



GENEVA CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS  
ADVANCEMENT AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE



Permanent Mission of Finland in Geneva  
Mission permanente de la Finlande, Genève

## CONFERENCE

### Environment, Climate Change and Women and Children's Rights: Challenges, Perspectives and the Role of Indigenous Peoples

#### Concept Note

**Date and Time** Wednesday, 6 September 2023, 10:00 – 13:00 CET

**Venue :** Room XXIII, Building E, Palais des Nations Geneva

**Event Format:** The conference will be held in a hybrid format at the United Nations Office in Geneva, Switzerland, in-presence and online (on Webex). It will be divided into three panels:

1. Promoting and protecting the rights of women and ensuring gender equality in the context of climate change and environmental degradation.
2. Children's rights, environment and climate change: integrating children's rights into climate action.
3. Traditional knowledge and practices of Indigenous peoples in reconciling pursuit of livelihoods with environment protection: innovative approaches to addressing climate change and safeguarding natural resources.

Each panel will last for one hour. The event will start with opening statements by H.E. Ghazi Jomaa, Chair of the Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue; H.E. Mrs. Claudia Fuentes Julio, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Chile to the United Nations in Geneva; H.E. Mrs. Clara Manuela da Luz Delgado Jesus, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Cabo Verde; a High Representative of the Permanent Mission of Finland; and H.E. Ms. Lubna Qassim Mohamed Yousuf Albastaki, Minister Plenipotentiary and Deputy Permanent Representative of the United Arab Emirates. An interactive dialogue followed by the moderator's remarks will close the conference.

**Participants:** The planned event seeks to bring together, in Geneva and online, around fifteen distinguished panellists, including UN Special Rapporteurs, Treaty Body experts, and other renowned experts from international organisations and academia. Furthermore, the event aims to give prominence to the voices from the field of women and children, notably those coming from the indigenous communities and those actively engaged in fighting the negative effects of climate change and making their communities resilient.

**Target audience:** The event aspires to reach a global audience of Geneva-based and international experts and diplomats, as well as prospective delegates, negotiators and observers at the forthcoming COP-28, and climate and environment champions from all over the world. The conference will also be open to the broader public, including concerned human

rights NGOs, indigenous women and girls, journalists, academics, students, and private sector representatives.

**Objectives:** *Climate change and environmental degradation affects the most vulnerable first. As we slowly and unevenly transition to greener societies, how can we reverse the trend for women and children and how can we ensure their rights are upheld and advanced?*

The conference will examine appropriate ways and effective means to address the challenges currently faced, draw upon the lessons learned thus far, explore future perspectives and offer concrete recommendations with regard to rights-based climate and environmental practices and policies.

With just transition and human-rights based climate action as an underlying framework for the discussion, it will seek to attain the following specific objectives:

1. Strengthen the understanding of the impacts of climate change on women and children and reinforce their role as agents of change.
2. Take stock of the relevant work conducted so far by the United Nations human rights bodies and mechanisms in Geneva, including the UN Human Rights Council, Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, on the issue of environment, climate change and human rights.
3. Bring to the discussion best practices from the field, voices of children as well as Indigenous Peoples' unique experience in order to promote an environment for continuous engagement.
4. Offer concrete recommendations for fulfilling human rights obligations, particularly those related to women's and children's rights, in the context of large-scale climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts.

**Outcome:** A substantive follow-up report will be issued after the event (by the end of September 2023) and will further provide, based upon the proceedings of the conference, additional analyses, information, illustrative examples and best practices. The publication aims to serve as a preparatory background document for the stakeholders taking part in the UNFCCC COP-28, including during its thematic day discussions on 8 December 2023 that will focus on placing young people at the forefront of shaping COP outcomes, and on 9 December 2023, when "gender-just" transition and enabling the full, equal, and meaningful participation of women and girls in climate action are scheduled to be addressed<sup>1</sup>.

The follow-up report will also aim to encourage governments to integrate a human rights perspective in their nationally determined contributions, adopt a gender-specific plan of action and a child rights-based approach while drafting their climate change and disaster risk reduction programmes and policies, and enhance the inclusion of indigenous traditional knowledge in all components of climate change action.

The video recording of the event will be made available at the Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue's website, <https://gchragd.org/>.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.cop28.com/en/draft-thematic-program](http://www.cop28.com/en/draft-thematic-program)

## Background

There has recently been encouraging developments in the United Nations Office in Geneva and on international fora, including the historical recognition of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment by the United Nations General Assembly; establishment of a long-awaited mandate of Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change by the United Nations Human Rights Council; adoption of the General recommendation No. 37 on gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in a changing climate by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women; as well as the adoption of General Comment No. 26 on children's rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change, by the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

The adoption of a breakthrough decision on the establishment of a Loss and Damage Fund at the Sharm el-Sheikh Climate Change Conference (COP-27) in November 2022, is also a positive leap forward. This year, as the world celebrates the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, more than ever, the right-based approach to climate action should drive higher ambition and ensure more effective engagement, while the new mechanism should be rooted in human rights, ensure meaningful action, and include the needs of vulnerable groups, including women and children.

