

Check against delivery

**Panel discussion on climate change
and the rights of the child**



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Mr. Vice President, excellencies, colleagues and friends,

It is a privilege to be with you this morning. On behalf of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, thank you all for joining us at this important discussion on climate change and the rights of the child. I particularly want to pay tribute to the esteemed panellists with us here today.

It is by now an oft-repeated truism that the objective of every parent is a better life for their children, that of each generation to leave the world a better place for the next. Ultimately, this can be described as the overarching goal of development.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is founded in human rights and dignity and this Agenda explicitly promises to reduce inequalities and leave no one behind. It is an ambitious Agenda “for today’s generation and for future generations”.

Climate change poses an existential threat to our children and to future generations. Human Rights Council resolution 32/33 describes children as “among the most vulnerable to climate change, which may have a serious impact on their enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, access to education, adequate food, adequate housing, safe drinking water and sanitation”.

Human rights law, and in particular the Convention on the Rights of the Child require that we take action to address this threat. The Committee on the Rights of the Child, for example, has called upon States to “put children’s health concerns at the centre of their climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies, ” noting that climate change “is one of the biggest threats to children’s health and exacerbates health disparities”.

Colleagues and friends,

There can be no doubt. Climate change does have a serious impact on children’s rights. And the children it hurts the most are those who can least afford it. Poor children, children with disabilities, indigenous children, and girls, will suffer the worst consequences of climate change.

Last year, like each of the two years before it, was the hottest on historical record, an estimated 1.38 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

For many children, this warming poses a direct threat to health and home, sometimes even life, characterized by increased incidence of diseases, malnutrition, heat stress, natural disasters, and displacement. Owing to their specific needs and vulnerabilities, these dangers are more likely to lead to diminished quality of life and even death amongst children than adults. The World Health Organization, for example, estimates that climate change related under-nutrition alone will lead to 95,000 additional deaths per year in children under 5 by 2030.

Beyond simply threatening children's lives and physical health, climate change poses a threat to children's identities, their cultures, their livelihoods and their relationship with the natural environment, a relationship that has shaped humanity throughout history. It is difficult to imagine a world stripped of coral reefs, bereft of rainforests and absent mountain glaciers but without prompt action such a world will come to pass.

When children die in multitudes from foreseeable, preventable, man-made harms and the international community fails to take sufficient preventative action, there can be no absolution. Insufficient action in the face of the escalating impacts of climate change upon our children and future generations challenges the very conception of justice.

The Paris Agreement to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change highlights the importance of taking urgent, rights-based action specifically calling for States to take into consideration their respective obligations related to the rights of the child and intergenerational equity and to hold warming below 2 degrees Celsius over pre-industrial level.

However, the commitments of States expressed in their intended nationally determined contributions fall far short of this objective. Addressing the threat of climate change will require a stepped-up international effort to ensure justice for all who suffer climate harm, particularly children, by integrating human rights considerations in climate policy.

Colleagues and friends,

We know that many of the worst impacts of climate change can be averted by simply changing flawed public policies and self-interested behaviours. This kind of change has a cost and many have asked who should pay for climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Human rights, climate justice and intergenerational equity all mean that while we all have obligations to address climate change, those who have contributed the most to climate change should contribute the most to addressing its impacts.

Adults, particularly wealthy consumers, developed countries and the private sector are the most responsible for climate change. Those least responsible, yet likely to suffer its worst consequences, are developing countries and their populations, particularly children in vulnerable situations.

States have human rights obligations to address this injustice, to take action to prevent climate harms by regulating environmental practices, to protect vulnerable communities, to hold violators accountable, and to ensure redress where harms are suffered. In the case of protecting children from climate harm, these obligations have been glaringly neglected.

Excellencies,

I would like to close by urging us all to not simply view children as a legacy to be protected. A human rights based approach to climate action requires more than that. It requires that we empower children as agents of change, that we ensure them an education adequate to cope with the challenges of the future, and that we hear their voices and integrate their needs in our everyday deliberations.

Children are entitled to participate, according to their age and maturity, in all decisions that have a direct and indirect impact upon their well-being. This participation is their right but it also can and should inform and inspire more effective decision-making. The 2030 Agenda, for example, describes children as agents of change crucial to the transition toward equitable, sustainable and fossil free development.

It is for this reason that I would like to specially recognize Ms. Kehkashan Basu here with us today, who at only 16 years of age has successfully mobilized thousands of children's voices across the world on behalf of positive environmental change through her own initiative, the Green Hope Foundation.

Colleagues and friends,

The children of today and those of many tomorrows will suffer the consequences of life on a continually warming planet and they know it. Children have become engaged in strategic litigation to promote more ambitious climate action. In one such case, *Juliana v. US*, children are suing to preserve the climate for this and future generations alleging violations of their constitutional rights to life, liberty, property and equal protection.

We should be proud that some children have stepped up and are seeking to shape policy in this way. We should remember that the voices of many children will never be heard, including those suffering already from the effects of climate change. And we must recognize that the need for children to act exposes our own collective failures.

As we look today at the global threat of climate change, children are both our inspiration and our accusers. We owe them both answers and action.

Thank you.