

## HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL – 54th SESSION

### Biennial panel discussion on youth and human rights

26 September 2023

In his opening remarks, **Mr. Volker Türk, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights** highlighted the importance of youth engagement in climate and environmental decision-making. The HC recounted its recent visit to southern **Iraq** where he experienced extreme heat and the devastating impact of climate change on once-fertile areas. He emphasized that young people are bearing the brunt of the climate crisis, and they have been demanding urgent action from governments and businesses. To address the challenge effectively, the HC stressed the importance of learning from young people's experiences and making their engagement meaningful. Despite being the largest generation in history, young people face various barriers, including financial constraints, lack of connectivity, and safety concerns. The HC mentioned that the OHCHR has issued guidelines on participation rights and prioritizes youth engagement. The HC urged all states to dismantle barriers, actively involve young people in designing solutions, and work together to protect the planet for future generations.

**H.E. Ms. Adriana Mira, Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs of El Salvador**, expressed that El Salvador initiated a national transformation process in June 2019 with a focus on the well-being of its citizens and the creation of opportunities for development. Climate change was recognized as a crucial factor in this development, and policies were adapted to protect the environment. El Salvador's President, Nayib Bukele, the youngest ever elected, made youth a top priority, as they represented 36% of the population and cared about both quality of life and environmental conservation. To address urgent climate change challenges, El Salvador developed a comprehensive National Climate Change Plan for 2022-2026 and updated its commitments on the global stage. Youth engagement was central, with young people taking on high-level roles and participating in educational programs and environmental initiatives. El Salvador is committed to addressing climate change and building a sustainable and resilient future for current and future generations.

**Ms. Evelyn Adzovi Addor, Climate Negotiator for Ghana, Communications Officer for EcoCare Ghana, and Member of the Climate Youth Negotiators Programme** emphasized the importance of human rights in sustainable development and the need to prioritize young people in decision-making processes. Climate change was highlighted as a global crisis affecting fundamental human rights such as life, land, water, food, and health, with significant impacts on young people, especially in **Africa**. Specific examples, like the negative impact on young women's education in **Ghana** due to water scarcity, were mentioned. The lack of meaningful youth participation in environmental governance was noted as a pressing issue. She commended initiatives like the Climate Youth Negotiators Academy and urged more support for capacity building, funding, and networking opportunities for young people. Barriers to youth participation, including limited climate education and financial resources, were identified. She highlighted the injustice of **Africa** suffering disproportionately from climate change despite contributing a small percentage of global emissions. She requested sustained dialogue between the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and young people to address climate change as a human rights issue and find mutually beneficial solutions.

**Mr. Vishal Prasad, Campaign Director for the Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change**, emphasized the power of youth in addressing global crises, particularly the climate crisis. Mr. Prasad shared the story of a youth-led initiative that began in 2019 where a resolution requesting an advisory opinion from the ICJ on state obligations related to climate change was adopted at the UNGA in March. This achievement showcased the meaningful contributions young people can make and their ability to shape international law. However, challenges like tokenism and logistical issues persist. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted innovative solutions, such as global collaboration and digital media use. Mr. Prasad emphasized the need for genuine inclusion of young people at both international and national

levels. Accountability, transparency, and honesty were seen as essential to restore faith in existing systems. Mr. Prasad concluded by highlighting the choice between empowering youth to shape the future or continuing with minimal engagement, hoping for a brighter future.

**Ms. Xiomara Acevedo Navarro, Representative of the Global Youth Biodiversity Network** emphasized the interconnected crises of biodiversity and climate change rooted in systemic injustice. She stressed the potential of the world's largest young generation to influence global conservation and climate action but noted that this potential remains untapped. Challenges include the absence of young voices, especially from the **Global South**, in decision-making, along with issues of **youth washing and tokenism**. She expressed more efforts should be made, including funding, and addressing practical barriers. She emphasized the importance of the youth biodiversity movement and recommended supporting Indigenous peoples, local communities, women, girls, children, and youth, bridging the financial gap, protecting environmental defenders, and encouraging meaningful youth participation with decision-makers.

**Mr. Zuhair Ahmed Kowshik, the Global Focal Point for the Children and Youth Major Group to the United Nations Environment Programme** highlighted the obstacles in the multilateral environmental governance processes, including a lack of uniformity in civil society engagement, resulting in a fragmented engagement landscape. He emphasized the need to develop a unified civil society engagement framework, encompassing constituent groups, with youth as key stakeholders. He also highlighted the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands where youth actively participated. He further noted the barriers faced by youth, including the lack of capacity-building support and limited environmental and human rights education. He also emphasized the need to guarantee youths' access to green and sustainable jobs, empowering them to participate in green industries while securing their livelihoods. Additionally, he mentioned the relevance of youth participation in political, scientific, and financial decision-making processes.

