and the youth in Cape Town through their involvement in local water conservation initiatives and awareness campaigns during the water crisis.

This approach integrates legal studies and children's rights discourse to illustrate how legal frameworks and sociopolitical contexts shape facilitators, obstacles, and potential impacts of youth participation in environmental decision-making. By examining laws such as the UNCRC and the South African Children's Act 38 of 2005 (the Children's Act) together with the sociopolitical dynamics of child activism and participation, this study combines insights from these diverse fields to provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers and opportunities for child participation in environmental decision-making. To this end, the central question guiding this contribution is as follows: How can children, as a distinct minority group, be meaningfully included in environmental decision-making processes in South Africa?

for their rights and ensuring their inclusion in critical discussions and decisions. See also the discussion at 2.1 below.

⁸ Banducci SA, Donovan T & Karp JA "Minority representation, empowerment, and participation" (2004) 66(2) *The Journal of Politics* 534; Verkuyten M "Multicultural recognition and ethnic minority rights: A social identity perspective" (2006) 17(1) *European Review of Social Psychology* 148; Sabiescu AG "Empowering minority voices" (doctoral thesis, Università della Svizzera Italiana, 2013).

⁹ The views of children are still unheard in crucial societal decisions, including those related to education, health and the environment. Despite various international and national frameworks advocating for child participation, such as the UNCRC, practical implementation remains inconsistent, resulting in limited inclusion of children's perspectives in these critical areas. Chambers M *Exploring decision making in school exclusion* (doctoral thesis, University College, 2021); Battrick C & Glasper EA "The views of children and their families on being in hospital" (2004) 13(6) *British Journal of Nursing* 328; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2012) UN Doc CRC/C/CAN/CO/3-4 at para 36; Bala & Houston (2015) 70.

This article therefore examines the current state of child participation in environmental decisions in South Africa, scrutinising the structural, legal and societal barriers to and opportunities for such participation. It further examines the implications of international and national legal frameworks, including the UNCRC and the Children's Act, on the practical realities of child participation. By shedding light on this underexplored intersection of child rights, minority rights, and environmental governance, this research aims to contribute to both academic discourse and policy considerations, amplifying the often-muted voices of children in conversations about their environmental future. We conclude by offering several recommendations aimed at improving child participation in environmental decision-making in South Africa.

2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

The discourse surrounding child participation in decision-making has played a pivotal role in redefining children from passive subjects to active contributors to society.¹⁰ Scholars from various disciplines have provided valuable insights in this discourse. Lansdown,¹¹ for instance, asserts that children, by virtue of their evolving capacities, possess a right to engage in matters affecting their lives, necessitating a shift from viewing them as mere recipients of adult decisions to recognising them as capable contributors.¹²

Although the importance of child participation in decision-making has been achieved in areas such as education and social services, its exploration in environmental decision-making remains relatively underexplored.¹³ In this regard Contreras and Krasny illustrate the significant impact children can have on environmental decisions when provided with opportunities.¹⁴ However, these studies focus mainly on health or school and community settings, leaving a lack of knowledge on children's participation at the policy and governance levels, particularly in a South African context. A notable aspect of

¹⁰ Woodman E, Roche S & McArthur M "Children's participation in child protection: How do practitioners understand children's participation in practice?" (2023) 28(1) *Child and Family Social Work* 125; Tisdall EKM & Cuevas-Parra P "Beyond the familiar challenges for children and young people's participation rights: The potential of activism" (2022) 26(5) *The International Journal of Human Rights* 792; Strömpl J & Luhamaa K "Child participation in child welfare removals through the looking glass: Estonian children's and professionals' perspectives compared" (2020) 118: 105421 *Children and Youth Services Review*; Skauge B, Storhaug AS & Marthinsen E "The what, why and how of child participation: A review of the conceptualisation of 'child participation' in child welfare" (2021) 10(2) *Social Sciences* 54; Duramy BF & Gal T "Understanding and implementing child participation: Lessons from the Global South" (2020) 119: 105645 *Children and Youth Services Review*.

¹¹ Lansdown G "Promoting children's participation in democratic decision-making" (2001) *Innocenti Insight* 4.

¹² See Lansdown (2001) 4.

¹³ See Lansdown (2001) 1; Lansdown G *Taking part: Children's participation in decision making* (Vol 1) London: Institute for Public Policy Research (1995).

¹⁴ Contreras DE & Krasny ME "Young children contribute to nature stewardship" (2022) 13: 945797 *Frontiers in Psychology*. See also Milakovich J, Simonds VW, Held S, Picket V, et al. "Children as agents of change: Parent perceptions of child-driven environmental health communication in the Crow community" (2018) 11(3) *Journal of Health Disparities Research and Practice* 115.

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child participation lies in considering children as a minority group. The discourse on minority rights acknowledges the disproportionate marginalisation certain groups face in societal processes.¹⁵ In this context, children can be seen as a demographic minority given their unique vulnerabilities and societal positions.¹⁶ However, despite the applicability of minority rights discourse, its intersection with child participation, particularly in environmental issues, remains sparsely investigated.

South Africa presents a distinctive case with its unique socio-environmental and political history. Although some studies have explored child participation in South Africa, such studies have been mostly in social contexts.¹⁷ In general these studies on child participation in South Africa do not explicitly consider children as a minority group and do not investigate environmental decision-making, leaving a significant gap in the literature. Existing research offers valuable insight into child participation and the conceptualisation of children as a minority group. However, there is a notable lack of studies that integrate these concepts within the realm of environmental decision-making in South Africa.

Our aim is to bridge this gap by offering a nuanced understanding of child participation in environmental decisions, one which recognises children's status as a minority group, focuses on the specific socio-environmental context of South Africa, and considers relevant global events to enrich the discussion.

2.1 Children as a minority group in South Africa

The discourse on minority rights refers primarily to certain social groups that experience disadvantage or discrimination compared to the majority or dominant groups.¹⁸ These minority groups are typically characterised by race, ethnicity, religion, or, in some instances, gender and sexual orientation.¹⁹ Such characteristics often lead to differential treatment, systemic discrimination, and marginalisation, creating a societal imbalance in which minority groups receive less access to resources, opportunities and power.²⁰ As such, the term "minority group" refers to individuals who, based on distinct physical or cultural attributes, are socially disadvantaged compared to the dominant

¹⁵ Kostadinova G "Minority rights as a normative framework for addressing the situation of Roma in Europe" (2011) 39(2) *Oxford Development Studies* 163.

¹⁶ Murray C "A minority within a minority? Social justice for Traveller and Roma children in ECEC" (2012) 47(4) *European Journal of Education* 569.

¹⁷ Bray R & Moses S "Children and participation in South Africa: Exploring the landscape" (2011) 29(1) *Perspectives in Education* 6; Moses S "Children and participation in South Africa: An overview" (2008) 16(3) *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 327.

¹⁸ Perkins & Wiley (2014) 1192; OHCHR "Minority rights: International standards and guidance for implementation" (2010) available at https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/MinorityRights_en.pdf (accessed 21 February 2024).

