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

To foster a deeper understanding of the relationship between children's rights and environmental issues the Committee on the Rights of the Child dedicated its biennial Day of General Discussion 2016 to children's rights and the environment, with climate change as one of its main topics. It gathered more than 250 participants from around the world, representatives of states, NGOs, child activists, academics and others, and we received 50 written submissions. Climate change was the topic of one of the two parallel working groups, and my presentation is based on the discussions and recommendations of that day.

Three categories of human rights obligations on States have been identified in the context of environmental protection: substantive obligations of mitigation and adaptation, procedural obligations, and heightened obligations – towards those who are especially vulnerable to environmental harm. As pointed out by the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the environment, John Knox, 'in sheer numbers, no group is more vulnerable to environmental harm, as a whole, than children.' It is also a fact that because of their evolving physical and mental development children are particularly vulnerable to risks caused by climate change. So there can be no doubt that states have heightened obligations towards children in this respect.

Almost all the substantive rights of the child may be affected by climate change: the right to life, survival and development, non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, as well as the rights to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts, freedom from exploitation, protection from all forms of violence, the right to health and an adequate standard of living, housing, food, water and sanitation, to education and to identity.

Climate change may also have more indirect impacts on the ability of governments to protect children's rights. For example, 'in Bangladesh, (...) some families have rushed to marry off (...) girls in anticipation of losing their homes to river erosion'. Furthermore, by aggravating existing inequalities in the use of and access to productive land and freshwater, climate change can cause violent conflicts, exploitation, and large-scale migration or displacements. Climate change poses an existential threat to indigenous children due to their close relationship with the environment.

A child- rights-based approach to climate change is urgent: **When determining what mitigation and adaptation measures to take, States must take into account the rights and best interests of the child.**

As for the procedural rights of children, they include the rights to information, to environmental education and to participation. Children depend on information about climate change and its impact to make personal choices, but also to be able to exercise their rights to freedom of expression, to be heard and participate in environmental matters. Deficits related to the right to information are seen as a real barrier to the protection of children's rights in the environmental context and for holding duty bearers accountable.

Education is children's main source of gaining environmental information. Education plays a significant role in empowering children to become actors of change. In the words of one of the youth participants in the DGD: 'All curriculums should include a clear, comprehensive and frequently updated climate change education. As weather patterns changes so should our curriculum to match the new challenges our climate faces. This education must be altered in different countries so information is relevant to every child's situation, keeping in mind the inclusion of traditional knowledge and teachings.'

This is in line with SDG 4, Target 7, calling upon States to ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including through education for human rights.

Children's right to participation in decision-making is crucial, and they have a great capacity for doing so. At present, children's concern for the environment is not reflected in the degree to which they are able to participate meaningfully in decision-making on a wide range of global environmental issues that matter to them now and in the future.

Particular regard must be had to children with disabilities, children of indigenous groups and other children in vulnerable situations. They may be particularly exposed to violations of their rights in the context of climate change. However, they should not primarily be seen as vulnerable and in need of protection, but as actors to be involved, like all children.

Under SDG (13) target 13 b on climate change is to '*(p)romote mechanisms for raising capacity for effective climate change-related planning and management in least developed countries... including focusing on ... youth*'.

Consequently, **structures must be developed for involving children and young people in decision-making at local, national and international level, including children in vulnerable situations.**

My main message here today: A child rights approach to climate change is overdue, and children should be supported to be agents of change.