### Interactive dialogue

Most states and state organizations stressed the importance of meaningful youth participation in policymaking and decision-making processes. Many countries expressed that youth plays a pertinent role in the fight against climate change and remains a critical voice that can meaningfully contribute to key climate decisions including national strategies and policies. **Portugal** highlighted the importance of youth's involvement in the triple planetary crises of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. **Finland** expressed the need to establish more informal ways of including young people in climate-related decision-making. **Qatar** expressed its commitment to engaging its youth in environmental initiatives, focusing on capacity-building and fostering environmental awareness. **Samoa** highlighted Small Island Developing States's vulnerabilities and how these impede sustainable development. It reiterated the call to accelerated action on SDG13 and the operationalization of the Loss and Damage Fund. **Iraq** mentioned its strategic plan to empower youth, provide suitable employment opportunities, and ensure access to healthcare and education. **Bahrain** highlighted its establishment of the King Hamad Award for Youth Empowerment, a global award reflecting King Hamad's belief in youth leadership. The **UAE** prioritized youth education for sustainable leadership, promoting innovation, and global environmental engagement. **Lithuania** expressed the need to overcome barriers such as financial constraints, harassment, threats, and a lack of environmental education that hinder meaningful engagement by young people in global environmental decision-making. **Italy** mentioned its support for education and training initiatives for young people on climate change, energy, and green transition. **Bolivia (Plurinational State of)** mentioned the implementation of its Plurinational Programme for Climate Empowerment which includes environment; and education, specially focused on young girls. **Ireland** emphasized its National Youth Assembly held annually allows young people to their visions for Ireland in 2050 and how SDGs can be better incorporated into youth



participation structures. **Malawi** expressed how the country included youth in the design and implementation of its national development plan for 2023. They also emphasized the importance of granting youth access to climate change information and providing access to remedies in cases where their rights have been violated.

**The Bahamas** emphasized the importance of supporting young people's climate change advocacy efforts. **Maldives** highlighted the achievements of young scientists and advocates advancing climate-smart technologies and sustainable infrastructure. It urged the international community to provide resources, and institutional support and collaborate with SIDS to empower young people. **El Salvador** pledged to prioritize meaningful youth participation in multilateral forums, recognizing the valuable contributions of young people in finding sustainable solutions to global challenges. **Oman** highlighted the need to bridge the knowledge gap among youth regarding environmental and climate change issues through adjustments in educational systems and practical training. **Libya** mentioned the Arab League's General Secretariat declared 2023 as the Year of Arab Youth and established the "Arab Youth Council for Climate Change" to engage young people in climate issues. **Timor-Leste** stressed their commitment to ensuring young voices are heard and actively supported youth engagement in key forums like the United Nations Climate Change Conferences (COP). The **EU** mentioned it declared 2022 as the "European Year of Youth" and adopted a "Youth Action Plan" to empower youth in global initiatives. It also included a youth delegate in their official delegation at UNFCCC COP meetings and encouraged others to follow suit.

**Most NGOs** expressed the need to include youth in all decision-making processes at all levels, in particular, regarding climate change and the environment. NGOs called for youth's substantial, transformative participation in decision-making processes. The fact that is still limited generates distrust in political institutions and local authorities and diminishes motivation and engagement among youth. One NGO mentioned that Jewish youth continue working towards a more just, fair, and inclusive world, despite being intimidated by the widespread antisemitism on school grounds and university campuses. Another NGO emphasized the link between climate justice and sexual and reproductive rights. It mentioned that climate change impacts access to healthcare and increases issues like child marriage. It urged States to include youth in decision-making and address climate and gender links for a sustainable, equitable future. One NGO highlighted the disproportionate impact of climate change on young girls. Another NGO denounced that children environmental human rights defenders are facing threats, intimidation, harassment, and other serious reprisals.

#### Delegations that took the floor during the Interactive dialogue (23 country delegations):

*Bahamas (on behalf of the Commonwealth), Maldives (on behalf of a group of countries), El Salvador (on behalf of a group of countries), Oman (on behalf of the Gulf Cooperation Council), Libya (on behalf of the Arab Group), Timor-Leste (on behalf of the CPLP Countries), European Union, Bahamas, Lithuania, Portugal, Germany, Qatar, Finland, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Samoa, Iraq, Bahrain, Italy, United Arab Emirates, Croatia, Ireland, Malawi, Belgium.*

#### NHRIs and NGOs that took the floor during the Interactive dialogue (6):

*UNDP, National Human Rights Council of Morocco, World Jewish Congress, Stichting CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, World Vision International, Save the Children International, Istituto Internazionale Maria Ausiliatrice delle Salesiane di Don Bosco (Joint statement).*

To watch the full meeting refer to [UN Web TV](#).