¹⁹ Perkins & Wiley (2014) at 1192–1195; OHCHR (2010).

²⁰ Perkins & Wiley (2014) at 1192–1195; OHCHR (2010).

group in society or the nation.²¹ The critical attributes or criteria of a minority group extend beyond numerical representation and primarily relate to unequal treatment and a relative lack of power and influence.²² The United Nations regards a minority group as any subgroup in society subjected to unequal and differential treatment and excluded from full participation in societal life.²³

An often overlooked but significant demographic minority, almost universally, is children. The status of children as a minority group originates from their legal standing.²⁴ Similarly to international law, South African law establishes age thresholds for various political and civil rights, such as voting, entering contracts, and marriage.²⁵ The legal age of majority in South Africa is 18 years, making individuals below this age minors with limited legal capacity.²⁶ This limitation affects one's ability to participate effectively in decision-making processes, including those related to the environment.

In South Africa, children could be considered a numerical minority. By 2022, approximately 36 per cent of the population was under the age of 19.²⁷ However, the classification of children as a minority group is based not solely on numerical representation but also on their legal and social status. As Vissing argues, children constitute an "unrecognised minority group" subject to "similar types of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination as other groups".²⁸ This marginalisation stems from their lack of legal and political power, economic status, and other privileges accorded to adults.²⁹ Consequently, children are often excluded from substantive decision-making processes, particularly those concerning environmental policymaking.³⁰ The environment in which children grow up and the environmental challenges they face

²¹ Perkins & Wiley (2014) at 1192–1195; Mohd Yusof NA "Women and ethnic minorities on boards" (2019) 2 *Accounting Bulletin: Faculty of Accountancy UiTM Kedah* 11.

²² Fujii SM "Minority group elderly: Demographic characteristics and implications for public policy" (1980) 1(1) *Annual Review of Gerontology and Geriatrics* 261; Wertlieb EC "Minority group status of the disabled" (1985) 38(11) *Human Relations* 1047; Goldscheider C & Uhlenberg PR "Minority group status and fertility" (1969) 74(4) *American Journal of Sociology* 361.

²³ United Nations *Marginalised minorities in development programming: A UNDP resource guide and toolkit* (2010) 7.

²⁴ Vissing (2023) 271.

²⁵ Mahery P "Factsheet: At what age can children act independently from their parents and when do they need their parents' consent or assistance?" Children's Institute, University of Cape Town available at <https://www.childlinesa.org.za/wp-content/uploads/age-of-independence-of-children-from-their-parents.pdf> (accessed 21 February 2024).

²⁶ Section 28 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996.

²⁷ In 2022, South Africa's population was "approximately 60.6 million. Of these, about 22.12 million were aged 0–19". Cowling N "Total population of South Africa in 2022, by age group" Statista available at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1116077/total-population-of-south-africa-by-age-group/> (accessed 21 February 2024).

²⁸ Vissing (2023) 271.

²⁹ Vissing (2023) 271.

³⁰ For example, marriage limitations, entering into contracts, and exclusion from participation in the electoral process.

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directly affect their health, education, and overall quality of life. Despite the profound impact of these issues on children, their voices are frequently absent from discussions about environmental challenges and policy development.

In this context, the next section examines the environmental setting of South Africa, detailing the major environmental issues affecting children and emphasising the importance of including children in decision-making processes addressing critical environmental challenges.

2.2 South Africa's environmental context

South Africa boasts rich biodiversity and a complex ecosystem yet faces numerous environmental challenges. These include climate change, water scarcity, loss of biodiversity, land degradation, waste management, and air and water pollution.³¹ Among these challenges, climate change stands out as one of the most pressing. South Africa's commitment to the Paris Agreement on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change³² and its status as the 14th largest greenhouse-gas-emitter underscore its pivotal role in the fight against climate change.³³ The country is experiencing evident impacts, including irregular rainfall patterns, increased temperatures, and extreme weather events that disrupt agriculture, water supply, and public health.³⁴

The loss of biodiversity presents another significant environmental problem in South Africa. Despite its status as one of the 17 most megadiverse countries in the world, South Africa faces threats to biodiversity due to habitat destruction, pollution, climate change, and the illegal wildlife trade.³⁵ This loss not only affects the unique flora and fauna of the country but also jeopardises the provision of essential ecosystem services for human well-being. Furthermore, loss of biodiversity and land degradation have an impact on the availability of natural resources, influencing children's nutritional status

³¹ Darkoh MBK "An overview of environmental issues in Southern Africa" (2009) 47(1) *African Journal of Ecology* 93; Vogel C, Scott D, Culwick CE & Sutherland C "Environmental problem-solving in South Africa: Harnessing creative imaginaries to address 'wicked' challenges and opportunities" (2016) 98(3) *South African Geographical Journal* 515.

³² Paris Agreement to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (12 December 2015) TIAS. No 16-1104.

³³ Carbon Brief "The Carbon Brief Profile: South Africa" (2018) available at <https://www.carbonbrief.org/the-carbon-brief-profile-south-africa/> (accessed 21 February 2024).

³⁴ Carbon Brief (2018); Vogel et al. (2016) 515.

³⁵ Von Staden L, Lötter MC, Holness S & Lombard AT "An evaluation of the effectiveness of critical biodiversity areas, identified through a systematic conservation planning process, to reduce biodiversity loss outside protected areas in South Africa" (2022) 115: 106044 *Land Use Policy*; Biggs R, Simons H, Bakkenes M & Scholes RJ "Scenarios of biodiversity loss in Southern Africa in the 21st century" (2008) 18(2) *Global Environmental Change* 296.

and potentially leading to future resource conflicts that could destabilise children's social and economic security.³⁶

Water scarcity and pollution pose significant challenges in South Africa. The country is water-stressed, with water demand projected to surpass supply by 2025.³⁷ The pollution of freshwater resources resulting from untreated wastewater, mining runoff, and agricultural residues is exacerbating the water crisis.³⁸ Water scarcity and pollution can lead to inadequate access to clean drinking water, contributing to factors that disproportionately affect children's health, such as waterborne diseases, malnutrition and inadequate sanitation.³⁹ Furthermore, air pollution, primarily from coal-based power generation, vehicle emissions, and industrial activities, contributes to respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, which are particularly severe in children.⁴⁰ South Africa's dependence on coal for energy is also leading to significant carbon emissions, exacerbating global climate change.⁴¹

These environmental issues have a huge impact on South Africa's children. Climate change affects their health and well-being, has an impact on food security, and increases the prevalence of vector-borne diseases such as malaria.⁴² Extreme weather events often result in displacement, disrupting children's lives and psychological well-being.⁴³

In summary, South Africa faces a multitude of environmental challenges that directly and indirectly affect children. Recognising children as a minority group highlights their specific vulnerabilities to these issues, emphasising the importance of involving them in decision-making processes. This involvement ensures that their unique experiences and perspectives contribute to shaping environmental policies that will determine the future they inherit.

