



Save the Children

Young climate activists leading the way on climate action

The Experience of Nepal

Impact Story

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ADVOCACY WIN

The Supreme Court of Nepal halted the construction of an international airport that would have compromised the environment, biodiversity and wildlife of a heavily forested area and the Parsa National Park. Consequently, this would have several effects on children's basic rights, posing an immediate threat to the enjoyment of many, if not all, of the rights protected by the Convention of the Rights of Child.



Credit: Nepalese Youth for Climate Action (NYCA)

CONTEXT

Even if airports contribute to local economy and employment, on the other hand, associated with both construction and operation of the airports. With one of the worst air pollution in the world¹, Nepal is struggling with a number of environmental issues, such as deforestation, climate change, energy and species conservation. In the country there are, at the moment, 43 airports, including two international airports currently active and two future international airports.

Children and young people bear the greatest burden of climate change as they are more vulnerable than adults to the extreme weather, toxic hazards and diseases it causes. Exposure to air pollution during childhood can harm the healthy functioning of children's lungs, and this sometimes has lifelong implications.

The earth has a limited capacity for what it can bear in terms of human activities, after which it will undergo possibly terrible changes. Among others, many of these boundaries, that are related to climate change, biodiversity loss, air pollution, deforestation, will be exacerbated by the airport construction. Creating a sustainable country (and world) for children requires focusing on all the different dimensions that are essential to a healthy planet.²

The implementation of impact evaluation studies and the involvement of the local communities in all stages of development could help reaching a balance between the growth of airports and its environmental consequences.

¹ Environmental Performance Index (EPI) 2022: <https://epi.yale.edu/downloads/epi2022report06062022.pdf>

² For more information: <https://www.unicef.org/media/105376/file/UNICEF-climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis.pdf>

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

After the release, on February 2017, of an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), stating that the construction of the airport would cause the disruption of 2.4 million trees and identifying negative impacts deriving both from the construction and operation of the airport, the Forest Ministry of Nepal is denying the permission, to the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil, to cut down the trees as it advocates the necessity of a concrete plan clearly identifying a land for re-plantation and all the related costs. Actually, such massive reforestation would be an ambitious, and maybe useless goal. In fact, it takes decades to build species diversity and fully functioning forest ecosystems, and they still cannot replace native forests. According to environmentalists, **the more feasible and less damaging solution would be to look an alternative site** for the airport.

To avoid the construction of the Nijgadh airport and the consequent impact on environment, a network of youth from all over Nepal, helped and supported by international organizations such as Save the Children International and WWF Nepal, started campaigning for the same agenda: to stop the government plan and avoid the destruction of 2.4 million trees spread in more than 7000 hectares³.

On September 2019 a petition at the Supreme court of Nepal has been filed by nine individuals, including Ranju Hajur Pande, an environmentalist, and former secretary Dwarika Nath Dhungel, seeking a judiciary intervention to stop the construction of the airport by changing the airport's location and the consequent felling of a large number of trees and, at the same time, Senior advocates Prakash Mani Sharma and Ranju Hajur Pandey had separately filed a writ petition alleging that the construction of the airport in Nijgadh would cause irreparable damage to the environment. The Supreme Court has admitted the petition and, after the initial hearing, it has ordered the government to put the process on hold until the final verdict is made.

Finally, on May 2022, **the Supreme Court ordered the government to find an alternative site** for the construction of the airport. The fate of the Nijgadh International Airport had been hanging in the balance for years, with successive governments pushing for it and environmentalists resisting it with an equal effort. After a range of complementary actions and proactive efforts, the objective has been reached, thanks also to the contribution of different actors such as experts, environmentalists, activists, politicians, the civil society; but the driving force behind all has been the youth.

“
The interventionist decision of the government has caused an unbearable blow to the environment, but the decision of the court has raised a hope.
”

- Prem Soni Rauniyar - 14 years

With the purpose of defending their home land, their planet and the future generations, young people from Nepal, organized in networks and association, have actively advocated and campaigned to prevent the construction of Nijgadh Airport for years. This example gave the Nepali youth the chance to understand the importance of a **strong team** and their power as a **driver of changes**. Thanks also to this experience and this win, young people from Nepal are creating networks and organizations to keep fighting for a better country and a better world.

