

## OHCHR Expert Meeting on Climate Change and Human Rights

*Excellencies, colleagues and friends,*

On behalf of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, it is my privilege to welcome you to this two-day expert meeting on human rights and climate change. I am honoured to be joined in this opening segment by Mary Robinson, the President of the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice, H.E. Ambassador Elayne Whyte Gomez, Permanent Representative of Costa Rica, and H.E. Ambassador Negash Kebret, Permanent Representative of Ethiopia.

I would like to thank the Mary Robinson Foundation and the Geneva Pledge for Human Rights in Climate Action for co-sponsoring this meeting and all those who continue to make efforts to promote human rights in climate action.

Less than 12 months after, people around the world rejoiced in the passage of the first universal, legally binding agreement to mitigate climate change and adapt to its impacts, today we can celebrate that yesterday that agreement reached the threshold for formal entry into force. More than 70 countries have ratified the Paris Agreement including the world's two largest emitters, China and the United States. This means that November this year the 22nd Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Marrakech will be the first meeting of the parties to the Paris Agreement.

Such a rapid ascent for such a complex agreement is unusual and a clear sign of the **urgency and importance of the subject matter**. Climate change is a threat to all of us, to future generations, and to the enjoyment of human rights now and for the years ahead. The Paris Agreement openly acknowledges this and its Preamble calls explicitly for States to **respect and promote human rights in climate actions**.

Still, Paris was but one step. Its ambition does **not** match our need. We know that two degrees of warming will be too much warming, yet we are not nearly on track to meet even this objective.

**2015 was the hottest year on modern record**, a full one degree Celsius above pre-industrial levels. So far, **this year has been even hotter**, each month seemingly producing new record-breaking highs and new cycles of bad news. This year, the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, the largest living structure in the world, an ecosystem visible from space upon which countless people depend for their livelihoods, suffered an unprecedented bleaching event from which scientists fear it may never recover.

*Excellencies,*

A world of **unchecked climate change** as a graveyard for entire ecosystems, is also a grave yard for entire peoples and entire ways of living. Such is the magnitude of the impact some of us have upon this planet, others of us are suffering the most profound consequences – as this plays out on land and at sea, in the atmosphere and in the soil, in ways predicted and in ways not yet understood.

Breaking the cycle of warming is imperative, lest we have the dubious distinction of becoming the generation that stood idly by while the planet, the poorest and our greatest natural marvels are reduced to cinders.

What can we do?

First, we must do more to recognize and highlight the **impacts of climate change on peoples' lives**. Climate change is not a threat of some abstract, post-apocalyptic future, it is a clear and present danger – an everyday hazard already for countless millions of people right now. For example, an estimated **22.5 million people each year are displaced** by climate and weather-related hazards. We must unequivocally denounce those who deny this reality, who have delayed action in their own self-interest, and whose acts have increased our common peril.

And we must do more to highlight the human behaviours that drive those noxious impacts. Astonishing that even climate change attracts to it human toxins of racism and sexism. Climate change efforts suffer when, on the one hand, countries seek to deny women access to modern forms of birth control- with gravest consequences where fertility rates are highest. But on the other hand, it has proven so much easier to focus population growth as compared to populations' consumption - leaving so often unexamined and unproblematised the lives of the privileged. The average long-term carbon impact of a child born in the U.S. – along with all of its descendants – is more than 160 times the impact of a child born in Bangladesh.

Protecting people starts with better understanding of the **relationship between climate change and human well-being**, including of climate risks and the corresponding obligations of States and other duty-bearers. By assembling the esteemed group of climate and human rights experts here today, OHCHR hopes to contribute to this effort.

Today, the **first panel** will focus on the **disproportionate impacts of climate change on particular persons and groups** and the **second panel** will look into **climate change and displacement**. I hope that these discussions will contribute to a greater awareness of the impacts of climate change on persons everywhere.

By increasing awareness, we can **catalyse informed climate action that benefits all people**, particularly those most vulnerable to climate change. This will be the **focus of the second day** of discussion. You will hear from treaty-body experts, special rapporteurs and national human rights institutions about the role of human rights mechanisms in monitoring and addressing the impacts of climate change and holding duty-bearers accountable for their human rights and climate commitments.

You will also have the opportunity to hear from climate negotiators, representatives of relevant UN agencies and civil society advocates in a **discussion of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)**. In particular, the discussion will consider the implications of the Paris Agreement which recognizes that all States should respect and promote human rights when taking action to implement the UNFCCC.

*Ladies and gentlemen,*

At a minimum, rights-based action at the UNFCCC should be informed by sound climate science and impact analysis that is accessible to all persons. It should be directed toward mitigating and adapting to the worst impacts of climate change, particularly on those most vulnerable. Such action should be participatory, just, equitable, collaborative, transparent and non-discriminatory.

The Lima Programme of Work on climate and gender should be strengthened, to build human rights capacity in all climate actors, to ensure rights-based climate adaptation and mitigation, and human rights safeguards in climate financing mechanisms,.

The May this year UNFCCC Gender and Climate Change Workshop highlighted that involving women in decision-making processes, providing them access to loans and new technologies, and sharing information yielded outcomes that reduced emissions and improved lives.

Empowering communities to make land use decisions reduces deforestation rates and related emissions substantially. In Ecuador, the Socio Bosque programme offers direct economic incentives to local landowners for conserving their forests and as a result had protected over 1.4 million hectares of forest by 2014, also protects the livelihoods of local indigenous peoples.

Where land rights are not adequately recognized, a strong legal system can protect both communities and the environment. In Ecuador, the Saray-aku contested oil exploration in their territories. In 2012, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights called for Ecuador to halt the exploration and apologize for proceeding without their consent.

When communities have ownership over their land and access to remedies, their livelihoods, traditional practices and human rights are protected and often, so is the environment.

*Colleagues,*

As we approach COP22, we are at a **critical moment in determining the future course of climate action**. It is the intent of this meeting and our relevant work to support the Human Rights Council and its various mechanisms including special procedures as well as the treaty-bodies to help ensure that course of action includes rights-based climate solutions.

In this regard, last month, the **Committee on the Rights of the Child** completed a day of general discussion on the environment and the rights of the child and OHCHR issued a call for inputs to a detailed analytical study on climate change and its impacts on the rights of the child that the Office is preparing as mandated by Human Rights Council resolution 32/33.

Furthermore, we intend to **take the results of this expert meeting directly to COP22**, where we will advocate for integration of human rights throughout the UNFCCC. But this work does not come without a cost, and, in the area of climate change, we lack any dedicated capacity. Our work over the past years cannot be sustained unless this situation changes.

*Excellencies,*

Global inaction poisoned our planet and only global action can preserve it. By doing our part here today and enumerating concrete recommendations for such action, we can contribute to managing the inter-connections and inter-dependencies between people, planet, peace and prosperity. We can take a critical step toward promoting a better world for this and future generations.

I wish you the best in tackling this challenge. May you have a lively and productive discourse over the next two days.

Thank you.