3 THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CHILD PARTICIPATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

The rights of children to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives are protected by international and national legal frameworks. Internationally, the UNCRC serves as the cornerstone document for children's rights. Article 12 of the

³⁶ Von Staden et al. (2022); Biggs et al. (2008) 296.

³⁷ Mnisi N "Water scarcity in South Africa: A result of physical or economic factors?" (2023) *Helen Suzman Foundation* available at <https://hsf.org.za/publications/hsf-briefs/water-scarcity-in-south-africa-a-result-of-physical-or-economic-factors> (accessed 1 November 2023).

³⁸ Du Plessis A *Water as an inescapable risk: Current global water availability, quality and risks with a specific focus on South Africa* Switzerland: Springer, Cham (2019) at 13; Mnisi (2023).

³⁹ Mnisi (2023); Du Plessis (2019) 13.

⁴⁰ Langerman KE & Pauw CJ "A critical review of health risk assessments of exposure to emissions from coal-fired power stations in South Africa" (2018) 28(2) *Clean Air Journal* 68.

⁴¹ Pretorius I, Piketh S, Burger R & Neomagus H "A perspective on South African coal-fired power station emissions" (2015) 26(3) *Journal of Energy in Southern Africa* 27.

⁴² For example, climate change can increase the prevalence of vector-borne diseases such as malaria. See Zervogel G, New M, van Garderen EA, Midgley G, et al. "Climate change impacts and adaptation in South Africa" (2014) 5(5) *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 605.

⁴³ Zervogel et al. (2014) 605. South Africa ratified the UNCRC in 1995.

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UNCRC grants children the right to freely express their views on all matters that concern them, with the weight of these views corresponding to the child's age and maturity. While not explicitly addressing environmental issues, article 12 can be broadly interpreted to encompass environmental decision-making.

However, the practical implementation of this provision, especially in the context of environmental decision-making in South Africa, has posed challenges. At the national level, the legal framework for the participation is established by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (the Constitution) and the Children's Act. Section 28(1) of the Constitution protects children's rights, focusing particularly on protecting children from maltreatment and asserting that children's best interests are paramount in all matters relating to them. Although not explicitly stated, section 28(2) implies the importance of children's right to participate in decisions affecting their well-being.

The Children's Act reinforces children's participation rights. Section 10 recognises the right of all children to express their views in any matter that concerns them, with due consideration given to the age, stage of development and maturity of the children. This provision mirrors article 12 of the UNCRC. However, the Children's Act does not explicitly address the right to participate in environmental decision-making, potentially leaving a gap in the legal framework. Implementing the participation rights of children, as outlined in these laws, has yielded mixed results. Although South Africa has made significant strides in facilitating child participation in areas such as family law and education, structured and meaningful child participation in environmental decision-making remains lacking.⁴⁴ This disparity may be due to the absence of explicit references to environmental issues in the legal framework, as a result of which children's participation in such decisions is relegated to a lower priority. In addition, societal and institutional attitudes towards children's capacities and rights often hinder the realisation of their participatory rights. Traditional views sometimes result in token participation in which children's perspectives are sought but not genuinely considered. Compounded by socio-economic disparities, educational access, and cultural variations, these attitudes pose significant obstacles to effective participation in environmental decision-making.

In general, while the UNCRC, Constitution, and Children's Act establish the foundation for child participation, the actualisation of this right, particularly in the context of environmental decision-making, is influenced by a complex array of social, institutional, and individual factors. These factors include societal attitudes, the structure of adult-centric institutions, educational access and quality, legal interpretation and implementation, resource constraints, cultural differences and political will. Societal

⁴⁴ South Africa has made significant progress in facilitating child participation in areas such as family law and education. In the context of family law, South African courts have demonstrated a commitment to upholding the best interests of the child by recognising the importance of children's participation. See, for instance, *Central Authority v K* 2015 (5) SA 408 (GJ); *B v MB* 2012 (2) SA 394 (GSJ); Moyo A "Child participation under South African law: Beyond the Convention on the Rights of the Child?" (2015) 31(1) *South African Journal on Human Rights* 173.

attitudes and beliefs have a significant influence on children's participation in decision-making processes.⁴⁵ Traditional perspectives persist in many South African communities, where children are expected to be seen and not heard.⁴⁶ This mindset is particularly evident in certain traditional African societies, where challenging or engaging with adults may be seen as disrespectful.⁴⁷ When society has paternalistic views of children as incapable of offering meaningful contributions due to their age or perceived immaturity, their active participation is inevitably hindered. It is thus imperative to confront and transform these ingrained attitudes to foster a culture that values and respects the perspectives of children. Effecting this change would require comprehensive social awareness campaigns employing locally resonant messages in native languages.

Furthermore, adult-centric institutions also have considerable influence over child participation. Many adult-centric institutions, including those engaged in environmental management, are predominantly structured around norms and practices that cater to adults.⁴⁸ Such settings may not offer conducive environments for children to effectively voice their opinions. There is hence a pressing need for a shift in the institutional culture toward one that embraces, encourages, and facilitates the meaningful participation of children. For example, public hearings on environmental issues are frequently scheduled at times or locations that are inconvenient for children, or they may be conducted in formal language or styles that are intimidating to young participants.⁴⁹ These spaces must be adapted to be more child-friendly, accommodating their needs and capacities.

Take, for example, the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), which plays a key role in the country's biodiversity conservation. Charged with monitoring the

⁴⁵ Martin S, Forde C, Horgan D & Mages L "Decision-making by children and young people in the home: The nurture of trust, participation and independence" (2018) 27(1) *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 198.

⁴⁶ Moses (2008) 327.

⁴⁷ Theron LC "Researching resilience: Lessons learned from working with rural, Sesotho-speaking South African young people" (2016) 16(6) *Qualitative Research* 720; Viviers A "The ethics of child participation" (doctoral thesis, University of Pretoria, 2010) at 12.

⁴⁸ Examples include the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI); the Centre for Environmental Rights in South Africa; and the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE).

⁴⁹ For example, the public hearing for the Climate Change Bill held in October 2022 by the Portfolio Committee on Environment, Forestry and Fisheries highlighted potential barriers to children's participation. The fact that these hearings were conducted virtually and involved formal presentations by government departments and organisations meant that they might not have been accessible or engaging for children. The format and the level of discourse, as well as the potential lack of targeted outreach to younger demographics, supports the argument that public hearings on environmental issues are often not structured to accommodate or actively involve children. See Maputi S "Committee on Environment starts public hearings on Climate Change Bill" (2022) *Parliament of the Republic of South Africa* available at <https://www.parliament.gov.za/news/committee-environment-starts-public-hearings-climate-change-bill> (accessed 29 September 2023).

