



INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE CLIMATE INEQUALITY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

21 NOVEMBER 2025

Palais des Nations, UN Geneva



Climate inequality, human rights and sustainable development

International Conference organised by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to development and the Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue on 21 November 2025 at the United Nations in Geneva

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Background

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights in its advisory opinion¹ on “Climate Emergency and Human Rights” noted “the role of inequality between individuals and nations in relation to the human causes of climate change and its disproportionate impact on those who have contributed least to those causes and yet are in a situation of greater vulnerability to its impacts” (para 261). In doing so, the Court aligned its reasoning with longstanding international human rights principles, including the right to development as proclaimed in UN General Assembly Resolution 41/128², which recognises development as an inalienable human right grounded in equity, participation, and international cooperation.

In a similar vein, the International Court of Justice in its advisory opinion³ on “Obligations of States in respect of climate change” recognised, among others, sustainable development, common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR), and equity as guiding principles to interpret the obligations of States. The Court noted that the principle of CBDR “reflects the need to distribute equitably the burdens of the obligations in respect of climate change, taking into account, inter alia, States’ historical and current contributions to cumulative GHG emissions, and their different current capabilities and national circumstances, including their economic and social development” (para 148). The ICJ clarified that climate change cannot be assessed in isolation. Courts and governments, the ICJ said, must consider climate obligations together with human rights and other environmental agreements.⁴ This integrated approach echoes the Human Rights Council’s recognition of the autonomous right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment in Human Rights Council Resolution 48/13, which affirms that environmental degradation, including climate change, interferes with the enjoyment of human rights.⁵

Both courts also acknowledged that climate change has disproportionate impacts on groups such as children, women, Indigenous Peoples and persons with disabilities. This judicial recognition is consistent with authoritative treaty body interpretations. For instance, the Committee on the Rights of the Child in CRC General Comment No. 26⁶ clarified that States have binding obligations to protect children from environmental harm, including climate change, as part of their duties under the Convention. Similarly, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in CESCR General Comment No. 14⁷ affirmed that environmental conditions, including those affected by climate change,

¹ Inter-American Court of Human Rights. n.d. *Advisory Opinions*. Accessed [date you accessed].

https://www.corteidh.or.cr/opinionones_consultivas.cfm?lang=en.

² UN General Assembly, *Declaration on the Right to Development*, UN General Assembly Resolution 41/128, UN Doc. A/RES/41/128 (4 December 1986).

³ International Court of Justice. n.d. *Case Details: Case Concerning the Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (The Gambia v. Myanmar)*. Accessed [date you accessed]. <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/187>.

⁴ While advisory opinions are not binding in the same manner as contentious judgments, they carry considerable authoritative weight in clarifying existing obligations under international law.

International Court of Justice. 2025. *Order for Provisional Measures, The Gambia v. Myanmar, ICJ Case No. 187*, July 23, 2025. PDF. <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/187/187-20250723-pre-01-00-en.pdf>.

⁵ UN Human Rights Council, *The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment*, Human Rights Council Resolution 48/13, UN Doc. A/HRC/RES/48/13 (8 October 2021). UN General Assembly, *The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment*, UN Doc. A/RES/76/300 (28 July 2022).

⁶ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No. 26 (2023) on children’s rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change*, CRC General Comment No. 26, UN Doc. CRC/C/GC/26 (22 August 2023).

⁷ UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *General Comment No. 14: The right to the highest attainable standard of health* (art. 12), CESCR General Comment No. 14, UN Doc. E/C.12/2000/4 (11 August 2000).

are integral to the right to the highest attainable standard of health. The judicial recognition of various facets of climate inequality is therefore in line with what scholars, climate activists and UN human rights mechanisms have been arguing for years.

