Media Statement

Joint Statement of the Special Procedure Mandate Holders of the Human Rights Council on the UN Climate Change Conference (Copenhagen, 7-18 December 2009)

“An ambitious climate change agreement must protect human rights of all,” warn UN experts

GENEVA - “It is a matter of human rights,” stated a group of United Nations human rights experts* just before the opening of the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference. While there is a growing consensus on the adverse impact that global warming is likely to have on the environment and economic growth, the serious threats it poses to the full enjoyment of a broad range of human rights still need to be properly understood and addressed.

“A weak outcome of the forthcoming climate change negotiations threatens to infringe upon human rights,” the experts said. Rising sea levels, increasing ocean and surface temperature and extreme weather events like storms, droughts and cyclones have, and will continue to have, a range of direct and indirect implications for the enjoyment of human rights.

“Adaptation or mitigation measures, such as the promotion of alternative energy sources, forest conservation or tree-planting projects and resettlement schemes must be developed in accordance with human rights norms,” warned the experts. “Affected individuals and communities must participate, without discrimination, in the design and implementation of these projects.” Inadequate mitigation and adaptation strategies can lead to human rights violations when, for example, tree planting efforts fail to ensure adequate participation of local communities or if due process is not respected for any necessary displacement.

The adverse effects of climate change are felt most acutely in the poorest countries of the world. Poor or otherwise marginalised individuals and communities, who often live in areas prone to natural disasters and depend on natural resources for their subsistence, face the greatest risk. They are less able to prepare for, or adapt to, climate change and its effects on the accessibility and availability of food, drinking water, sanitation, adequate housing or health care. A growing number of people will face displacement and the loss of their homes and livelihoods, which may also result in increased social unrest.

“Focusing on the rights of those who are already vulnerable and marginalised due to poverty and discrimination, a human rights-based approach to climate change can be a useful tool to complement international efforts aimed at tackling the adverse effects of global warming,” affirmed the experts. In accordance with international human rights law, States have an obligation to take individual and collective measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and their adverse impact, as well as to assist those who are most vulnerable in preparing for, and adapting to, its inevitable impact.

“Because of the productive and reproductive roles they play in many societies, women are likely to be more severely affected than men by climate change. They are
overrepresented in the agricultural and forestry sector, and often bear the responsibility of gathering food, water and fuel, which requires greater effort and time during floods, droughts and storms,” the UN human rights experts stated.

Indigenous peoples are another example of particular vulnerability to the adverse effects of climate change, since they often inhabit fragile ecosystems and have traditional ways of life closely associated with the land and natural resources. Climate change has already had especially direct and significant effects on indigenous peoples.

The experts urge participants at the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference “to step up their efforts to achieve a new agreement that prevents further climate change, protects affected individuals from its adverse impact and leads to the formulation of global and national mitigation and adaptation responses based on internationally recognised human rights norms and standards.”

ENDS

(*) The human rights experts who join this statement are:

The Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context, Ms. Raquel Rolnik

The Acting Chair of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, Ms. Mirjana Najcevska

The Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, Ms. Najat M’jid Maala

The Independent Expert in the field of cultural rights, Ms. Farida Shaheed

The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Mr. Vitit Muntarbhorn

The Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Mr. Vernor Muñoz Villalobos

The Independent Expert on the question of human rights and extreme poverty, Ms. Maria Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona

The Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Mr. Olivier de Schutter

The Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Haiti, Mr. Michel Forst

The Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, Mr. Anand Grover

The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people, Mr. James Anaya

The Representative of the Secretary-General on the human rights of internally displaced persons, Mr. Walter Kälin

The Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, Mr. Jorge A. Bustamante

The Independent Expert on minority issues, Ms. Gay McDougall

The Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, Ms. Gulnara Shahinian

The Independent Expert on human rights and international solidarity, Mr. Rudi Muhammad Rizki
The Special Rapporteur on the adverse effects of the movement and dumping of toxic and dangerous products and wastes on the enjoyment of human rights, Mr. Okechukwu Ibeanu

The Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially in women and children, Ms. Joy Nyozi Ezeilo

The Independent Expert on the issue of human rights obligations related to access to safe drinking water and sanitation, Ms. Catarina de Albuquerque

The Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Ms. Rashida Manjoo

Useful links


- Human Rights Council panel discussion on the relationship between human rights and climate change (http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/climatechange/panel.htm)

- Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing to the 64th session of the General Assembly on the impact of climate change on the fulfilment of the right to adequate housing (A/64/255) (http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/housing/annual.htm)

- Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General on the human rights of internally displaced persons to the 64th session of the General Assembly on the nexus between climate change and internal displacement (A/64/214) (http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/idp/annual.htm)

- Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing on the mission to Maldives -Preliminary note (A/HRC/10/7/Add.4) (http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/housing/visits.htm)

- Report on “Climate Change and the Right to Food”, prepared by the Columbia Law School under the supervision of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food (forthcoming) (http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/index.htm)

- Position Paper by the Independent Expert on water and sanitation on “Climate Change and the Human Right to Water and Sanitation” (http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/water/Iexpert/docs/ClimateChange_HRtWS.pdf)

- Thematic page on human rights and climate change on the website of the OHCHR (http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/climatechange/index.htm)

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