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health of the nation's biodiversity, SANBI's work has far-reaching implications in various sectors, including agriculture and health.⁵⁰ While SANBI does conduct environmental conservation outreach programmes and education initiatives, its primary interactions, research publications, and policy recommendations target adult stakeholders such as researchers, conservationists and policymakers.⁵¹

In terms of the argument developed in this article, there is a clear need for SANBI to develop specialised programmes tailored for children. For example, interactive exhibitions in its botanical gardens or online platforms could be created to explain the importance of biodiversity in a child-friendly manner. Additionally, SANBI could involve children in citizen science projects, allowing them to contribute to research efforts while learning about biodiversity. These initiatives would not only promote child participation but also cultivate a new generation of environmentally conscious citizens.⁵² Such programmes would empower children with the knowledge and skills needed to understand and engage in environmental issues.⁵³

However, to effectively raise awareness about environmental preservation, access to quality education for all is essential. Quality education plays a crucial role in

⁵⁰ South African National Biodiversity Institute "About" (2023) available at <https://www.sanbi.org/about/about-sanbi/> (accessed 12 October 2023).

⁵¹ See, for instance, SANBI community initiatives such as the Groen Sebenza, the Greening programme, and the Fundisa for change programme. These initiatives are mostly adult-centric and focused on furthering employment, capacity development, and biodiversity education in the general community. There is no programme specifically targeting children in relation to biodiversity matters. See South African National Biodiversity Institute "Community initiatives" (2023) available at <https://www.sanbi.org/community-initiatives/> (accessed 12 October 2023).

⁵² Further examples of the role of adult-centric institutions dealing with environmental management are the programmes of the DFFE. The latter is responsible for environmental protection, conservation, and pollution control in South Africa. The DFFE's structures, processes, and outreach programmes are typically designed for adult stakeholders. For example, its environmental programmes and projects, such as the "working for forests", "working for coasts", and "working for ecosystems" projects, often use technical language and are not crafted in a way that intentionally involves children as active participants and decision-makers. A possible way of dealing with this challenge is for the DFFE to consider organising special projects exclusively for children and youth, with these projects perhaps facilitated in partnership with schools or youth organisations. The sessions should employ simpler language and interactive tools and be scheduled at convenient times. By actively involving the younger generation, the DFFE could gain fresh perspectives and ensure that policies are more future-focused. See Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment "Environmental programmes projects and programmes" (2023) available at <https://www.dffe.gov.za/environmental-programmes-projects-and-programmes> (accessed 20 October 2023).

⁵³ By involving children in citizen science projects and creating educational platforms, SANBI would be providing them with opportunities to actively participate in environmental research and discussions. This active engagement would help ensure that children's voices and perspectives are included in decision-making processes related to environmental conservation. Moreover, fostering an early interest and understanding of environmental issues can lead to a lifelong commitment to environmental stewardship, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and effective environmental governance.

empowering children to participate in the issues that affect them.⁵⁴ Children must be equipped with the knowledge, skills and confidence to express their opinions on complex issues such as environmental decision-making. Disparities in access to quality education, often stemming from socio-economic inequalities, can impede this process.⁵⁵ Educational inequality is a significant challenge in South Africa.⁵⁶ For example, children in rural areas often have less access to quality education than their urban counterparts.⁵⁷ In the realm of environmental decision-making, schools could integrate comprehensive environmental education in the curriculum, providing children with knowledge about environmental issues and their rights.

However, beyond the educational system, the interpretation and implementation of laws also play a critical role in facilitating child participation. Although laws such as section 28 of the Constitution formally recognise the rights of children to participate in decision-making, the interpretation and implementation of these laws can restrict these rights in practice. It is crucial that laws explicitly outline children's rights to participate in all decision-making processes, including those related to environmental issues.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Correia N, Aguiar C & Amaro F "Children's participation in early childhood education: A theoretical overview" (2023) 24(3) *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 313; Viviers A "The ethics of child participation" (doctoral thesis, University of Pretoria, 2010) at 23; Burde D, Ozen G, Kelcey J, Lahmann, H & Al-Abbad K *What works to promote children's educational access, quality of learning, and wellbeing in crisis-affected contexts* London: Department for International Development (2015) at 53.

⁵⁵ Spaull N "Poverty and privilege: Primary school inequality in South Africa" (2013) 33(5) *International Journal of Educational Development* 436.

⁵⁶ Clercq FD "The persistence of South African educational inequalities: The need for understanding and relying on analytical frameworks" (2020) 24(1) *Education as Change* 1.

⁵⁷ Spaull (2013) 436.

⁵⁸ For example, municipalities often make decisions about local environmental planning, such as the development of parks, green spaces, and waste management strategies. Involving children in public consultations and planning meetings can ensure that their perspectives and ideas are considered, leading to more inclusive and effective environmental policies. Their unique viewpoints can highlight aspects that adults might overlook, such as the need for safe play areas or educational green spaces. Additionally, school boards and education departments decide on the implementation of environmental education programmes. Including students in the development and evaluation of these programmes could enhance their relevance and impact. For instance, student-led initiatives such as recycling programmes or school gardens can foster a sense of ownership and responsibility towards the environment. These initiatives not only educate students about sustainable practices but also promote leadership and community involvement. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community groups often spearhead conservation projects such as tree planting, wildlife protection, and clean-up campaigns. Engaging children in these projects not only educates them about environmental issues but also empowers them to take an active role in conservation efforts. For example, participating in a local tree-planting event can teach children about biodiversity and the importance of trees in ecosystems, while also instilling a sense of accomplishment and stewardship. Furthermore, before large-scale projects such as mining, construction, or industrial developments are approved, Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) are conducted to assess their potential environmental impacts. Including children's voices in the EIA process through public hearings and consultations ensures that the younger generation's concerns about their future environment are considered. This inclusion can bring fresh perspectives to long-term sustainability and intergenerational equity, ensuring that development

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Although section 10 of the Children's Act grants children the right to participate in any matter that concerns them, it does not specifically address environmental issues. This ambiguity leaves room for interpretation, potentially excluding children from discussions of environmental policies. Strengthening the Children's Act with explicit language on environmental decision-making could enhance children's rights to participate in environmental issues.

In addition to legal considerations, resource availability poses a significant challenge. Meaningful child participation processes, such as organising workshops and training sessions tailored for children, setting up child-friendly consultation platforms, and conducting outreach programmes in schools, often require substantial resources, including time, money, and personnel. Institutions, especially in resource-constrained contexts like South Africa, may struggle to allocate these resources due to their competing priorities. For example, limited resources could hinder efforts to provide transportation for children to attend public hearings or to train professionals in child-friendly participation techniques.

Furthermore, South Africa's diverse cultural landscape presents its own set of challenges. Cultural norms and beliefs can influence child participation, and certain practices potentially conflict with the principles of child participation.⁵⁹ South Africa is a multicultural country with various ethnic groups.⁶⁰ Certain cultural practices might not align with the ethos of child participation. Sensitivity and culturally appropriate interventions are necessary to ensure that children's voices are heard without ignoring cultural heritage.⁶¹ For example, some cultural norms may discourage children from expressing views that contradict those of their elders, requiring delicate navigation to promote child participation respectfully.⁶²

Finally, the role of political leaders is paramount. Political will is essential to prioritise child participation, enact supportive laws and policies, allocate resources, and hold institutions accountable for implementing child participation initiatives.⁶³ A lack of political commitment could result in minimal implementation of child participation measures despite the presence of supportive legislation. For example, there may be

projects consider the interests of future generations. These examples illustrate the multifaceted ways in which children can be involved in environmental decision-making. By incorporating their input, we not only enrich the decision-making process but also empower the next generation with the knowledge and skills needed to address environmental challenges. Such engagement is crucial for fostering a sense of environmental responsibility and ensuring the creation of policies that are both inclusive and effective.

