**The Impact of Climate Change on the Human Rights of Older Persons**

This report is submitted by Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights, an organization in special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council, on the impact of climate change on the human rights of older persons.

In this report, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights presents its vision of how far climate change affects the human rights of older persons in accordance with international human rights laws.

* **Preamble**

Climate change is defined as an imbalance in normal climatic conditions such as temperature and wind patterns that characterize every region on Earth. It is a significant and long-term change in weather rate, whether in temperature, precipitation or wind. The industrial development that marked the last 150 years has led to the extraction and burning of billions of tons of fossil fuels for power generation. Heat-trapping gases such as carbon dioxide have been released and the planet has been overheated, and temperatures must be reduced to below 2 degrees Celsius.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Global warming has become an indisputable reality, mainly evidenced by the unprecedented increase in the global average of air and ocean temperatures, the large-scale melting of ice sheet, and the global rising of sea level. The effects of climate change on human rights are among the most prominent issues that have occupied domestic and international public opinion, given the fact of its association with human existence, especially in poor countries where the human cost is increasing year after year. The crisis has reached a critical point that residents of the islands have become threatened by rising sea levels.

Climate change, as defined by the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention, is directly or indirectly attributed to human activity, which leads to a change in the composition of the global atmosphere, which, in addition to natural climate variability, is observed over similar periods of time. In 2008, the Human Rights Council passed its resolution 23/07, in which it warned against the immediate and long-term impact of climate change on fundamental rights and the survival of some peoples. Other resolutions, included resolution No. 15/29 of 2009, 22/18 of 2011, 27/26 of 2014, 15/29 of 2015, 35/20 of 2018, and 33/9 of 2019 followed this. All of them focus on the impact of climate change on human rights and the need for international solidarity to address this crisis.[[2]](#footnote-2)

* **The impact of climate change on older persons**

Climate change affects humans either directly or indirectly. These changes may likely lead to death. The direct effect is due to heat stress, floods and storms, whereas the indirect impact is due to low water quality, air quality, availability and quality of food, destabilization of the natural system, and vector-borne diseases. These consequences can severely affect humans in term of social, economic and environmental conditions. Other consequences include the following:

* A decrease in crop production, which may lead to malnutrition and higher food prices.
* Higher rates of heat-related illness, including heat exhaustion and heat stroke.
* Higher rates of Lyme disease due to high temperatures and humidity, which increases tick abundance and as a result contribute to the transmission of Lyme disease.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**The phenomenon of climate change has some adverse effects on the human rights of older persons**

The adverse impact of climate change undermines the enjoyment of human rights of all groups in general and the elderly in particular. The high temperatures resulting from global warming and the ensuing results such as ice sheet melting, increased flood rates, forest fires, drought swells, and desertification to which some states are exposed and the resulting destruction of agricultural and livestock production undermines the older persons’ enjoyment of human rights, such as the tight to health, food and clean water.

**The right to health** involves not only the timely provision of health-care services, but also the inherent determinants of health such as clean and safe water, adequate supplies of safe food and nutritious foods, safe housing, safe occupational and environmental conditions and appropriate health education and information, including sexual and reproductive health.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Older adults are vulnerable to the health effects associated with climate change for a number of reasons, including natural changes in age-related bodies such as muscle and bone loss that limit mobility. Older adults are also likely to suffer from chronic diseases such as diabetes, obesity and heart disease. Some older persons, particularly those with disabilities, may need assistance in daily activities. In 2010, nearly half of people over the age of 65 were reported to have a disability, compared to about 17% of people between the ages of 21 and 64. This includes visual, hearing or speech disabilities, mental performance such as Alzheimer's disease, aging or dementia, or physical performance with limited ability or inability to walk, climb, climb, lift or hold objects[[5]](#footnote-5).

