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Written contribution
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Object: Submission of written contribution relative to the role of children as agents of change in the environmental context

Title: The role of Colombian youth as agents of change in the context of the Colombian water crisis

Context: The worldwide water crisis

State leaders and experts present at the World Economic Forum (2016) discussed the "global risks" posed to humanity. The list of potential calamities includes nuclear warfare, infectious disease pandemic, and globalized financial crisis – scenarios which would seriously compromise the social, political and economic world order. In addition, the occurrence of a world-wide drinking water shortage is identified as an increasingly likely scenario with disastrous damaging effects to humankind.

Intensive agriculture and cattle farming, industrial activity, demographic growth and widening social inequalities are among the factors exercising an unprecedented stress on global water resources. The rarefaction of water has led authors to coin the neologism "blue gold" in reference to a resource which is increasingly disputed by civil society, government and industry.

On July 28 2010, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution¹ recognizing water access as a "fundamental human right, essential to the full exercise of the right to life and all other human rights". The resolution calls upon States and international organizations to deploy all effective measures to guarantee populations' access to "clean, safe, potable, accessible and affordable water and sanitation".

Despite such innovations in international human rights law, implementation remains problematic. According to a study lead conjointly by the WHO and UNICEF (2015)², 663 million individuals (1 out of 10) do not have access to potable water. In addition, 2.4 billion people (1 out of 3) lack access to sanitary infrastructure. The same study estimates that only a third of the world's schools enjoy access to potable water and toilets.

¹ GA/10967

² Progress on Sanitation and Drinking Water. 2015 Update and MDG Assessment:

http://files.unicef.org/publications/files/Progress_on_Sanitation_and_Drinking_Water_2015_Update_.pdf

Studies demonstrate that the effects of the water crisis disproportionately impact the children and youth of the world. Unsanitary water and sanitary infrastructure pose a threat to postnatal children aged 1-5, who are especially vulnerable to life-threatening waterborne illnesses such as diarrhoea and malaria. In addition, water access is especially problematic in States with developing economies, where children and youth represent a considerable portion of the population from a demographic perspective. Therefore, given their physical vulnerability, the high proportion of children and youth in populations most exposed to the risks of an eventual world-wide water shortage, as well as the limitations imposed on children and youth in terms of economic and political power, it is possible to state that this "humanitarian crisis in the making" will most strongly impact the young citizens of the world. Organized, proactive, and urgent intervention is necessary in order to mitigate the effects of the humanitarian water crisis.

The Colombian case

In 2010, a report published by the United Nations Environmental Programme³ stated that Colombia stood among the 9 States to possess 60% of the planet's freshwater resources. In 2015, Colombia had fallen to the 24th place, and despite heavy annual rainfall, 50% of freshwater resources are said to be compromised in quality. Extensive agriculture and farming, mining, metalworking, and the development of tourism are among the factors contributing to the rapid and steady deterioration of Colombian water resources. The Colombian institute of hydrology, meteorology and environmental sciences (IDEAM) sounded the alarm, stating that in the absence of State measures, by 2025 approximately 69% of Colombian citizens' everyday lives will be seriously impacted by their non-access to quality drinking water.

The dire current situation – and potentially catastrophic future projections – have brought a group of Colombian academics to create SieNi, an association whose goal is to raise national awareness on the issue and produce new practices of water preservation and use that are democratic, environmentally sound, and respectful of human rights. The following sections discuss SieNi's intervention strategy, which attributes a central role to Colombian youth, who are given the opportunity to lead scientific research projects on community-specific water problems. Despite the fact that the project is in its pilot phase, its youth-centred strategy to tackle an environmental issue is highly innovative and constitutes an exception in the Colombian children's rights and environmental rights landscape. It also has the potential to be replicated outside of the Colombian context.

