



# The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

## The human rights impact of climate change

It is well-known that climate change represents a serious threat to the environment. Less discussed, however, is that climate change can also adversely affect the fundamental human rights of present and future generations. Marginalized groups, whether in industrialized or developing countries and across all cultures and boundaries, are particularly vulnerable to the dire consequences of climate change. The international community should consider the human rights dimension of climate change as Governments and various stakeholders gather in Bali to mount a global response to this pressing issue.

### **The Rights Most Affected**

The Stern Review, a respected study on the economics of climate change, rightly pointed out that climate change will affect the basic elements of life for people around the world and could seriously hinder growth and development. Global warming could result in hundreds of millions of people suffering from hunger, malnutrition, water shortages, floods, droughts, heat stress, diseases triggered by extreme weather events, loss of livelihood, and permanent displacement. Indeed, climate change poses a direct threat to a wide range of universally recognized fundamental rights, such as the rights to life, food, adequate housing, health, and water.

When considering the human rights impact of climate change, it is important to recall that all human rights are indivisible, interdependent and interrelated. The principle applies to all human rights whether they are civil and political rights, such as the right to life, equality before the law and freedom of expression; economic, social and cultural rights, such as the rights to work, social security, health and education; or collective rights, such as the right to development. The improvement of one right contributes to the advancement of the others. Likewise, the deprivation of one right adversely affects the others. In tackling climate change, Governments worldwide must bear in mind that they have not only moral but legal obligations to protect and promote basic human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights law.

### **The Most Vulnerable Groups**

While climate change affects everyone, it will no doubt hit the poorest and the most marginalized groups the hardest. Poverty, inequality, discrimination, lopsided power relationship and social injustice make certain groups particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. For example, small-scale farmers, women in rural areas, those not having adequate access to safe-drinking water, healthcare and social security, refugees, internally displaced, and the poor who are already living at the margins of survival would suffer disproportionately the consequences of global warming.

Indigenous peoples, and residents of small island states and Least Developed Countries, are also among those who will suffer soonest from climate change. Emerging evidence suggests that the livelihoods and cultural identities of indigenous peoples across all regions, such as the Inuit from North America, the Sami people from the Nordic countries and the Russian Peninsula of Kola, the Masai Tribe from Africa, and indigenous populations in Latin America, Central Asia and the Pacific Rim, are threatened by the detrimental impacts of Climate change partly because their means of subsistence are highly dependent on nature.

The most vulnerable will suffer earliest and most from climate change. Climate change therefore should be addressed in a way that is fair and just, cognizant of the needs and risks faced by the vulnerable groups, and adherent to the principles of non-discrimination and equality. Any sustainable solution to climate change must take into account its human impact and the needs of all communities in all countries in a holistic manner.

## A Rights-Based Approach

The false dichotomy between environmental friendly measures and economic growth has clouded the international discourse on climate change. In fact, ample evidence suggests that the benefits of strong and early action far outweigh the economic costs of not acting. Climate change, if left unchecked, could have a very serious impact on growth and development. The United Nations Charter firmly established that human rights, together with peace, security and development, constitute the three essential pillars of United Nations action. This has been reaffirmed by the Millennium Declaration and the 2005 World Summit Outcomes. As we face the daunting challenges of climate change, the international community must put human beings at centre-stage in addressing this urgent issue that affects all of us.

Efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and to protect human rights will help cushion the impact of climate change on the most vulnerable individuals and groups. Elements that are crucial to reduce individuals' vulnerability to climate change include, for example, more weather resistant housing for poor people; relocation out of hazardous zones; improved access to sanitation and safe-drinking water; access to adequate food; local participation in planning and decision-making; accountability; and access to information and to the system of administration of justice.

Most of the work related to climate change has so far focused on the development and implementation of mitigation and adaptation strategies. In a positive move recently, the promotion of sustainable development and poverty reduction are increasingly being brought into the equation. Today, a much needed step forward in the direction would be to fully integrate human rights when meeting the climate change challenges. A rights-based approach to tackling climate change will bring human beings back to the centre of the discussion and enrich international efforts in addressing climate change.

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