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Full Day Discussion on Human Rights and Climate Change

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Speaking points - Mary Robinson

President, Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice

I would like to thank President Rücker and the sponsors of the panel Bangladesh and the Philippines, for inviting me to take part in this important discussion today.

President Anote Tong of the Republic of Kiribati and Minister Mahmood Ali from Bangladesh have clarified the very real impacts of climate change on the enjoyment of human rights on people in their countries. They echo what the Prime Minister of Fiji said during the High Level Segment a few days ago. These impacts on people's lives and their enjoyment of their rights are what brought me to the issue of climate change – and what continues to motivate me to find urgent and equitable global responses to the climate crisis.

Last month, my Foundation co-hosted an event here in Geneva with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, where we brought the human rights and climate change communities together for a Climate Justice Dialogue. At that event I reflected that when I had the honour to serve as High Commissioner for Human Rights, from 1997 - 2002, climate change was not front of mind. In the years that have passed the impacts of what then seemed a distant threat have become a harsh reality that brought me to establish a Foundation on climate justice.

The Human Rights Council has responded to this reality through a series of resolutions, and that commitment to highlighting the negative impacts of climate change on the enjoyment of human rights continues in today's panel.

Time is running out to avoid dangerous climate change. This year, 2015, presents a unique opportunity to set the global community on a new path; away from fossil fuel based development and towards a sustainable alternative that will ensure the protection of the rights of generations to come. This move to sustainable development must enable the full participation of all countries regardless of their current levels of emissions

or level of development. To be effective all countries need to be enabled and supported to be part of the transition. More than any other challenge we have ever faced, climate change confronts us with the reality of our interdependence. No country alone can protect their citizens from the impacts of dangerous climate change; we must find ways of working together to tackle this global problem.

Looking to the specific themes for this panel: firstly, I would like to address the challenges towards the realization of human rights for all, including the right to development, in particular those in vulnerable situations in a climate affected world:

As we know those who are most vulnerable to climate change are those segments of the population that are already in vulnerable situations owing to factors such as geography, poverty, gender, age, indigenous or minority status and disability.

People in these circumstances around the world need to have their rights invoked in two ways:

ONE, to have their rights protected in the face of the impacts of climate change: this can be realised through support for adaptation to build resilience and capacity to cope with climate related events. There will also be incidences where extreme events surpass the ability to adapt – and displacement and migration become the only avenues for survival – in this case human solidarity and increased support of the international community will be critical to protecting human rights.

TWO, to be supported to be part of the transition to low carbon, climate resilient development. In making the transition to sustainable development we must ensure that we leave no one behind. A human rights framing to our development and climate responses can maximise the potential for inclusion, participation and equality.

In both instances a focus on rights can inform and strengthen our response and maximise the effectiveness of our local, national and international climate actions.

Secondly –with regard to this panel's focus on best practices in promoting and protecting human rights in addressing the adverse effects of climate change.

The HRC has already noted in resolutions that human rights obligations, standards and principles have the potential to inform and strengthen international, regional and national policymaking in the area of climate change, promoting policy coherence, legitimacy and sustainable outcomes.

This is reflected in the commitment by Parties to the UNFCCC to respect human rights in all climate actions.

A study commissioned by my Foundation identified some countries that are actively linking human rights and climate change in their policy making and reporting on this to the UNFCCC and the HRC. Unfortunately these countries are in the minority and more work is needed to share and learn from these experiences and scale up these good practices.

Further work by my Foundation captured good practices in using human rights principles and obligations to inform climate policies and actions in countries like Vietnam, Ecuador and Costa Rica.

As an example, let me share with you what I learned about human rights informing climate action in Vietnam.

In Vietnam, the right to education is conferred on Vietnamese citizens in the country's constitution, which recognises the role of education for "regions and peoples with particular challenges" including vulnerable people living in the mountainous and low lying parts of Vietnam.

These rights are also reflected in Vietnam's National Strategy and Law on Gender Equality. Consequently, the National Strategy on Climate Change launched in 2011 achieves real significance in the context of rights through specific targets to guarantee, among other things, food security and gender equality.

As a result actions to adapt to climate related disasters are informed by rights and are empowering previously vulnerable women to be actors in the national response to climate change.

Women such as Ran Nguyen a farmer in the Bing Ding province in central Vietnam, who like many farmers in rural Vietnam, has suffered due to increasingly frequent and severe storms associated with climate change that have resulted in loss of life and livelihoods. Ran participated in a project implemented by UN Women, the government of Vietnam and the Vietnam Women's Union, to build the resilience of women and their communities to extreme climate events. As Ran put it herself

"Thanks to good preparation… …nobody in the village was killed or injured in last year's storm season."

Returning to the event my Foundation co-hosted with the OHCHR last month – participants in the dialogue made suggestions for practical near-term actions to enable the human rights and climate change communities to work more closely together. A number of these recommendations are relevant to our discussions here today – for example they suggested:

- **The creation of fora under the UNFCCC and the HRC to allow the human rights and climate change communities to share examples and good practices. An initiative called the Geneva Pledge was developed which is encouraging this to happen at national level.**

- **that the Human Rights Community prepare guidance for climate actors on how to integrate human rights obligations standards and principles into their work; and**

- **that countries be encouraged to examine the linkages between human rights and climate change when preparing their reports to the Universal Periodic Review of the HRC.**

I look forward to hearing from my fellow panellists and State and non-state participants in this discussion on your experiences in linking human rights and climate change and your ideas on practical steps to strengthen our collective response to this immense challenge.