A recent article on UN News⁸ stressed that “with rising effects of climate change across the globe, the world has started recognising that climate change is not just an ecological collapse, but also a human rights crisis.” Professor Joyeeta Gupta echoed this view by adding that climate change impacts must be understood as violations of human rights. Because of this, “climate justice and development go hand in hand. Every basic right – from water and food to housing, mobility, and electricity – requires energy. There is a belief that we can meet the Sustainable Development Goals without changing how rich people live. That doesn’t work mathematically or ethically,” Professor Gupta explained.⁹

Speaking at the Human Rights Council in June last year, UN High Commissioner Volker Türk warned that climate change is already eroding fundamental rights, especially for the most vulnerable. He also framed climate action as an opportunity. “Climate change can be a powerful lever for progress,” he said, if the world commits to a just transition away from environmentally destructive systems. “What we need now,” he stressed, “is a roadmap to rethink our societies, economies and politics in ways that are equitable and sustainable.”¹⁰

Against this background, the conference provided a platform to foster dialogue among various stakeholders on the intersection of climate inequality, human rights, and sustainable development. It brought together experts to co-create human rights-based solutions to various facets of climate inequality, share good practices, and foster transformative collaboration among decision-makers for a just, fair, and sustainable future.

The conference commenced with a high-level opening session featuring statements by the co-sponsoring Permanent Mission of Chile to the United Nations in Geneva; the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Vanuatu to the United Nations in Geneva; the Permanent Mission of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas to the United Nations Office in Geneva; and the Permanent Mission of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to the United Nations Office in Geneva, alongside interventions from prominent experts, including UN officials and Special Rapporteurs, such as Prof. Nicolas Levrat, UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues; Mr Sean O’Connell, Global Focal Point on Environmental Justice, United Nations Development Programme; and Prof. Surya Deva, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to development. Discussions explored solutions to various facets of climate inequality, including unequal greenhouse gas emissions of developed countries and fossil fuel companies; differentiated and disproportionate adverse impacts experienced by certain groups as well as least developed countries and small island developing States; unequal access to clean energy; unfair international financial architecture; and climate finance barriers and debt burdens faced by developing countries.

Following the opening session, the conference featured three interactive panels on the following themes:

⁸ United Nations News, “UN Court Orders Measures in Genocide Case Against Myanmar,” *UN.org*, 27 December 2025, https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/12/1166649?utm_source=UN+News+-+Newsletter&utm_campaign=b09d82dd83-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2025_12_27_01_00&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_fdbf1af606-b09d82dd83-108475550.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

1. **Addressing adverse impacts on selected socio-economic rights:** Discussing ways to address adverse impacts of climate change on rights to food, housing, education, and health.
2. **Responding to differentiated and disproportionate impacts:** Examining how to respond to differentiated and disproportionate impacts of climate change on children, women, older persons and Indigenous Peoples.
3. **Right to development as a pathway to overcome climate inequality:** Exploring how various aspects of the right to development such as intergenerational equity, intersectionality, fair distribution, active, free and meaningful participation, and international cooperation provide a transformative pathway to overcome climate inequality.

The present paper presents the speeches of the different experts on these themes more comprehensively.

High-Level Segment discussions

The International Conference began with a High-Level Segment, where prominent speakers shared their thoughts and recommendations concerning the intersection of climate inequality, human rights, and sustainable development.

In particular, in her opening statement, **Ms. Rabab Fatima, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS**, spoke on behalf of the world's 92 most vulnerable countries—Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs), and Small Island Developing States (SIDS)—underscoring that climate change constitutes not only an environmental emergency but a profound inequality and human rights crisis. These countries, which have contributed the least to global greenhouse gas emissions, are nevertheless bearing the heaviest burdens of climate impacts, while also lagging furthest behind in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

She presented compelling data illustrating stark disparities in disaster-related mortality and economic losses. Over the past decade, disaster mortality rates in LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS have been several times higher than the global average, while economic losses as a percentage of GDP have vastly exceeded global figures. Beyond sudden disasters, Ms. Fatima highlighted the destructive effects of slow-onset phenomena—such as sea-level rise, desertification, glacial retreat, and freshwater salinization—which are eroding land, livelihoods, culture, and, in some cases, threatening statehood and the right of entire peoples to live with dignity and security.

Ms. Fatima stressed that the international community must deliver on long-standing commitments related to emissions reductions, climate finance, and technology transfer, grounded in the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, enshrined in the Rio Declaration, the UNFCCC, the Paris Agreement, and the 2030 Agenda. She welcomed the historic legal reinforcement of this principle through the July advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, which reaffirmed that states have binding obligations under international human rights law to protect the climate system in order to ensure the effective enjoyment of human rights.

