OHCHR Remarks

**Sustainable Food Systems and Agro-ecological resilience for biodiversity and health**

November, 16:45—18:15 pm, Pacific room

**Question: How can human rights principles contribute to and provide guidance on the development of sustainable food systems and agro-ecological strategies in a changing climate?**

First of all. On behalf of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, I would like to thank IFOAM, University of California and Madagascar for the invitation to participate in this event and the previous panellists for their insightful comments.

I’d like to start by explaining to you why I am here. The very simple answer is that climate change poses a threat to the enjoyment of all human rights including, most relevant to this discussion, the right to food.

The right to food is explicitly recognized in the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and numerous other human rights instruments. In 2015, **a Human Rights Council panel discussion** found that climate change is affecting the availability, acceptability and affordability of quality food.[[1]](#footnote-1) The **IPCC’s** **Fifth Assessment Report** noted that climate change is already having a negative impact on agriculture.[[2]](#footnote-2) The **SR on the right to food** recently concluded climate change poses a distinct threat to food security by affecting crops, livestock, fisheries, aquaculture and people’s livelihoods.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This year is predicted to be the hottest year on record, further threatening food security and subsistence agriculture. According to the World Health Organization, a 2°C increase in average global temperature could put between 100 and 400 million more people at risk of hunger and could result in 3 million additional deaths from malnutrition each year.[[4]](#footnote-4) By 2050, climate change could result in an additional 24 million undernourished children.[[5]](#footnote-5) Climate-related loss of biodiversity and scarce water resources will further threaten food security.

Under high emissions climate scenarios, FAO predicts that by 2100 crop production could decrease by up to 45 percent for maize, 50 percent for wheat, 30 percent for rice and 60 percent for soybean.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Climate change will also impact **land rights** through loss of land due to extreme weather events, sea level rise and changes in arable land due to droughts, floods, salinization, etc. Health will also suffer. According to WHO, farmers, wage-workers and people working in agriculture sectors are more exposed to **health hazards** aggravated by climate change.

Because human rights norms are legally binding and States have promised to respect, protect, promote and fulfil all human rights, States have obligations to address climate change and take action to protect the rights of all persons affected by its negative impacts.

Specifically, States have affirmative obligations to take measures to mitigate climate change; to prevent negative human rights impacts; to ensure that all persons, particularly those in vulnerable situations, have adequate capacity to adapt to changing climactic conditions; and to regulate the private sector in order to mitigate its contribution to climate change and ensure respect for human rights.

The United Nations Human Rights Council has made this clear in multiple resolutions on human rights and climate change over the past several years. The most recent resolution states “the adverse effects of climate change have a range of implications, which can increase with greater warming, both direct and indirect, for the effective enjoyment of human rights, including, inter alia, the right to life, the right to adequate food… etc.”

The Paris Agreement and these Human Rights Council Resolutions single out food and hunger for particular attention as does the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In 2015, for example, the Human Rights Council hosted a panel discussion on climate change and its impacts on the right to food and the Paris Agreement specifically references food production and food security. It emphasizes both the “the fundamental priority of safeguarding food security and ending hunger, and the particular vulnerabilities of food production systems to the adverse impacts of climate change” and that State actions to address climate change should not threaten food production.

Addressing these climate impacts on the enjoyment of the right to food requires a human rights-based approach. This means that adaptation and mitigation measures should be focussed on actions that benefit those most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change including those lacking food security.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food has called for a shift from large-scale production agriculture to transformative systems such as agro-ecology to support the local food movement, protect small holder farms, respect human rights, food democracy and cultural traditions, while maintaining environmental sustainability.[[7]](#footnote-7) The FAO finds that ensuring food security will require making more **farms climate-resilient**, particularly for smallholder farmers and marginal fishers.[[8]](#footnote-8) By contrast, large scale monoculture poses a threat both to the environment and to the rights of people. This can include efforts to mitigate climate change like plantations for the production of biofuel which can displace people from their lands and drive up commodity prices.

