The climate crisis is a human rights crisis

Climate change threatens the enjoyment of all human rights, including the rights to health, water, food, housing, self-determination, and life itself. Climate change is man-made. It is a result of policy choices that breach the affirmative obligations of States to respect, protect and fulfil human rights. And these policy choices are harming millions of people now.

Climate Justice requires climate solutions grounded in human rights, equality and non-discrimination; the participation of those most affected; the equitable sharing of costs, burdens and benefits; accountability; and rule of law. This must include accountability for polluters, redress for victims, and protection of the vulnerable in all prevention, response, mitigation and remedial measures.

It requires the adoption of smart policies that address and are up to the scale of the problem. The Paris Agreement, the first universal legally binding climate change agreement, represents an initial step in this direction. It calls upon States to respect, promote and consider their respective human rights obligations, including the right to development, when taking action to address climate change. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 13 also calls for urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts within the larger context of the 2030 Agenda, itself a human rights-based document. On 2 July 2018, the Human Rights Council adopted the latest in a series of resolutions on human rights and climate change (A/HRC/RES/38/4) which calls, among other things, for States to consider human rights within the context of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and to adopt a comprehensive, integrated and gender-responsive approach to climate change adaptation and mitigation policies.

Facts and figures

The planet’s average temperature has increased by 1.1°C since the late 19th century. The Paris Agreement calls upon States to hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

The global sea level rose about 20 cm in the last century.

250,000 additional deaths per year from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress between 2030 and 2050 due to climate change.

21.7 million internally displaced people each year due to weather-related disasters since 2008.

Our role

UN Human Rights aims, in line with the 2030 Agenda, and the Paris Agreement on climate change, to ensure a human rights-based approach to all climate change action. Such an approach demands high ambition and adaptation and mitigation measures that are shaped by affected communities and accountable to them.

How?

- Through collaboration with partners to integrate human rights in environmental laws and policies;
- Through the support for the inclusion of civil society in environmental decision-making processes, access to information and effective remedies for victims;
- Through assisting human rights mechanisms to address environmental issues, including climate change;
• Through advocacy on behalf of environmental human rights defenders and support to efforts by the UN system to protect them;

• Through research and advocacy to address human rights harms caused by environmental degradation, particularly to groups in vulnerable situations.

Examples

• In 2015, the High Commissioner for Human Rights publicly called for States to take the most ambitious action possible to protect people and planet by advocating for the adoption of the most ambitious temperature goal under consideration by the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC. The 1.5-degree target was adopted as an aspirational goal in the Paris Agreement.

• Since 2015, the Office has organized a Human Rights Council panel discussion on climate change each year, covering diverse subjects such as climate change and the rights of the child, human rights, climate change and human mobility, and climate change and the effective enjoyment of the right to health. The Office has also produced analytical studies on these subjects.

• UN Human Rights and the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice also organized a “Climate Justice Dialogue” in Geneva, which brought together representatives of delegations focusing on the UNFCCC and the Human Rights Council, experts and key civil society actors. One outcome of this meeting was the Geneva Pledge for Human Rights in Climate Action, which now has 33 members committed to integrating human rights in their climate actions and sharing best practices and knowledge between human rights and climate experts at the national level. The Office continues to support and work closely with the Geneva Pledge today.

• In 2017, the Office in collaboration with Fiji organized the first official human rights event at a Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC. The Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Prime Minister of Fiji and the President of the Marshall Islands participated alongside high-level representatives of civil society, the UNFCCC and others.

• In 2018, the Office spear-headed a joint submission by OHCHR, UN Women and ILO to the Durban Forum on Capacity-Building which resulted in the Forum with continued support from OHCHR addressing the issue of human rights capacity-building for climate action an issue which was, in turn, taken up by the Paris Committee on Capacity-Building.

Our added value

In 2018-2021, as per its organizational management plan, UN Human Rights has planned to shift its overall approach and focus more intensively, across all its activities, on issues which connections with human rights are not well understood or documented. One of these issues is climate change.

The human rights framework provides an unassailable moral and legal justification for immediate and urgent climate action.

UN Human Rights’ independent mandate to mainstream human rights makes it uniquely qualified to contribute to the promotion of more effective climate action that benefits all persons.

To find out more

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