She outlined her Office's work in advancing climate resilience and development priorities through key frameworks, including the Doha Programme of Action for LDCs, the Programme of Action for LLDCs, and the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS. These efforts include support for national adaptation plans, multi-hazard early warning systems, strengthened climate advocacy, and the operationalization of the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index, which offers a more comprehensive assessment of vulnerability beyond GDP and is increasingly being applied to concessional and climate finance allocations.

Ms. Fatima concluded by emphasizing the right to development as a transformative framework linking climate action with justice and equity. She issued four urgent appeals ahead of the decisive phase of COP30: raising mitigation ambition in line with the 1.5°C target; scaling up predictable, accessible, and grant-based climate finance for adaptation; fully supporting the "Early Warnings for All" initiative by 2027; and capitalizing and operationalizing the Loss and Damage Fund. She called on the international community to move from promises to implementation and from climate inequality to climate justice.

Ambassador Claudia Fuentes-Julio, Permanent Representative of Chile to the United Nations Office in Geneva, emphasized that addressing the climate crisis through a human rights-based approach is central to Chile's national and international climate policy. She underlined that climate change has direct and concrete consequences for people's lives, particularly those in situations of vulnerability and historically excluded groups, affecting rights such as health, food, water, sanitation, housing, and livelihoods.

At the national level, she highlighted Chile's 2022 Framework Law on Climate Change, which establishes carbon neutrality by 2050 and mandates sectoral mitigation and adaptation plans grounded in principles of climate justice, gender equality, public participation, and protection of vulnerable groups. She also presented Chile's National Strategy for a Just Socio-Ecological Transition, structured around four pillars: labor reconversion and quality employment, ecosystem restoration, community equity and wellbeing, and innovation for sustainable production, all implemented through inclusive social dialogue.

Recognizing that national action alone is insufficient, Ambassador Fuentes-Julio stressed the importance of strengthening the international legal framework. She highlighted the landmark advisory opinion of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, requested by Chile and Colombia, which affirmed that climate change is a human rights crisis and clarified states' obligations under the American Convention, including the duty to adopt differentiated measures to address the disproportionate impacts on groups affected by structural discrimination.

She further welcomed the July 2025 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, which reinforced these conclusions at the universal level by recognizing climate change as an existential planetary threat and affirming states' legal obligations to protect the climate system for present and future generations. Importantly, the ICJ clarified the legal consequences of acts and omissions contributing to climate harm, particularly when affecting vulnerable states and communities.

Ambassador Fuentes-Julio concluded by stressing that these converging regional and international legal standards strengthen the global architecture for human rights-based climate action. She reaffirmed the importance of international cooperation, equity, and common but differentiated responsibilities, expressing hope that the conference would foster dialogue and collective action toward a just, equitable, and sustainable future.

Ambassador Patricia Ann Hermanns, Permanent Representative of the Commonwealth of the Bahamas, framed climate inequality as the lived reality of Small Island Developing States, which collectively account for less than one percent of global emissions yet face some of the most severe climate impacts. She described climate inequality as the gap between minimal responsibility and maximal risk, compounded by repeated cycles of destruction and rebuilding within severely constrained fiscal space.

She recalled the devastating impact of recent hurricanes, including one that wiped out a significant share of national GDP, illustrating how each disaster deepens inequalities and undermines human rights, particularly the right to development. She welcomed recent legal developments, including advisory opinions of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the International Court of Justice, which affirmed states' obligations to prevent and remedy climate harm, cooperate internationally, and provide financial and technical support to vulnerable countries in line with equity and common but differentiated responsibilities.

Ambassador Hermanns emphasized that climate inequality is also embedded in global financing structures. She referenced the widening development finance gap—estimated at USD 4 trillion annually—and called for reform of the international financial architecture. In this context, she welcomed the adoption of the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index as a tool to move beyond GDP and better reflect climate vulnerability.