³ A Report on the issue of Nijgadh Airport, Kathmandu University (2020).

ADVOCACY/CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES

Advocating policy change at all levels

Young people from Nepal's activism is raising awareness of climate change and environmental issues with impacts on all the country. Thanks to their knowledge of the different impacts of the climate crisis, many of them decided to become climate warriors and defend biodiversity and people's livelihood.

Save the Children had a background role in this campaign and was able to support it by working very closely with local organizations and youth networks by giving them financial, technical and moral support.

Red Alert Nepal Campaign⁴ is one of the way STC contributes to the climate action conversations: via an integrated climate and environment approach to bring youth and children's voices to the forefront. It is a network of networks that brings together different organizations and activists from Nepal.

Nepali youth are feeling betrayed by the earlier generations, and stating that, lately, the impact of climate change has been louder and more pronounced than ever, they are determined to make a point to their whole country.

I. At district level

Nijgadh is a town and municipality in Bara District in the Narayani Zone, province number 2 of south-eastern Nepal. The criteria of selection for the site of the airport have been the location, topography of the area, climatic conditions and the distance from the capital, Kathmandu. Even though the area seemed the perfect place for the construction, the project could be a massive damage for environment and local society.

Thanks to the young Nepali's actions, the local community will not have damage regarding the majority of streams in Bara, which originate from the proposed site for the airport and irrigate hundreds of acres of lands. Also, the wildlife and biodiversity of the region, and in particular of Parsa National Park, will not be disturbed.

The campaign also contributed to save part of the Tangiya community from displacement. In fact, the project would have hampered 1.476 households of the settlement⁵.

II. At national level

The network of environmental activists that pushed for saving the forest in Bara district, involves young people and organizations spread all over Nepal, thus giving to the cause national resonance.

In fact, construction-related impacts include changes in land use, air pollution, noise pollution, operation of quarry sites, changes in drainage network, soil erosion and operation of the work camps. Operational impacts include changes in the surface hydrology and ground water hydrology, soil erosion, changes in the micro climate, air pollution, noise pollution and climate change. All of these effects would have affected everyone in the country, despite the geographical location, so the Supreme Court Order could be considered as a win for the whole Nepal.

⁴ For more information: <https://nepal.savethechildren.net/about-us/red-alert>

⁵ For more information: <https://journals.librarypublishing.arizona.edu/jpe/article/2304/galley/4805/view/>

Children and young people in Nepal are already experiencing the impacts of climate change, that is why they have the right to contribute to the cause. By living in their communities, they often have a unique and very clear insights into the local environment so their practical experience together with their studies, often climate-centered, give them the possibility to identify strengths and weaknesses of a certain area. Also, they will have to live the consequences of current decisions regarding environment, so their engagement is both an asset and a win.

Nepalese youth are already working at a national level to spread the knowledge of climate change and its impact to local people and they are gaining their space in the decision-making processes concerning sustainable development at a local, national and international level.

