

## 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.

*"Climate change is the greatest threat to human rights in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."*

Mary Robinson,  
President, Mary  
Robinson Foundation  
– Climate Justice

### 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;

## GLOSSARY

### Climate change

encompasses global warming, but refers to the broader range of changes that are happening to our planet. These include rising sea levels, shrinking mountain glaciers, accelerating ice melt in Greenland, Antarctica and the Arctic, and shifts in flower/plant blooming times. These are all consequences of the warming, which is caused mainly by people burning fossil fuels and putting out heat-trapping gases into the air.

### United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

international environmental treaty adopted on 9 May 1992 and opened for signature at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro from 3 to 14 June 1992. It then entered into force on 21 March 1994, after a sufficient number of countries had ratified it. The UNFCCC objective is to "stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system".

### Paris Agreement

In December 2015, Parties to the UNFCCC reached a landmark agreement to combat climate change and to accelerate and intensify the actions and investments needed for a sustainable low carbon future. The Paris Agreement builds upon the Convention and – for the first time – brings all nations into a common cause to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate change and adapt to its effects, with enhanced support to assist developing countries to do so.

### Human Rights-based approach

States have an affirmative obligation to address the human rights impacts of climate change. This obligation requires States to act individually and collectively, and to mobilize and allocate the maximum available resources for the progressive realization of economic, social and cultural rights, as well as for the advancement of civil and political rights and the right to development. Failure to adopt adequate measures to prevent ongoing and foreseeable future human rights harm caused by climate change breaches this obligation.

- 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.

*"A world of unchecked climate change is a graveyard for entire ecosystems, is also a graveyard 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."*

Kate Gilmore  
Deputy High Commissioner  
UN Human Rights

## 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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