

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, colleagues,

My name is Marcos Orellana, UN Special Rapporteur on Toxics and Human Rights.

My message to you today is simple: Humanity cannot afford to aggravate the toxification of our planet. We need strong tools to confront the global toxic tide. And human rights offer those tools.

Every year, millions of people lose their lives as a result of exposure to hazardous substances. Many more suffer illnesses and hardship. This exposure is preventable because it is a political choice.

Today I come to encourage you to embrace a bold vision, where we all choose to protect human lives, health, and the environment.

To make this vision a reality we must move away from narrow self-interests that lead to a zero-sum game, where humanity and planet lose.

Human rights can help overcome this perverse dynamic by leading our collective efforts towards a world where every person can enjoy the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, and no one is left behind.

At times, certain industry interests have pushed a tale where human rights are opposed to economic development. This is simply a tactic to divert our attention.

What human rights actually oppose is exploitation, discrimination, and abuse. Conversely, what human rights set to achieve, is a world free from fear and want, in the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Let's take the right to science, for example. This right welcomes technology and innovation at the service of human beings. It also requires the alignment between best available science and regulatory measures.

Today, however, there is a wide chasm between the scientific evidence on the risks and harms posed by chemicals and the measures established to prevent exposure.

This is not an accident. It is the result of deliberate disinformation by unscrupulous interests that stand to profit from the lack of protections. It is the result of corporate capture of governments by industries that are guided only by their immediate financial profits.

What's the end result? A planetary chemical crisis of unprecedented proportions that is inflicting harm to countless individuals and even threatening to alter some of the defining traits of our common human nature, such as our intelligence and fertility.

Human Rights provide a moral compass and norms to confront the global chemical crisis.

When we consider the right to information, for example, it is well known that we lack information on most of the hundreds of thousands of chemicals in the market. We lack information on chemicals in the products we use. Information would empower society to demand stronger protections.

I sometimes hear that if we could safely manage and minimize the risks of chemicals, then society would benefit from chemical innovations. This argument is conceptually seductive, but it ignores the distance between an assumption and reality.

A human rights-based approach can help bridge this distance because it calls upon us to look at reality from the perspective of those individuals and groups in most vulnerable situations: Indigenous Peoples, workers including in the informal sector, peasants, women, children, and other groups left behind in our societies.

From the standpoints of those who suffer, words like “minimizing risks” are, plainly, words devoid of meaning.

In the real world, people face serious environmental injustices from chemical exposure. The right to a healthy environment is a strong ally in their pursuit of protection and remedies. Perhaps that is why this right is so opposed by some who would rather remain unaccountable for the harm they have inflicted on the planet and humanity.

But international morality calls upon us to address global environmental injustices. This involves putting an end to odious double standards, such as in the export of banned hazardous pesticides. It involves mobilizing substantial resources for international cooperation and solidarity. It involves applying due diligence in supply and value chains. It also involves overcoming the legacy of environmental racism and the enduring forms of environmental violence.

To conclude, I wish to invite you to achieve this vision of human rights, as the common ground that will allow us to work together to overcome the global chemicals crisis.

Thank you for your attention.