## Context

In 2021, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a ground-breaking resolution 48/13 which recognized access to a healthy and sustainable environment as a universal right. This right, already contained in the constitutions, laws, policies and regional agreements of at least 156 States<sup>2</sup>, includes a safe climate, clean air, access to safe water and sanitation, healthy and sustainably produced food, non-toxic environments and healthy biodiversity and ecosystems. It is also linked to the rights to information, participation in decision-making and access to justice with effective remedies. Climate change jeopardises the enjoyment of these rights for all people but particularly for the most vulnerable groups.

Women and girls worldwide are among those directly and disproportionately affected. Lack of nutritional food, notably for pregnant and breastfeeding women, can negatively affect their physical and reproductive health and wellbeing. The risk of premature births and maternal and new-born deaths also increases as drinking water gradually becomes more scarce and saltier. Furthermore, exposure to indoor air pollution from dirty fuels often used for cooking or heating homes brings women at an especially high risk of disease and death<sup>3</sup>.

Similarly, children, who constitute one of the largest groups to be concerned, are disproportionately affected by changes in their environment, owing to their unique metabolism, physiology and developmental needs<sup>4</sup>. According to the UNICEF's recent report, the climate crisis constitutes the biggest structural threat to global food and nutrition security<sup>5</sup>, while extreme weather and natural

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<sup>2</sup> [www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2021/698846/EPRS\\_ATA\(2021\)698846\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2021/698846/EPRS_ATA(2021)698846_EN.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/household-air-pollution-and-health](http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/household-air-pollution-and-health)

<sup>4</sup> [www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241511773](http://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241511773)

<sup>5</sup> [www.unicef.org/globalinsight/media/3001/file/UNICEF-Innocenti-Prospepects-for-Children-Global-Outlook-2023.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/media/3001/file/UNICEF-Innocenti-Prospepects-for-Children-Global-Outlook-2023.pdf)

disasters, inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene, air pollution, vector-borne diseases, and resulting psychological trauma also cause some of the other substantial impacts of climate change on children. Additionally, climate-induced problems in agriculture, such as poor harvest, land loss, loss of livelihoods or livestock can increase the risks of domestic violence, child labour, early marriage, and trafficking in persons.

The unequal burden that children bear because of age-related vulnerabilities<sup>6</sup> and adverse discrimination linked to the impacts of climate change is also shaped by the economic and political structures that marginalise their interests. Research has shown that during climate change-induced natural disasters and extreme weather events, women and children were up to fourteen times more likely to die than men<sup>7</sup>, owing to differences in socioeconomic status and access to information. In a number of regions, women often have more limited rights compared to men, including less access to resources, information, decision-making authority and assets to prevent and mitigate disasters and climate change. Consequently, they are significantly more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and have fewer capacities to adapt and diversify their livelihood options<sup>8</sup>. Gender inequality coupled with climate change poses a particular challenge for those in situations of vulnerability or in conflict settings and those facing multiple intersecting forms of discrimination. Moreover, eighty percent of people displaced by climate change are women<sup>9</sup>, and gender-based violence against women and girls is known to become more acute in the wake of displacement, conflicts and natural disasters.

While women and children are at the forefront of climate and environmental action, their voices are rarely sufficiently represented in national and international climate discussions, leading to policies that do not adequately address their specific rights and needs. Women and children, however, should not be viewed as passive victims of climate change but rather as powerful agents of change, capable of making contributions to climate change adaptation and mitigation. It is important to stress that women are not inherently more vulnerable than men, nor should they be stereotyped as such. Vulnerability is constructed socially, economically and culturally through the distribution of power, wealth and resources – and can and should be deconstructed. Many women, including indigenous women, are already leaders in environmental action and staunch defenders of the right to land, water, nature, environment, and communities. In recent years, children, too, have become one of the most active and vocal constituencies of the climate justice movement.

Indigenous people, who are responsible for protecting an estimated 22 per cent of the planet's surface and 80 per cent of biodiversity, even if accounting for only 5 per cent of the world's population<sup>10</sup>, have a particularly important role to play in safeguarding ecosystems, maintaining biocultural integrity and designing collective futures to ensure human, multispecies and environmental justice and equity. Indigenous women often serve as holders and custodians of the collective accumulation of vital

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<sup>6</sup> A/HRC/RES/45/30 [documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G20/264/85/PDF/G2026485.pdf?OpenElement](https://www.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G20/264/85/PDF/G2026485.pdf?OpenElement)

<sup>7</sup> Peterson, K. (2007). "Reaching Out to Women When Disaster Strikes.", [www.soroptimist.org](http://www.soroptimist.org)

<sup>8</sup> [www.fao.org/climate-smart-agriculture-sourcebook/enabling-frameworks/module-c6-gender/chapter-c6-1/](http://www.fao.org/climate-smart-agriculture-sourcebook/enabling-frameworks/module-c6-gender/chapter-c6-1/)

<sup>9</sup> [www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/06/annual-full-day-discussion-human-rights-women](http://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/06/annual-full-day-discussion-human-rights-women)

<sup>10</sup> [www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms\\_551189.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms_551189.pdf)

traditional knowledge and technical skills, including those related to weather patterns and natural resource management. Their knowledge has been acquired over the centuries of observation and testing and has been transmitted across generations, often only in an oral form. Climate change gives new urgency to the preservation and incorporation of this unique knowledge into decision-making with respect to environmental programmes, the management of protected areas, and climate change mitigation and adaptation measures.