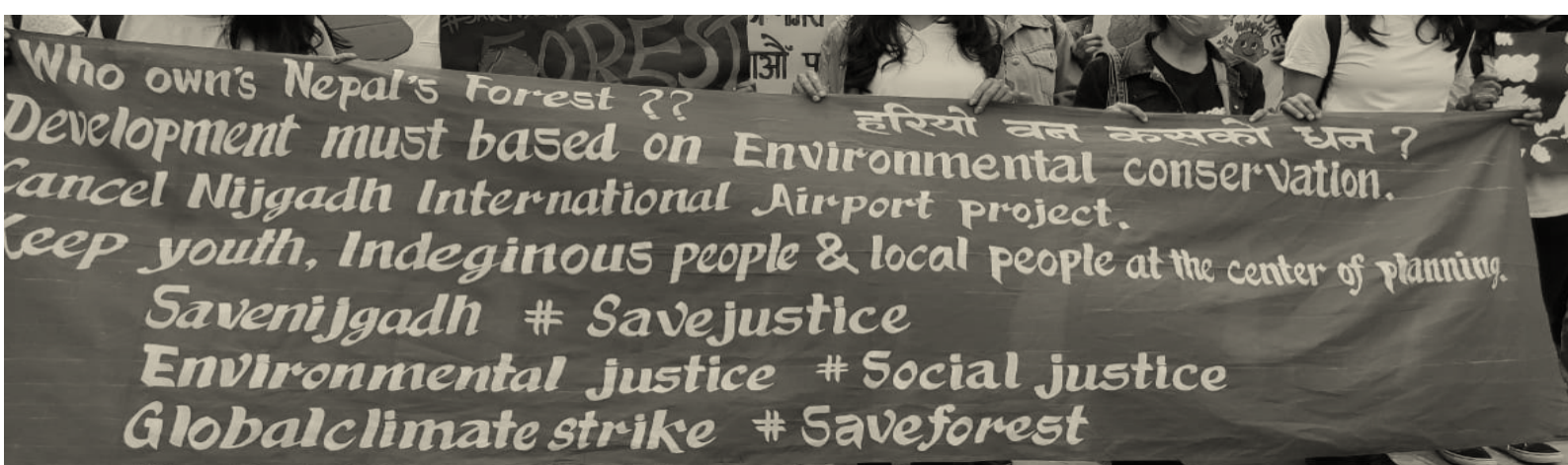
Progresses has been made, as it demonstrates the government's Nepal's Long-term Strategy for Net-zero Emissions of October 2021⁶ which establishes as a country's goal to achieve net zero emissions from 2020-2030 and after a period of very low emissions to full net zero by 2045. Even though Nepal is a small country which consequently contributes really less to carbon emission, it is listed as one of the most vulnerable countries in the context of climate change.

III. At global level

At the global level, young activists from Nepal are raising their voices by standing together. In fact, in the last two years they organized a Local Conference of Youth (LCOY), an annual event that aims to bring together youth around the world to host a climate event in their nations and to strengthen youth involvement in climate activism.

Through LCOYs, local youths come together to make their voice heard on the international platform, in fact, outcomes of the conference are presented in the United Nations Climate Change Conference of Youth (COY). The COY serves as a space for capacity building and policy training, in order to prepare young people for their participation at Conference of the Parties (COP), the annual UN Climate Change Conference.

So far, youth from all over the world are more connected than ever, so examples such as the Nijgadh airport case can be inspiring for young people from other countries and represent a spark of hope.



⁶ For more information: <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/NepalLTLEDS.pdf>

Mobilizing support to change behaviour

I. Youth networks movements

Today, young people are increasingly aware of the challenges and risks presented by the climate crisis and the importance of achieving sustainable development. That is why, all over the world, we are experiencing an unprecedented mobilization of youth stating that, after the failure of the older generation, they now want their space as accountable decision-makers.

Young people from Nepal are no exception. They are aggregating into networks, organizations and associations to protect their country from the adverse impacts of climate change by spreading awareness, advocating policies and taking action. There are different examples of how they are creating gathering and sharing spaces.

The Rethink Nijgadh Alliance is a collective, born on 2020, made up by all the actors involved in the airport case, this means not only the youth but also lawyers, environmentalists, politicians, thus testifying the importance of synergy and complementarity when a community is fighting for the same agenda.

Nepalese Youth for Climate Action (NYCA) is a youth lead coalition of the Nepalese youth and youth groups fighting against climate change. It was established in 2008, with the motto “Caring for climate, caring for ourselves”⁷ and it now counts 15 branches across the country. The association had a fundamental role in the campaign against the construction of Nijgadh airport.

Young people are drivers of change, so they can valuably contribute to climate action. They are scaling up their efforts and using their skills in education, science, technology and leadership to boost climate action.

II. Various forms of public mobilizations

Public mobilizations and campaigns were held through different forms with the purpose of reaching not only the civil society, but also major stakeholders and media. Being spread all over the country, the complementary actions took place in different places at different times and finally they became a single big action. For example, on September 2019, during the Global Week for Future⁸, a group of protesters also demonstrated in front of Swiss Embassy in Kathmandu asking Zurich Airport Ltd not to involve in cutting pristine natural rain forest and displacing endangered wildlife.

While the Supreme Court Order stopped the government’s plan, joint efforts by all stakeholders could be necessary again in the future as funds for the construction of the airport have been allocated in the current government’s budget plan.