⁵⁹ Bray & Moses (2011) 6.

⁶⁰ Van der Vijver AJR & Rothmann S "Assessment in multicultural groups: The South African case" (2004) 30(4) *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology* 1.

⁶¹ Bray & Moses (2011) 6; Clacherty G & Donald D "Child participation in research: Reflections on ethical challenges in the Southern African context" (2007) 6(2) *African Journal of AIDS Research* 147.

⁶² Bray & Moses (2011) 6.

⁶³ Leverett S "Children's participation" in Foley P & Leverett S (eds) *Connecting with children: Developing working relationships* Bristol: Bristol University Press, Policy Press (2008) 161.

inadequate follow-up or enforcement of laws that protect children's rights to participate in environmental decision-making. These factors intersect in complex ways, which demands a comprehensive and holistic approach to address them. Interventions must be tailored to the specific context of South Africa and regularly reviewed and revised to remain effective and adaptable to changing circumstances. Only through systemic changes in legal, educational, societal, and political systems can children's rights to participate in environmental debates be fully realised and upheld in South Africa.

These challenges and potential solutions become tangible when specific case studies are examined. They offer more valuable insights into barriers and facilitators of child participation. The following section explores two cases providing a compelling narrative of how children can play a pivotal role in driving environmental change.

4 CASES OF CHILD PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL DECISION-MAKING

This section presents and analyses the Cape Town water crisis to illuminate the dynamics of child participation in real-world environmental decision-making.⁶⁴ This case has been chosen to delineate the facilitators and obstacles to child participation, as well as to assess the potential impact of children's perspectives on decision-making processes.

Despite the increase in literature on child participation in environmental decision-making in the general sense,⁶⁵ it remains a relatively underexplored domain in South Africa. The recent involvement of children in environmental litigation and advocacy on the global stage provides a valuable perspective for evaluating South Africa's approach to integrating children's views into environmental decision-making.⁶⁶ By examining

⁶⁴ The term "water crisis" refers to a significant shortage of water resources that impacts a region's ability to provide sufficient water for its population, agriculture, industry, and ecosystems. This crisis can stem from various factors such as prolonged droughts, over-extraction of water resources, inadequate infrastructure, and climate change. See UNICEF "Water scarcity" (2024) available at <https://www.unicef.org/wash/water-scarcity> (accessed 25 July 2024); WWF "Water for nature, water for life" (2023) available at https://www.wwf.fr/sites/default/files/doc-2023-09/Water%20scarcity_report_v7.0.pdf (accessed 25 July 2024). The water crisis discussed in the context of Cape Town is primarily historical. It reached a critical point in early 2018 when dam levels fell dangerously low, prompting severe water restrictions and widespread concern over "Day Zero", the anticipated day when the city would run out of water. However, by September 2018, dam levels recovered to about 70 per cent and significant rains in 2020 brought them up to 95 per cent. Nonetheless, the situation serves as a stark reminder of the ongoing challenges and potential future risks associated with water scarcity and the importance of sustainable water management practices. See Calverley CM & Walther CW "Drought, water management, and social equity: Analyzing Cape Town, South Africa's water crisis" (2022) *Frontiers in Water* 1 at 3, 9, 10.

⁶⁵ Freeman C "Children's participation in environmental decision making" in Buckingham-Hatfield S & Percy S (eds) *Constructing local environmental agendas: People, places and participation* London: Routledge (1998) at 78–82.

⁶⁶ For example, the case of *Navahine F et al v Department of Transportation, State of Hawai'i et al* Civil No. 1CCV-22-0000631. This case was a children-led constitutional climate case addressing transportation emissions. The plaintiffs argued that the state's transportation policies contributed to climate change, violating their constitutional rights. The court ruled in favour of the young plaintiffs, leading to a historic

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Greta Thunberg's activism and contrasting it with South Africa's Cape Town water crisis, we can discern both deficiencies and prospects in policy and practice.

Without digressing from the flow of this section, this study argues that both case studies, despite their different scales and contexts, exemplify the critical role of youth in environmental advocacy and decision-making. Thunberg's global climate activism and the local response to Cape Town's water crisis both underscore the importance of including young voices in addressing environmental challenges. Although youth involvement in the Cape Town water crisis was limited, this case study still provides valuable information on the broader theme of youth participation in environmental decision-making.⁶⁷ In contrast, Greta Thunberg's activism represents a powerful example of how a young individual can catalyse a global movement for climate action. The juxtaposition of Thunberg's activism and the Cape Town water crisis serves to illustrate the potential for youth involvement in environmental decision-making and the challenges that can hinder such participation.

In South Africa, youth have historically played a pivotal role in justice movements.⁶⁸ A prominent example is the Soweto uprising of 1976, where thousands of black students protested against the apartheid regime's policies.⁶⁹ The Soweto uprising is considered one of the significant movements that contributed to major political changes in the country.⁷⁰ This historical context shows that South African youth have a strong legacy of activism and the ability to mobilise for social justice. However, this legacy of youth activism has not yet been translated into substantial involvement in environmental justice movements throughout the country. Several factors contribute to this gap, including limited access to resources, lack of platforms for youth voices in

agreement to decarbonise the state's transportation system and significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions. See also Earthjustice "Judge rules in favor of Hawai'i youth plaintiffs in climate case *Navahine F. v Hawai'i Department of Transportation*, case will proceed to trial" (2023) available at <https://shorturl.at/0Hubo> (accessed 25 July 2024); available at <https://shorturl.at/J5N8F> (accessed 29 July 2024).

⁶⁷ Calverley & Walther (2022) 1 at 3, 9, 10. During the Cape Town water crisis, the focus was on immediate water conservation measures and government-led interventions to prevent "Day Zero", that is, the day when the city would run out of water. Public campaigns encouraged residents to reduce water consumption, and the city implemented strict water usage restrictions. However, there was little to no significant youth-led activism or organised efforts by young people to influence the decision-making process during this period. The crisis primarily saw adult-led governmental and community responses aimed at managing the acute shortage of water.

⁶⁸ Gukelberger S "Youth and the politics of generational memories: The Soweto uprising in South Africa" (2020) 47 *Ateliers d'anthropologie* available at DOI: 10.4000/ateliers.12436 (accessed 29 July 2024).

⁶⁹ See generally the collection in Heffernan A & Nieftagodien N (eds) *Students must rise: Youth struggle in South Africa before and beyond Soweto '76* Johannesburg: Wits University Press (2016); Gukelberger (2020).

