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Children at the heart of global climate resilience

Without children, there is no future—and no solution—to the climate crisis.

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Children will have a voice in response to climate change. — Photo: Freepik

According to UNICEF, one billion children—almost half of the world's 2.2 billion children—live in countries at extremely high climate risk. This figure alone would be enough to classify climate and meteorological disasters as a direct threat to the rights, dignity, and survival of future generations.

Yet, children are often treated as bystanders in official negotiations or as leaders of the future, rather than as essential partners in the present. They are not only the most affected, but also subjects of rights and agents of change, whose voices, creativity, and capacity for innovation are fundamental to imagining a future in which all can thrive. Ignoring this is a moral and strategic error: it denies the vision, urgency, and courage that children bring—qualities indispensable if humanity is to survive the era of the climate crisis.

This month, in Brasília, the Pontifical Academies of Sciences and Social Sciences (PAS/PASS), in partnership with the Alana Institute, held the Resilient Brazil Summit on Children and Climate Action, one of ten regional summits leading up to COP30. The PAS/PASS Global Summits represent the most significant and systematic effort yet to chart practical, regional pathways to climate resilience. Unlike other high-level gatherings, these summits transcend borders, beliefs, and disciplines, connecting mayors, governors, Indigenous leaders, scientists, and, crucially, children and young people.

The summits are producing detailed resilience plans for every region: from the Amazon to Africa, from Asia to Oceania, and the Americas. No previous initiative matches this in scale or commitment to science and justice. And Brasília is, naturally, an ideal setting for a climate resilience summit, in part because Brazil, especially the Amazon, is not just one of several regions at risk; it is widely recognized as the most crucial region for the planet's future.

Often called the "lungs of the planet," the Amazon regulates rainfall patterns throughout South America, stores immense amounts of carbon, and harbors one of the richest biodiversity webs on Earth. But today, it is in danger. Temperatures in the Amazon are rising faster than the global average. Deforestation, drought, and fires are pushing it toward a tipping point where vast areas of forest could transform into savanna, releasing even more carbon, disrupting ecosystems, and destabilizing the global climate system.

If the Amazon fails, the planet fails. And when ecosystems collapse, it is children who suffer the most severe consequences, facing hunger, displacement, interrupted education, illness, and mental health impacts.

Therefore, the Brasilia Summit's singular focus on children is essential. They are not only the most vulnerable; they are also powerful agents of change. At the Summit, children participated in every panel, presenting bold ideas for nature-based solutions for water treatment, energy conservation, nutrition, and much more.

The questions they asked reflect a moral clarity that cuts through political excuses. Their lived experiences make the crisis undeniable, and their imagination and courage offer the most powerful source of hope. As Pope Francis teaches in *Laudato Si*, “the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor are one.” Nowhere is this truer than in the faces of children in flooded villages, drought-stricken farms, or burned forests.

The PAS/PASS Global Summits are guided by the MAST framework: Mitigation, Adaptation, and Social Transformation. Mitigation requires urgent reductions in climate risks and the protection of vital ecosystems like the Amazon. Adaptation requires investment in resilience, especially in education, health, and infrastructure that protects children. And Social Transformation demands a new ethic of care, one that abandons the throwaway culture and builds, in its place, a culture of eco-care.

But the most radical, and perhaps most important, innovation of these summits is the recognition that children must be at the center of this transformation. They are not a group to be “consulted”; they are protagonists in the drama of human survival. If we exclude their experiences and ideas today, we will betray the intergenerational justice of tomorrow.

The Amazon makes the stakes clear: what happens here will echo everywhere. Therefore, the eyes of the world have turned to Brasília, and this summit must no longer be a conference of speeches, but rather the cradle of real and achievable commitments that recognize children as partners in humanity's quest for resilience.

We must therefore ensure that children, their rights and their best interests are a priority in the climate negotiations at COP30 and all future COPs, as well as in the decisions of States, governments and communities, because a better world for children is a better world for everyone.

The PAS/PASS Global Summits, which stretch from Brazil to Japan, India, China, Oceania, Africa, and beyond, offer the most comprehensive attempt yet to answer the central question of our time: What will it take to protect our common home, including children and generations yet to be born? And how can we do this together?

And so, the test is simple: when the children of the Amazon, and the world, ask what we have done to defend their future, what will our answer be? Let us remember the words of Pope Francis: “The Earth is not an inheritance we receive from our parents, but a loan from our children to us, to care for, to make flourish, and to give back to them.”

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