During all three panels of the conference, as well as in the follow-up publication, the organizers envisages orienting the discussion around the following overarching issues:

1. *Meaningful participation*: women and children, including indigenous women and children, should be included in full, meaningful, informed, inclusive and equitable participation in environmental, climate and disaster risk decision-making processes, including within the UNFCCC process as well as at a regional, national- and local-level.
2. *Climate education*: women and children should enjoy equal access to environmental and climate information and climate education, which should be evidence-based, contextually relevant, gender-responsive and inclusive of indigenous knowledge and rights<sup>11</sup>.
3. *Access to justice*: access to justice and effective remedies, both judicial and non-judicial, for women and children when their rights are threatened or violated should be affordable, appropriate and timely.
4. *Gender and child sensitive climate action*: international donors and funding institutions must preserve and strengthen their gender-, children- and family policies in accordance with local context while ensuring projects carried in deeply patriarchal settings do not undermine local communities and do not leave anyone behind.
5. *Loss and Damage Fund*: the resources of the new UNFCCC mechanism should be allocated to address and remedy the human rights impacts of loss and damage, delivered in a gender equitable way, support children- and youth-led organisations, and be directly accessible to local communities as well as Indigenous Peoples.
6. *Just transition*: it is paramount to work towards a just transition to a green economy, that is one that is gender-responsive, closes development gaps, empowers vulnerable groups, benefits local communities and workers, and secures Indigenous Peoples' rights and livelihoods.
7. *Phasing out fossil fuels*: not only fossil fuels are the main driver of the climate crisis, but their extraction, production and related infrastructure are often associated with human rights abuses and violations. A more robust language on fossil fuel phase out is needed during the upcoming COP-28.
8. *Safe and respectful civic space*: the work of women and child- environment- and climate-champions should be highlighted and celebrated. Violence and reprisals striking environment defenders, including indigenous women, is unacceptable. Ensuring a safe and inclusive space for civil society engagement is imperative for mobilization of broad public support to meet climate goals and delivering ambitious and just climate action.
9. *Recognition of the role of indigenous knowledge*: climate change solutions should not be limited to Western scientific knowledge, but include traditional knowledge, innovations and practices of Indigenous Peoples in the design of national and international climate programmes and policies.

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<sup>11</sup> [www.plan-international.org/publications/reimagining-climate-education-and-youth-leadership/](http://www.plan-international.org/publications/reimagining-climate-education-and-youth-leadership/)

10. *Breaking the silos*: different mechanisms and systems addressing climate change, environment and human rights, albeit working with their own modalities, should be better linked with each other and continue building on each other's work.

### Suggested Discussion Questions

#### Panel 1, concerning women's rights:

- What are some of the good practices of States simultaneously advancing gender equality and the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment?
- How are women involved in political and decision-making processes related to climate change and human rights, and what needs to be done to further strengthen their participation in these areas?
- How can the newly created at COP-27 Loss and Damage Fund become a gender-sensitive and transformative platform, responsive to specific losses suffered by women?
- What are some of the recent best practices of integrating a gender-responsive approach into climate action at the local, national, regional and international levels, including at the UNFCCC?

#### Panel 2, concerning children's rights:

- What are some of the existing best practices in addressing the needs, rights and contributions of children? How can these practices be best used to inform actions and mechanisms for the protection of the human rights of those most affected by climate change, including children?
- What does the new General Comment No. 26 by the Committee on the Rights of the Child aim to achieve? How does it promote the holistic understanding of the child-based approach in the environmental context?
- What educational and consultative policies can help to engage children with issues related to climate change, the environment and disaster risk reduction?
- How can the 'youthwashing' be prevented during international events, and how can meaningful inclusion of children be encouraged and ensured?
- How can the principle of the intergenerational equity and the interests of future generations be better addressed in the future?

#### Panel 3, concerning the role of the traditional knowledge of Indigenous Peoples:

- How can Indigenous Peoples' traditional knowledge and experience be better included in decision-making on climate action and disaster risk reduction policies?
- What are some of the existing best practices of drawing on the traditional knowledge of the Indigenous Peoples in order to enhance the resilience of communities to the adverse effects of climate change?
- How can international climate mechanism leverage indigenous knowledge and enhance their capacity to safeguard the environment?
- How can indigenous women be better empowered to participate in preventing and responding to climate harm in their communities and beyond?