Climate change affects the frequency and severity of some extreme weather phenomena and their associated impact on older people. For example, older adults are likely to suffer from hurricanes, floods associated with heavy rains, coastal storms, droughts and forest fires. For example, nearly half of the deaths from Hurricane Katrina were among those over the age of 75. Half of the deaths from Hurricane Sandy were over 65. Health impacts may also be exacerbated by medical care interruptions and challenges associated with the transportation of patients with essential medication, medical records and any equipment such as oxygen. Extreme events can also cause power outages that can affect medical equipment and elevators, leaving some people untreated or able to evacuate.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Mental health**

Climate change threatens human health, including mental health, access to clean air, safe drinking water, nutritious food and shelter. Everyone's vulnerability increased from 9% in 1980 to nearly 20% in 2009. Similarly, about 5 million Americans over the age of 65 had Alzheimer's disease in 2013. This figure is expected to nearly triple in areas such as climate change and the health of older adults due to climate change at some point in their lives. Some people are more affected by climate change than others because of factors such as their place of life, health, income, profession and the way they practice their daily lives.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Increased rates of hunger**

**The right to adequate food** is one of the most important rights guaranteed by international conventions and the eradication of hunger is one of the most important goals of sustainable development. It was stipulated in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and implicitly in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Climate change, therefore, undermines the production of major crops such as wheat, rice and maize in tropical and temperate regions. Without being able to face such changes, the situation will only get worse and the temperatures will continue to increase. The prevalence of malnutrition and the increasing rate of famine is higher in the countries severely vulnerable to extreme climate. Under nutrition is higher when exposure to climate extremes is associated with a high proportion of the population dependent on agricultural systems that are highly sensitive to rain and temperature fluctuations. The ensuing damage to agricultural production also contributes to the lack of food availability, alongside direct effects, such as high food prices and income losses that reduce people's access to food.[[9]](#footnote-9)

For example, Somalia is a classic example of the vicious circle between conflict and the harmful impact of climate change. In the early 1990s, the country plunged into the inferno of protracted and ruthless armed conflict. It has weakened state institutions and forced millions of people to migrate, especially those who depend on agriculture and grazing. They have had painful experiences of catastrophic drought due to low rainfall rates in the rainy season. UN organizations have predicted that the catastrophic drought that hit Somalia in 2019 will cause 2 million people to suffer from severe hunger. This has led to increased mortality rates among the elderly and children. Moreover, South Sudan, with its fluctuating rainfall, has led to a repeat of the dry seasons. This has exacerbated the suffering of civilians as a result of high rates of acute food insecurity.[[10]](#footnote-10)

* **The Effect of Climate Change on Elderly**

One of the challenges to protecting vulnerable populations is a lack of resources, such as education and training on how to adapt. The health effects of climate change can worsen existing issues linked to social determinants of health, such as availability of healthy housing, access to health care and food affordability. Evacuation scenarios are particularly difficult for seniors and people with disabilities who may be physically unable or prepared to leave their homes. Nearly half of the deaths from Superstore Sandy in 2012 were among people ages 65 and older and almost half of Hurricane Katrina deaths in 2005 were among people over 75, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).[[11]](#footnote-11)

* **The Elderly in National Climate Change Strategies**

For vulnerable populations, such as children, low-income people, people with disabilities, pregnant women and minorities, the health effects of climate change-related extreme weather events can be especially devastating, and states are obliged, under international human rights law and in accordance with the principle of equality and non-discrimination, to address these vulnerabilities. Climate-change vulnerability assessment is generally based on the impacts on economic sectors such as health and water, rather than focusing on the vulnerabilities of specific population groups.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Consequently, states have an obligation to respect, protect, fulfil and promote all human rights for all persons without discrimination. Failure to take affirmative measures to prevent human rights harms caused by climate change, including foreseeable long-term harms, breaches this obligation. Among other impacts, climate change negatively affects people’s rights to health, housing, water and food. These negative impacts will increase exponentially according to the degree of climate change that ultimately takes place and will disproportionately affect individuals, groups and peoples in vulnerable situations including, women, children, older persons, indigenous peoples, minorities, migrants, rural workers, persons with disabilities and the poor. Therefore, States must act to limit anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases (e.g. mitigate climate change), including through regulatory measures, in order to prevent to the greatest extent possible the current and future negative human rights impacts of climate change. [[13]](#footnote-13)

According to the results of the review carried out by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in 2017, the elderly participation in labor market depends on the provision of national resources and the individual's social and economic needs. Moreover, it called for adopting a human rights-based approach in this area related to aging and work, and ensuring that the elderly enjoy the freedom to remain in the labor market after retirement age, while providing them with adequate job opportunities. As for the programs that provide social protection for the elderly, they are few and vary in terms of the services they provide, and most of them are not elderly-oriented, which undoubtedly leave them suffering poverty and insecurity.