The development of participatory, sustainable food systems and agro-ecological strategies offers potential solutions, reduced emissions and environmental degradation, climate resilience, protection of biodiversity, and food security. It will require a rights-based approach, including meaningful participation of relevant stakeholders, gender equality and protection of indigenous peoples’ rights.

Let me give you a few examples:

Women constitute 80 percent of farm workers worldwide, but own less than two percent of land and receive less than one percent of farm-worker credit.[[9]](#footnote-9) Gender equality is a legal commitment and moral obligation but it is also necessary for effective climate action. Women are well-positioned for contributing to sustainable food systems. A WHO case study in Nepal found that women are particularly able to maximize use of their available natural resources and that their knowledge helps their families adapt in extreme situations.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Fulfilling the rights of indigenous peoples is similarly both an obligation and an opportunity. The Paris Agreement acknowledges the rights of indigenous peoples and calls for participatory adaptation that takes into consideration the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples.[[11]](#footnote-11) The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues concluded that indigenous peoples are key to enhancing the resilience of ecosystems affected by climate change. Indigenous peoples interpret and react to the impacts of climate change in creative ways, drawing on traditional knowledge and other technologies to find solutions which may help society at large to cope with impending changes.[[12]](#footnote-12)

According to the FAO, an overwhelming majority of the world’s remaining biodiversity is found within indigenous peoples’ territories. Indigenous knowledge systems, technologies and institutions contribute to holistic management of this biodiversity and indigenous peoples play a key role in the conservation and adaptation of genetic resources and agricultural biodiversity.[[13]](#footnote-13) Applying a rights-based approach to adaptation would incorporate traditional knowledge to promote sustainable food systems while protecting indigenous peoples’ rights including those to their lands, natural resources and territories. At the UNFCCC this could mean, for example, taking measures to ensure that the knowledge platform established by article 135 of the Paris decision respects indigenous knowledge.

As another example, climate financing mechanisms should possess adequate social and environmental safeguards that protect the rights of all persons and comply with international standards related to consultation with indigenous peoples and free, prior and informed consent. This would prevent the types of large-scale agricultural projects that often have substantial human rights impacts and dubious climate-related benefits.

Given the time constraints, I would like to stop here after this brief and non-comprehensive survey to leave room for your questions about human rights obligations related to climate, food, health and agro-ecosystems.

1. OHCHR, “Human rights council panel discussion on the relationship between climate change and human rights: Summary of discussions” Available at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/HRAndClimateChange/Pages/HRCAction.aspx>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. IPCC, “The Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change”, AR5 (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. UNGA, « Right to food: Note by the Secretary General”, A/70/287 (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The World Bank, World Development Report 2010: Development and Climate Change (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. UNGA, “Outcome of the panel discussion on the adverse impact of climate change on States’ efforts to progressively realize the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health and related policies, lessons learned and good practices: Summary report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights”, A/HRC/32/24 (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Findings from the recent consolidated study on the impact of global climate change on agriculture, conducted in the framework of the Agricultural Model Intercomparison and Improvement Project (AgMIP) and Inter-Sectoral Impact Model Intercomparison Project (ISI-MIP). FAO, “Climate change and food security: risks and responses” (2016) <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i5188e.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. UNGA, ”Right to food: Note by the Secretary General”, A/70/287 (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. FAO, “Peace and Food Security” (2016) <http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/newsroom/docs/Peace%20and%20Food%20Security%20booklet.pdf>. See also, FAO “State of Food Insecurity in the World 2015” <http://bit.ly/2fw4pbd>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. FAO, “The State of Food and Agriculture, Women in Agriculture: Closing the gender gap for development“ (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. WHO, “Gender, Climate Change and Health” [www.who.int/globalchange/GenderClimateChangeHealthfinal.pdf](http://www.who.int/globalchange/GenderClimateChangeHealthfinal.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. UNFCCC, “Adoption of the Paris Agreement”*,* FCCC/CP/2015/L.9 (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, “Climate change and indigenous peoples” <http://www.un.org/en/events/indigenousday/pdf/Backgrounder_ClimateChange_FINAL.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. FAO, « Indigenous peoples’ sustainable livelihoods » ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/aj033e/aj033e02.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)