⁷⁰ See Gukelberger (2020).

environmental policy, and the immediate economic and social challenges that may overshadow environmental concerns.⁷¹

In this light, the juxtaposition of Greta Thunberg's case and the Cape Town water crisis is justified by the need to explore the potential for youth involvement in environmental decision-making and the barriers that need to be overcome. Although the Cape Town water crisis lacked significant youth activism, it provides a context to understand the existing challenges and the importance of fostering youth participation in future environmental issues. Thunberg's case, on the other hand, highlights the powerful role that youth can play on a global scale, thus offering valuable lessons for local contexts. By learning from both cases, we could work towards creating more inclusive and effective avenues for youth participation in environmental justice movements in South Africa and beyond.

4.1 The Greta Thunberg and the child petitioners' case

In 2018 Greta Thunberg, together with other young environmental activists, challenged the major carbon emitters on the international stage.⁷² Their actions included organising global climate strikes, speaking to world leaders at conferences such as the United Nations Climate Change Conference, and using social media to mobilise and inspire millions worldwide.⁷³ These efforts were based on the belief that children, as significant stakeholders, have the right to hold nations responsible for climate inaction.⁷⁴

Thunberg's meteoric rise as a global environmental icon began when in 2018 when she embarked on a mission to force lawmakers to prioritise climate change. Just weeks before Sweden's elections, she skipped school to stage a protest outside the Swedish parliament, displaying a sign that boldly declared "*Skolstrejk för Klimatet*", which translates as "School Strike for Climate".⁷⁵ Her early solitary demonstrations outside the Swedish parliament served as a powerful testament to the influence of an individual voice, capturing international attention in the process. Despite her returning to school

⁷¹ Although there are NGOs in South Africa that, like the South African Youth Climate Change Coalition (SAYCCC) and Earthchild Project, focus on environmental education and empowering young people to take action on climate-related issues, they face challenges in gaining widespread recognition and making an impact on environmental policy.

⁷² BBC "Greta Thunberg: Who is the climate activist and what has she achieved?" (2023) available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49918719> (accessed 22 October 2023).

⁷³ BBC (2023).

⁷⁴ Sabherwal A, Ballew MT, Van der Linden S, Gustafson A, et al. "The Greta Thunberg effect: Familiarity with Greta Thunberg predicts intentions to engage in climate activism in the United States" (2021) 51(1) *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 321.

⁷⁵ Osmanski S "Greta Thunberg's school climate strike: What you need to know" (2021) *Green Matters* available at <https://www.greenmatters.com/p/did-greta-thunberg-drop-out> (accessed 29 September 2023).

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after Sweden's elections, she designated Fridays as the weekday on which she would continue her protests, thus initiating the "Fridays for Future" movement.⁷⁶

The "Fridays for Future" movement saw millions of students around the world join Thunberg to skip school on Fridays to demand urgent climate action.⁷⁷ What initially began as a local plea quickly grew into a global outcry, spotlighting the collective strength and unity of the concerns of the younger generation. Thunberg's impassioned activism succeeded in reshaping perspectives and behaviours relating to climate change.⁷⁸ Her advocacy efforts earned her invitations to speak on esteemed platforms such as the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, the European Parliament, and various legislative bodies, including those of the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and the United States of America.⁷⁹ At these international engagements, Thunberg's speeches transcended a mere expression of concern; they challenged the very power dynamics of global governance. By fearlessly criticising world leaders for their inertia in addressing climate issues, she underscored the stark disconnect between those in authority and the generation most profoundly affected by their decisions even though she and her followers did not participate in decision-making in the traditional sense.

On 23 September 2019, Thunberg delivered a powerful address at the United Nations Climate Action Summit in New York.⁸⁰ Her impassioned "How dare you?" speech reverberated worldwide, sparking climate strikes worldwide.⁸¹ Shortly thereafter, along with 15 other child petitioners from various nations, Thunberg filed a ground-breaking complaint with the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child decrying government inaction on the climate crisis.⁸² Ranging in age from eight to 17, these

⁷⁶ Sorce G "The 'Greta effect': Networked mobilization and leader identification among Fridays for Future protesters" (2022) 10(2) *Media and Communication* 18.

⁷⁷ Strikes took place in countries such as Belgium, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Finland, Denmark, France, and the Netherlands. See Britannica "Greta Thunberg" (2023) available at <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Greta-Thunberg> (accessed 23 November 2023); Ottesen S "Greta Thunberg on the state of the climate movement" (2021) *The Washington Post* available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2021/12/27/greta-thunberg-state-climate-movement-roots-her-power-an-activist/> (accessed 23 November 2023); Beckh P & Limmer A "The Fridays for Future phenomenon" in Wilderer PA, Grambow M, Molls M & Oexle K (eds) *Strategies for Sustainability of the Earth System* Switzerland: Springer, Cham (2022) 427.

⁷⁸ See Britannica (2023); Ottesen (2021); United Nations "Greta Thunberg tells world leaders 'you are failing us', as nations announce fresh climate action" (2019) available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/news/2019/09/greta-thunberg/> (accessed 29 September 2023).

⁷⁹ United Nations (2019).

⁸⁰ See NPR Staff "Greta Thunberg's speech at the UN Climate Action Summit" (2019) *NPR* available at <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit> (accessed 21 February 2024).

⁸¹ NPR Staff (2019).

⁸² The countries represented were Tunisia, Sweden, India, Palau, Argentina, the Marshall Islands, Nigeria, France, Germany, the United States, and Brazil. See Arnoldy B "Greta and 15 kids just claimed their

young petitioners implored the committee to compel member states to protect children from the dire consequences of climate change.⁸³ The complaint alleged that five major economies (Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany, and Turkey) were infringing on children's rights by failing to implement adequate measures to combat the climate crisis.⁸⁴

The child petitioners underscored the urgency of the climate crisis, highlighting its far-reaching implications, including food and water scarcity, the production of uninhabitable regions, and the displacement of climate refugees.⁸⁵ Located under the Third Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, this complaint empowered individuals, including children, to seek UN intervention in cases where rights violations had occurred without recourse in their home countries.⁸⁶ Recognising the significance of this initiative, UNICEF Deputy Executive Director Charlotte Petri Gornitzka stressed that today's children are holding global leaders accountable for commitments made three decades ago with the adoption of the UNCRC.⁸⁷ Thunberg's climate strikes and the petition to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child epitomise the power of child participation. Her unwavering commitment to highlighting the urgency of the climate crisis underscores the necessity of external pressure to catalyse real change within entrenched systems.

One key takeaway from Thunberg's actions and those of the other child petitioners is the tangible demonstration that entrenched systems may remain inert without significant external impetus. Therefore, raising awareness on a broad scale is imperative to truly address the climate crisis. Meaningful outcomes from global conferences will materialise only when individuals actively voice their demands for change in the public sphere. These global mobilisations and events serve to refocus attention on the climate emergency, accentuating the persistent gap between necessary actions and current efforts.

The pressure exerted by children, exemplified by figures like Thunberg and other young advocates, is not merely symbolic; it has the potential to be transformative, playing a pivotal role in propelling the world toward substantive action against the looming climate crisis. In essence, these child activists are not just protesting; they are also integrating themselves in the mechanisms of global governance, showcasing the fact

climate rights at the UN" (2023) *Earth Justice* available at <https://earthjustice.org/article/greta-thunberg-young-people-petition-UN-human-rights-climate-change> (accessed 22 September 2023).