SieNi, Education for Water Protection in Colombia

SieNi, Education for Water Protection in Colombia, is a non-profit organization based in Switzerland. It was launched in June 2016, and was created under the impetus of the Association of Colombian Researchers in Switzerland (ACIS). In order to achieve the twin goals of heightened social awareness and public action in the field of water conservation in Colombia, SieNi's strategy is primarily focused on the empowerment of Colombian youth through science. In close partnership Ondas-COLCIENCIAS (the Colombian government's main program for child and youth science education), The National University of Colombia, and the Education and Development Corporation, SieNi will organize science projects centred on

³ UNEP annual report: <http://www.unep.org/annualreport/2010/pdfs/CLIMATE-CHANGE.pdf>

water-related themes throughout schools in two of the regions most impacted by water shortage and contamination.

In the framework of SieNi's strategy, teenage children (aged approx. 12-16) of all genders living and schooled in the Colombian regions of Magdalena and Boyacá will be involved in research projects, therefore ensuring that scientific research is made accessible to underprivileged in the most economically underdeveloped regions of the country, and contributing to raise data on local water issues that is essential to decision-takers.

1'200 pupils from the two aforementioned departments will form 60 research teams. While supported by a teacher trained in team management and in basic water science, and a scientific mentor specialized in environmental sciences, the water teams will have six months to conduct an environmental and socioeconomic diagnosis of the hydrographical micro-basin in which they live. Throughout the following six months, the water teams will design an action-research project based on their diagnosis and carry it out involving key members of their community. At the end of the school year, their results will be made public to local authorities and contribute to two regional water observatories for tracking the national water situation. On the following year, a forum will be organized to present the observatories to national stakeholders and take measures to scale the project to a national level.

How do children of different ages, gender and social backgrounds use their capacities, competencies and experiences to respond to environmental issues, and how can these skills be used in actions to protect the environment? Please provide examples (e.g. reports, films, studies, drawings, photographs or any other media of the child's choice)

The activities undertaken by the organization SieNi are based on the belief that youth – if provided adequate pedagogical, scientific, and logistical support – are ideally placed to identify and investigate environmental issues affecting their communities from a bottom-up perspective, grounding their research in an understanding of local cultures and norms, needs and aspirations.

SieNi equally holds to be true that if provided adequate support and guidance, adolescents possess the ability to carry out scientific research that is methodologically sound, ethical, and relevant to the advancement of the state of knowledge on issues linked to local and national water degradation and/or conservation. In the particular case of water conservation in Colombia, youth can contribute to fill a knowledge gap which is crucial to decision-takers by producing knowledge about their own hydrographical micro-basin. In this sense, the youth-led environmental research organized by SieNi is by no means tokenistic: As producers of knowledge, Colombian youth become legitimate stakeholders and actors in public policy debates at local and national levels.

In a recent study⁴ carried out by postgraduate students enrolled in the University of Geneva's Master's degree programme in Children's Rights Studies, findings demonstrated that SieNi is the sole organisation in Colombia to use involvement in science as a means to empower youth in the context of environmental degradation. SieNi is hopeful that the research produced by youth will provide the scientific basis and motivational impetus towards the creation of an independent national institution dedicated to the monitoring and protection of Colombia's water resources.

⁴ Report available via: <http://www.sieni.co/partenaires>

How and to what extent can children find out basic facts about environmental issues that affect them in their communities and beyond (e.g. waste, pollution, water and sanitation), participate meaningfully in environmental decision-making, and seek justice when environmental harm has been caused? What obstacles hinder them from exercising these rights (e.g. lack of child-friendly information or the burden of proof) and what are examples of good practices (e.g. regarding involvement of children in decision-making on urban planning)?

Basic information on Colombian environmental issues is readily available on the internet and in physical reading material. However, the available material provides an inaccurate account of the phenomenon, given that it fails to take into account the hydrographical micro-basin-specific issues that bear different effects on the country's diverse population, and that is crucial to informing policy making. The present paper takes SieNi as an example of innovative practice to fill this gap, by allowing youth to create knowledge themselves, and to subsequently convey their findings in a manner deemed most accessible to children and youth.