Webinars

Q&A Sessions

Social Media Channels

Community Engagement Activities

Protests

Legal Campaign

Petitions

⁷ For more information: <https://nyca.net.np>

⁸ The September 2019 Climate Strikes were a series of strikes and protests to demand action be taken to address climate change, which took place across 4,500 locations in 150 countries at it lasted from 20–27 September 2019.

III. Red Alert Campaign – The role of Save The Children

The Red Alert Campaign is an initiative of Save the Children and has been launched in over 17 countries across the Asia. Red Alert Nepal Campaign was launched on 28th July 2020 as a part of the bigger Asia Pacific Regional Campaign launch.

It aims to support children and youth to design and lead their own campaigns and advocacy for climate and environmental action, and help them have an enhanced voice in national, regional and international efforts to prevent climate and environmental damages in the Asia-Pacific and beyond. With this campaign, STC wants to boost the voice of children but also ensure that they are protected during all the emergencies connected to the environmental crisis.

Concerning Nepal, State 2 and Karnali State are prone to different climate-induced disaster, including flood, landslides, droughts and pandemics which affect the learning, care, protection and overall development of children. Therefore, STC would like to call on the State Governments of the two States to consider taking immediate policy actions.

On 15 April 2021, Ms. Jennifer Syed (CD, Nepal CO) and Ms. Shreya KC (National Network Coordinator, NYCA) signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Save the Children and Nepalese Youth for Climate Action for ensuring the meaningful participation of children and youth and to provide different type of capacity building, as well as global and regional speaking opportunities.

In 2021, STC supported young Red Alert activists to target policymakers and publics around Climate Adaptation Summit, Leaders Climate Summit and Earth Day. So far, it successfully generated 1.4M of estimated reach on social media globally. Also, 13.2K of people globally made interactions with #RedAlertonClimate's published content. Finally, Save the Children International ranks third after UNICEF and Oxfam who speak about climate change the most.



CONCLUSION

This event gives us a perspective of how often development projects are totally disjointed from all the dimensions that should be taken into account, in particular environmental and social sustainability. At the same time, this is also an important proof of the power that can be in young people's hands and their ability to affect and influence governments that are not doing nearly enough to stop climate change from devastating our lives and our futures.

“The development of a country is only possible if the natural resources are sustained.”

- Anuska Basnet, 16 years

TOP 5 THINGS THAT WORKED

1

Networking

The young activists, aggregated into different organizations, were able to connect with each other and involve kids from all over the country

2

Children's power

Children were capable of involving the civil society and spreading knowledge about the airport case and, in general, environmental issues to the extent of receiving great media attention and coverage

3

Accountability

The voice of kids was reliable and entitled by their previous knowledge and experience of environment-related matters

4

External Support

The young activists managed to collaborate with other actors, such as experts, lawyers, politicians and organizations such as Save The Children so as to merge and exploit everyone's background and know-how

5

Campaign's Heterogeneity

The adoption of different forms of public mobilizations and campaign gave to the protest the chance to spread all over the country and to reach the greatest number of people

EVIDENCE, MILESTONES AND TIMELINE

May 2018

The Ministry of Forests and Environment approved the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the future airport

September 2019

Young activists organized a petition, signed by environmentalists, lawyers, politicians and Nepalese citizens to stop the construction of the airport

A group of lawyers filed a public interest litigation (PIL) citing the improper preparation of EIA

December 2019

Supreme Court of Nepal halted the construction of Nijgadh airport citing the improper preparation of EIA

July 2020

Save The Children (STC) launches the Red Alert Campaign in Nepal, an initiative aiming at bringing together children and youth and sustain their efforts to prevent climate and environmental catastrophe

April 2021

Save The Children (STC) and Nepalese Youth for Climate Action (NYCA) sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to design and roll out the Red Alert project in Kathmandu, Madhesh Pradesh and Karnali State

October 2021

Government issued a development strategy for Nepal “Long-term Strategy for Net-zero Emissions”

May 2022

The Supreme Court of Nepal gave its final verdict, issuing an order to the government to find an alternative to Nijgadh for building the airport

June 2022

Demonstrations have been organized in Kathmandu in support of the Supreme Court's order not to proceed with the work of constructing the Nijgadh International Airport