⁸³ UNICEF "16 children, including Greta Thunberg, file landmark complaint to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child" (2019) available at <https://www.unicef.org/turkiye/en/press-releases/16-children-including-greta-thunberg-file-landmark-complaint-united-nations> (accessed 29 September 2023).

⁸⁴ UNICEF (2019).

⁸⁵ UNICEF (2019).

⁸⁶ Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a Communications Procedure available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/optional-protocol-convention-rights-child-communications> (accessed 23 November 2023).

⁸⁷ UNICEF (2019).

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that the young can and should be active participants in shaping their future. Greta Thunberg's activism has shown that children can be significant stakeholders in environmental decision-making. Her global climate strikes and the petition to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child are prime examples of effective child participation.

4.2 The Cape Town water crisis: Lessons from Greta Thunberg

The Cape Town water crisis is a case study of environmental governance issues in South Africa. It highlights the urgent need for innovative and inclusive approaches to address such crises. Based on the global momentum of child participation, it is imperative to consider its implications for nations like South Africa, particularly in the light of the country's susceptibility to climate-related issues. Although Thunberg's actions and those of other young environmentalists have undeniably influenced international discourse, a crucial question emerges: How can South Africa harness the enthusiasm and commitment of its youth, especially given the distinctive environmental challenges of the country? This inquiry prompts an examination of the Cape Town water crisis in South Africa as a case study in the missed opportunities of not involving children.

In recent years, South Africa has faced significant environmental challenges that are exemplified by the Cape Town water crisis. During 2017-2018, Cape Town experienced a drastic decline in dam levels, which plummeted to critically low capacities, with levels dropping below 25 per cent.⁸⁸ The situation escalated to the point that the city announced a countdown to "Day Zero", which signified the projected day when the municipal water supply would stop for most households.⁸⁹ This crisis was caused by a combination of factors, including three consecutive years of drought, escalating water demand due to population growth, and arguably insufficient preparation by urban planners.⁹⁰ The water crisis in Cape Town was not an isolated incident; rather, it underscored the broader environmental, governance and societal challenges confronting numerous urban centres worldwide. Although Cape Town managed to avoid "Day Zero" primarily through city-wide conservation efforts, the episode serves as a cautionary tale for cities around the world.

4.3 Harnessing child participation: Global and local insights

The juxtaposition of the Cape Town water crisis and Greta Thunberg's global activism underscores the disparity between South African policy and practice regarding child participation in environmental decision-making. Although European children are actively engaging their governments on the international stage, South African children's voices remain conspicuously absent from crucial discussions about their future. Despite

⁸⁸ Global Resilience Institute "Avoiding a water crisis: How Cape Town avoided 'Day Zero'" available at <https://globalresilience.northeastern.edu/avoiding-a-water-crisis-how-capetown-avoided-day-zero/> (accessed 12 October 2023).

⁸⁹ Rodina L "Water resilience lessons from Cape Town's water crisis" (2019) 6(6): 1376 *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Water*.

⁹⁰ Maxmen A "As Cape Town water crisis deepens, scientists prepare for 'Day Zero'" (2018) 554: 7690 *Nature* 13 at 13-14.

being directly impacted on by events such as the Cape Town water crisis, South African children have not played a significant role in shaping the global discourse around such crises.

Thunberg's petition to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child demonstrates the existence and effectiveness of formal channels for children to express their concerns.⁹¹ By contrast, South Africa lacks evident formal mechanisms or platforms to amplify children's voices in environmental decision-making or policy responses, indicating the existence of a systemic gap. Even where children have a platform on which to speak, ensuring equitable representation and meaningful engagement to avoid tokenistic participation remains a challenge.⁹² The Cape Town water crisis could act as a catalyst to stimulate introspection in South Africa. Policymakers have an opportunity to draw insights from international child-led movements and assess the efficacy of existing South African frameworks that facilitate or impede child participation. Taking cues from Greta Thunberg's approach, South Africa could contemplate establishing formal channels through which children could express their opinions on environmental issues, ensuring that their perspectives are properly considered in policymaking and implementation.

Thunberg's activism was ignited by her own research and understanding of climate change.⁹³ It is imperative that schools and other educational institutions integrate environmental education in their curricula, thereby empowering students to develop informed opinions and inspiring them to take proactive measures. Although South Africa demonstrates awareness of general environmental concerns and the need for water conservation, it is essential to evaluate the depth and breadth of environmental education. A robust environmental education curriculum would be crucial in equipping children to participate actively in discussions and decisions about their future.

In this regard, cultural norms and social expectations significantly influence the level and nature of child participation in governance. Although many European countries increasingly accept children's participation in sociopolitical discourse, as is evidenced by the widespread support for student-led climate strikes, South Africa's attitudes toward child participation in environmental issues require careful examination.⁹⁴ Despite the historical political consciousness of South Africa's youth evident in movements such as the Soweto uprising,⁹⁵ the dominant societal view is often that

⁹¹ Millington N & Scheba S "Day Zero and the infrastructures of climate change: Water governance, inequality, and infrastructural politics in Cape Town's water crisis" (2021) 45(1) *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 116.

⁹² Blanchet-Cohen N & Grégoire-Labrecque G "The transformative potential of human rights education for youth engagement in the community" (2022) 30(2) *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 352 at 356.

⁹³ Vavilov EM "Lessons about activism from a Swedish high school student: A rhetorical analysis of Greta Thunberg's public speeches on climate change" (master's thesis, Jönköping University, 2019) at 15.

⁹⁴ Fridays for Future "List of countries" (2023) available at <https://fridaysforfuture.org/what-we-do/strike-statistics/list-of-countries/> (accessed 23 September 2023).

⁹⁵ Gukelberger (2020).

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children are passive recipients of care, protection and instruction rather than active agents in their own right.⁹⁶ These deep-rooted perspectives may hinder adults from recognising children's potential to contribute constructively to discussions on issues that affect them.

The comparison of the global child-led movement and the Cape Town water crisis underscores the untapped potential of child participation in South Africa. It highlights the imperative for systemic changes that lead to meaningful integration of children's voices in environmental decision-making. Reflecting on these comparative insights underscores the pivotal role of societal attitudes and traditional structures in shaping the participation of various groups, particularly children, in crucial discussions.

Additionally, the perception of the need for expertise is another significant factor that influences participation in different contexts and regions. Discussions surrounding complex issues like environmental conservation, climate change, and water management have predominantly been confined to experts, inadvertently excluding not only children but also other community members from active participation in the discourse. This narrow perception of the need for expertise not only limits wider community engagement, but also often fails to grasp the true essence and depth of child participation. Genuine child participation goes beyond merely soliciting opinions; it involves deeply involving children in decision-making processes. In essence, it is about recognising children as active agents in shaping their own futures. The demonstrable impact of young activists on a global scale challenges this restricted perspective.

