

Fracking: a children's rights issue



Scotland's Commissioner
for Children & Young People

Overview

Unconventional Gas (UCG) refers to gas in an unusual location whose extraction involves processes such as hydraulic fracturing, (**fracking**), coal bed methane extraction (**CBM**) and **underground coal gasification**.

These processes are controversial. Some see them as helping to contribute to the world's increasing energy demands. Others have environmental and health concerns around their impact.

To safeguard children's rights, I would urge adopting the precautionary principle. This states that if an action has a suspected risk of causing harm to the public, those proposing it must show that it does not— even if some elements of the science behind it remain unclear.

How fracking relates to children's rights

Specific UNCRC rights relating to health and the environment include:

- **Article 24**, which calls on states to recognise the right of the child to the highest attainable standard of health
- **Article 29**, which calls for education to develop the child's abilities to their fullest potential— including development of respect for the environment spend matches the reality and by encouraging recognition that young children are holders of all rights enshrined in the Convention
- **Article 17**, which states that children to have the right to get information that is important to their health.

Barriers to realising rights

Planning and public health

Laws and regulations around planning decisions often neglect their public health effects. I support introducing public health assessments during the planning process for unconventional gas projects, as this is an important rights issue which can affect children and young people. I would also urge their involvement in any consultation in a meaningful way.

Chemical exposure

The possible health risks of unconventional gas are concerning. We have a good understanding of the effects of high levels of toxic exposure, but risks around low-level exposure are harder to assess. For example, low-level exposure to certain chemicals during pregnancy can have detrimental effects on the foetus. That there is no safe dose of a carcinogen is already accepted by medical establishments, including the World Health Organisation— risks may be small, but they never disappear. [Carcinogens have been found in waste water from CBM, as have other highly toxic chemicals.](#)

Climate Change

Globally, exploiting reserves of unconventional gas could lead to a temperature rise of 3.5 C°, way beyond the [2 degree rise deemed necessary to avoid dangerous climate change](#). Scotland has ambitious climate change targets, but I feel these are jeopardised by a focus on unconventional gas.

Briefing

December 2014

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[Climate change is an urgent challenge for children.](#) They are recognised as being the most vulnerable to its impacts and the least responsible for its causes, and their vulnerability threatens the realisation of their rights.

The Commissioner's key messages

- Unconventional gas extraction may lead to unavoidable environmental and health impacts even if extracted with caution. The precautionary principle should be adopted in such operations.
- Some chemicals can have far reaching effects at very low doses and the idea of a cut off point below which no harm is assumed is misleading.
- The child's right to health is threatened by climate change, especially when health sustaining conditions such as clean water are compromised.
- The increase of greenhouse gas emissions contribute to air pollution. UNICEF identifies at least 15 rights at risk from climate change related setbacks.

Further information

For further information on any issues raised in this briefing, please contact Máire McCormack, Head of Policy: maire.mccormack@sccyp.org.uk

For more detail on the Commissioner's position on this issue, [read his full length briefing on fracking.](#)