It is a pleasure to be here today at what promises to be a challenging meeting. I would like to particularly express my thanks to OHCHR for organising this event. They have continued to have a dedication to the intersections of human rights and climate change, and much of where we are today comes from these efforts.

The week before last I was at the High Level Summit on Refugees and Migrants and I listened to Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein in his role as High Commissioner on Human Rights, an office I once held. He made a powerful speech that challenged many in the room. It was founded on a call for action. He urged everyone to not just continue to hold meetings and give statements but to reflect these realities in action, or face the judgement of history.

This is a sentiment that I think is worth repeating here. Last year, in Paris, we were successful in including human rights for the first time in the text of an international climate treaty. The language is
preambular, and as such, informs both the context and purpose of the treaty as a whole.

However this will be meaningless without action at the operative level. I saw in Bonn, during the meetings of the subsidiary bodies, a lack of understanding amongst the representatives of many parties on the role of human rights in their work. This November the parties again gather to set down the rules for implementation. The window of opportunity is closing fast. The ratification of the Paris Agreement occurred more rapidly than we anticipated, and this is great news for the planet. The Paris Agreement will enter into force before the COP. We must be aware though that with the Agreement coming into force parties will want the rules and implementation decided. It is in this process we must ensure that human rights stand as foundational principles. We will not be able to bring human rights sensitive approaches in ‘after the fact’. Delegates and parties need to see the linkages now.

It is easy to pretend that action taken to combat climate change and its impacts is by its very nature human rights sensitive. I have said repeatedly that one of the most important actions we can take for rights is to ensure that the world limits warming to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C. The accomplishment of this goal will have incalculable benefits, it will reduce impacts of climate
change on human health, on the right to housing, food, water and it will reduce adaptation based migration and all of the potential for human misery that can bring.

I recently co-hosted a meeting entitled ‘Climate Displacement and Dignity: the Needs of the Most Vulnerable Countries’. There I listened to Ministers from countries as diverse as Ethiopia, Tuvalu and Nepal describe how climate change was impacting their nations, and forcing people to move from their homes. This threatened their rights to housing, to an adequate standard of living amongst many others. For these situations, and those communities vulnerable to climate impacts swift and effective action to combat climate change is one of the most powerful things that countries can do to protect human rights.

But that only tells half the story. I don’t need to tell anyone in this room the impacts that climate change mitigation action can cause. We are already getting reports that human rights violations are increasing dramatically in parts of the renewable energy sector. Where large projects for hydro – or indeed solar power are imposed on communities, with no regard for land rights, water rights or environmental protection, serious human rights violations may occur. Those who try to protest and safeguard land or water rights are among the most persecuted human rights defenders in the world today. We have seen how mitigation processes, such as
the clean development mechanism of the Kyoto Protocol can lead to climate action that detracts or violates human rights.

These sorts of issues are not compatible with climate justice. We cannot address the problems that the industrialisation and consumption habits of the developed world have imposed on the planet by dispossessing vulnerable people of their homes, lands and human security.

We can see the increased connections that the global community is making between climate change and human rights across a number of processes. The Sustainable Development Goals of Agenda 2030 are perhaps the best example, and one that must be taken into account by parties this year in Marrakech. Goal 13 of the SDGs is to ‘take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts’. Agenda 2030 aims to reach the furthest behind first, and by the inclusion of Goal 13 countries have given a strong signal that the UNFCCC, in implementing the Paris Agreement, must improve its integration of people centred approaches as it moves forward in this new era.

With this convergence of international will and policy to bring human rights further into the climate change space it begs the question ‘what more needs to be done’. I think it is fairly clear that the major gap is one of capacity. Early last year, at a meeting of countries here in Geneva, I was witness to the creation of the
‘Geneva Pledge’. Pledge countries agree to enable meaningful collaboration between their national representatives to increase their understanding of how human rights obligations inform better climate action. This is the kind of action that needs to be taken on a wider level to ensure that human rights can inform climate policy making.

I hope that from this conference over the next two days you will be able to expand on this work, to find new and inventive ways to incorporate rights into the climate change process. I hope also that you are able to explore the many impacts climate change will have on the enjoyment of rights, particularly amongst the most vulnerable of society.

As many of you are aware, the impacts of climate change are an issue of justice, and so too are the actions taken to mitigate and adapt to those impacts. We cannot allow the most vulnerable in society, women, girls, those with disabilities and the poor not only to have the enjoyment of their fundamental rights eroded because of the changing climate, but to also bare the further burden of our attempts to minimise the harm. As experts in these fields it is up to you to find the ways that this injustice can be rectified and averted in the future.

I look forward to the rest of this conference, which promises to be both enlightening and practical in its outcomes. The UNFCCC is at a
critical juncture. How they implement the Paris Agreement over the next few years will set in place a regime that will either take a people centred approach and ensure climate justice, or leave us facing an uphill battle to ensure the most vulnerable are protected as we continue to struggle with the negative impacts of climate change.

Last week I attended the Hilton Humanitarian Prize Symposium in New York. The 2016 winner were the Task Force on Global Health. One of their values is very relevant to climate justice, and I want to end with it so that it can really sink in!

‘Consequential Compassion – empathy for those who are suffering must be linked to effective action to alleviate their suffering.’