Take, for example, Thunberg's activism. It began with her solitary strike outside the Swedish parliament, yet with societal, cultural, and institutional support, her cause resonated globally. This illustrates the immense potential children possess in environmental dialogues when genuine engagement is nurtured. Although barriers to child participation remain significant, they are not insurmountable. With the right interventions, cultural shifts, and legal provisions, South Africa could harness the untapped potential of its children in shaping its environmental future.

4.4 Leveraging child-centric solutions in the context of environmental crises

Reflecting on Thunberg's global impact highlights the transformative potential of child participation. In this context it is necessary to examine missed opportunities during significant environmental challenges such as the Cape Town crisis. Had child participation been more pronounced during the Cape Town crisis innovative, youth-centric solutions akin to those proposed by Thunberg and her peers might have emerged. Involving youth as "water ambassadors" or launching educational campaigns could have spurred a more comprehensive, community response. Moreover, children have inherent advantages. Growing up in a digital age, they are well-versed in global best practices and trends, enabling them to offer different perspectives during crises.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Bray & Moses (2011) 6; Clacherty & Donald (2007) 147.

⁹⁷ UNICEF *The state of the world's children 2017: Children in a digital world* (2017) at 43.

Additionally, their way of connecting with their peers, rooted in their digital proficiency, would allow for unconventional but effective crisis management strategies.

However, it is not just their digital familiarity that is a tremendous advantage. Beyond textbooks, schools and youth groups play an essential role in shaping perceptions. When children are educated about a crisis, they internalise the knowledge and become carriers of this information, spreading awareness in their families and peer groups. This process also fosters indispensable life skills such as critical thinking.

Building on the idea of engagement, children are not just the future, they are an active part of the present. By involving them in crucial discussions, we would instil a sense of ownership and responsibility in them. This would not only propel them to seek sustainable solutions, but also cultivate in them a sense of empowerment and self-worth, encouraging them to be more proactive participants in social affairs.

In summary, the Cape Town water crisis and global youth activism, as typified by Thunberg's movement, demonstrate the need for child participation. Beyond just fulfilling a mandate, it is about tapping into one's potential. With its rich tapestry of young minds, South Africa is at a juncture where it can either harness this potential or overlook a vital resource in its environmental strategies. Having grown up in a digital and globally connected age, children have a unique point of view. Their exposure to global best practices, trends, and innovative solutions might offer a fresh perspective that could be leveraged in crises like the one in Cape Town. Such crises present prime opportunities for South African authorities to actively involve children in response and recovery efforts. Engaging children during such events would serve not only to tap an immediate source of assistance, but also to educate them about the real-world impacts of the climate crisis. If children were involved directly, they would not only learn about the environment in theory, but see the consequences of environmental neglect first-hand. This active involvement would educate and empower them to adopt sustainable practices early on.

Furthermore, involving children in these efforts would plant seeds for the future. If today's children were equipped with environmental knowledge and awareness from a young age, they would grow into adults with a deep understanding of the importance of sustainable living. Imagine what it would be like if our current world leaders had been actively engaged in environmental issues as children. It is highly possible that, armed with that foundational understanding, they would prioritise the environment in their policy decisions today.

In essence, every environmental challenge that South Africa faces, be it a drought, water shortages, or another climate impact, is not just a crisis but an opportunity. It is an opportunity to involve, educate and nurture a generation that will prioritise environmental conservation, ensuring that the mistakes of the past are not repeated.

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Active participation of children in addressing these issues can help create a ripple effect where environmentally conscious decisions become the norm rather than exception.⁹⁸

5 CONCLUSION

The examination of both the Greta Thunberg complaint and the Cape Town water crisis underscores a stark contrast in child participation levels between the Global North and South. Noting this contrast could provide South Africa with an opportunity for critical self-reflection and advancement. Embracing child participation would have the potential to inject fresh perspectives and innovative solutions into the nation's environmental challenges, paving the way for a more inclusive, democratic, and sustainable future. Children are not mere spectators in the narrative of environmental sustainability; rather, they are indispensable participants. As the primary beneficiaries or victims of today's decisions, their voices, passion and creativity carry immense value. Neglecting their viewpoints not only misses an opportunity but does a disservice to generations to come.

Considering these insights, we propose several recommendations for the future. The first, as must be evident from the above discussion, arises from the urgent need for policy interventions aimed at mandating child participation in environmental decision-making processes. Legislation must be enacted or amended to ensure that children have a guaranteed role in shaping policies that directly impact their future. This could involve exploring amendments to existing laws such as the Children's Act or introducing new legislation to ensure that children have a seat at the decision-making table regarding environmental issues.

Furthermore, institutionalising child participation is crucial. South African environmental institutions should establish dedicated platforms where children can voice their opinions and contribute to decision-making processes. Like the United nations platform accessed by Thunberg and her peers, these platforms could take the form of dedicated councils or committees at municipal and provincial levels. In addition, digital platforms should be introduced to facilitate feedback and ideas from the younger population, making participation more accessible and inclusive.

Educational interventions are essential to empower students with environmental knowledge and platforms for action. Schools should integrate comprehensive environmental studies in their curricula and organise workshops and training sessions on environmental conservation. Real-world cases, such as the Cape Town water crisis, should be dissected to provide students with a better understanding and encourage proactive thinking in addressing future crises. Encouraging children to participate in decision-making related to environmental issues can be significantly enhanced by promoting technological solutions. Organising innovation gatherings or hackathons

⁹⁸ "Active participation" in this context means that children are not only included in discussions about environmental issues but are also empowered to contribute ideas, make decisions, and take action that influences the outcomes of decisions on environmental issues.

specifically for children can foster critical thinking and practical problem-solving skills. To further support this initiative, the government should offer incentives such as grants or scholarships for innovative projects that address environmental challenges. This approach not only empowers children, but also involves them directly in the creation of solutions, making them active contributors to environmental progress.

Likewise, community-based initiatives led by children could have a significant impact on environmental awareness and action. Children-led campaigns focused on water conservation, waste management, and sustainable practices could be enabled and funded. Establishing neighbourhood environmental watches, where children volunteer to monitor water use and suggest community-based solutions, could further empower children to take an active role in environmental stewardship. Encouraging research projects carried out by younger people and fostering partnerships with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that focus on child rights and environmental issues are essential steps to take. Creating a database of successful youth-driven environmental projects could serve as a reference point and inspiration for future endeavours.

Finally, it is imperative that the government forge partnerships with NGOs specialising in child rights and environmental issues. These collaborations could foster structured and impactful child participation initiatives. Beyond these partnerships, it would be crucial for the government to explore exchange programmes that enable South African youth to learn from their counterparts in countries with advanced practices in child participation in environmental issues. If it were to diligently implement these recommendations, South Africa would not only enhance its ability to manage future environmental crises but also empower its younger generation to assume ownership of the campaign to address climate change and become key stakeholders in shaping the nation's environmental trajectory.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The contributions of each author to this manuscript are as follows: Rufaro Emily Chikuruwo conceptualised the idea and drafted the initial manuscript; Christa Rautenbach provided critical revisions and finalised the manuscript for submission. As such, both authors contributed to the final output on an equal footing.

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