Given the ongoing conflicts and never-ending struggles, especially climate-change related ones such as drought and desertification, hitting the Arab world in general and countries like Sudan and Somalia in particular, it is noticeable that Arab countries have developed no sufficient policies to protect the elderly from abuse, violence and neglect, and have miserably failed to attend to their special needs in humanitarian emergencies cases, wars and crises.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In many Arab countries, great strides have been made in the delivery of health services and social care for elderly people. However, the extent to which countries meet the pledges they have undertaken in this area, varies. Most of the Arab countries’ constitutions provide for guaranteeing the rights of the elderly in terms of health, economic, social, cultural and entertainment, providing them an adequate pension that guarantees them a decent life, and enabling them to participate in public life. Moreover, states must take into account the needs of older persons, when planning, designing and implementing public facilities, provided that this is done in a cooperative framework with civil society organizations as regulated by law. The proposed Arab strategy for the protection of the elderly (2019-2029) seeks to bridge the gap between social groups, eliminate all forms of inequality, and promote justice. However, in reality, there is no link between the climate changes taking place in the Arab countries and the rights of the elderly.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Egypt, for example, is threatened by the catastrophic repercussions of climate change, mainly represented in increasing temperature and sea level rise, which may wreak havoc on agriculture in many areas, and thereby, pushing population out to seek living elsewhere, whether inside or outside Egypt.[[16]](#footnote-16) Given this, the state has focused on working to confront the potential effects of climate change by updating its National Strategy for Adaptation to Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction, and making huge investments in national projects to direct geographical and sectoral development towards dealing with climate change ensuing threats. However, this strategy did not take into account the rights of the elderly and the adverse consequences they may suffer as a result of the climate change. By analogy, despite the very high temperature and the ensuing repercussions of climate change in countries like United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, neither their anti-climate change strategy nor policy include an independent approach to deal with its devastating effects on the elderly.

* **Conclusion & Recommendations**

In conclusion, it can be said that, in order to tackle effectively and immediately the disastrous effects of climate change on the elderly, this requires international cooperation at all governmental and non-governmental levels in order to mitigate its effects, especially in cases of severe floods and hurricanes that may force populations to evacuate their homes, which is occasionally rejected by elder persons. In other countries, clime-change related natural disasters may lead to drought and accelerate land desertification, which, in turn, is likely to decrease agricultural production and increase poverty and famine, undermining the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals that the world aspires to achieve.

In this light, **Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights** believes that the impact of climate change is not the same for all countries and age groups. The elderly are the most vulnerable populations; as the enjoyment of their basic rights will be affected by high temperature, desertification, and increased rates of rain, floods and fresh water sources. The suffering, however, will double for elderly displaced. Therefore, Maat for Peace stresses its support for the efforts made by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in the context of mitigating the harmful impact of climate change on the elderly.

**Maat, also, calls on states to consider the following:**

* Re-consider and amend climate-change related international, regional and national conventions, to include an independent approach to reduce its harmful effects on the elderly.
* Serious and effective cooperation in order to reduce the Earth's rising temperature and reduce the thermal emissions resulting from the use of traditional sources of energy.
* Promote international efforts to support the countries depending mainly on agricultural production to alleviate the impact of desertification on food shortages and the ensuing waves of famine from which some African countries are suffering.
* Encourage community participation such as universities, civil society organizations, the private sector and the media, to work hand in hand with governments and jointly combat the alarming phenomenon of climate change.

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