She stressed the need for predictable, grant-based finance for adaptation and loss and damage, warning that excessive reliance on loans deepens debt burdens. She highlighted innovative financing mechanisms, such as blue carbon monetization, as complementary tools that can support resilience, social protection, and just transitions without replacing public climate finance obligations.

In closing, she cautioned that commitments will only matter if they translate into resource allocation guided by vulnerability and human rights, enabling SIDS to break free from cycles of destruction and rebuilding and to close the climate inequality gap.

Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Jordan, H.E. Akram Sa'ud Harahsheh, presented climate change as a daily reality for Jordan, one of the world's most water-scarce countries, where rising temperatures and erratic rainfall threaten livelihoods, food security, and social stability. He highlighted the compounded pressures created by hosting large refugee populations and emphasized the growing nexus between climate change and displacement.

He stressed that climate change is fundamentally a human rights crisis, disproportionately affecting women, children, refugees, and marginalized communities, and undermining rights to water, food, health, shelter, and dignity. In response, he outlined Jordan's national policy framework, including the National Climate Change Policy (2022–2025), the National Adaptation Plan, and updated Nationally Determined Contributions aiming to reduce emissions by 31% by 2030, with renewable energy reaching 50% of electricity generation.

Ambassador Harahsheh highlighted initiatives promoting community-led resilience, women's empowerment in water conservation, green growth, job creation, and climate-resilient health systems. He emphasized Jordan's commitment to integrating human rights into climate action while calling for fair international support, technology transfer, and climate finance that uplifts rather than burdens developing countries.

He concluded with a call for solidarity and partnership, urging the international community to recognize the human stories behind climate statistics and to work collectively toward a just and sustainable future.

Mr Richardo Colmar, Deputy Permanent Representative of Vanuatu, described climate change as an existential and daily reality for small island developing states, marked by coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion, intensified cyclones, and widespread destruction of homes, schools, and infrastructure. Despite contributing negligibly to global emissions, these states face threats to sovereignty, survival, and self-determination.

He explained Vanuatu's leadership in seeking an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice not to assign blame, but to obtain legal clarity, justice, and hope. He welcomed complementary initiatives before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, emphasizing that climate change represents a legal and moral failure, not merely a political one.

Mr. Colmar underscored that a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is a human right, and that development must not come at the cost of survival or sovereignty. He stressed that climate finance, loss and damage, and debt relief are obligations grounded in justice, not acts of charity, and called for a fully operational, transparent, grant-based Loss and Damage Fund.

He concluded with a call for rapid emissions reductions, fossil fuel phase-out, predictable grant-based finance, financial system reform based on vulnerability rather than GDP, and the inclusion of local communities as leaders in climate action.

Mr Dimiter Chalev, Chief, Rule of Law, Equality and Non-Discrimination Branch, OHCHR, framed the climate crisis as a human rights crisis rooted in historical and ongoing inequalities, disproportionately affecting those least responsible. He highlighted the legal significance of the International Court of Justice’s advisory opinion, which clarified that states have binding human rights obligations to protect the climate system and must cooperate based on equity and common but differentiated responsibilities.

Drawing on OHCHR’s long-standing work, he outlined how climate change undermines economic, social, and cultural rights, particularly for marginalized groups, and exacerbates inequality and debt burdens in developing countries. He emphasized the importance of just transitions as pathways to environmental justice, equality, and the realization of rights to development and a healthy environment.

Mr. Chalev stressed that access to justice, effective remedies, and non-repetition of harm are essential components of climate action, alongside investments in social protection, education, and public services. He concluded by reaffirming OHCHR’s commitment to supporting states and stakeholders in ensuring that climate transitions leave no one behind.

Mr Livio Sarandrea, Senior Advisor on the Rule of Law, Security and Human Rights, UNDP

, focused on solutions, emphasizing the need for integrated approaches that bridge climate action, human rights, justice, and sustainable development. He highlighted UNDP’s role in supporting over 140 countries with climate action, including leadership in integrating human rights, gender equality, inclusion, and equity into Nationally Determined Contributions.

He stressed the importance of breaking institutional silos and ensuring that affected communities are central to decision-making. He provided concrete examples of UNDP’s work on NDC support, loss and damage responses, community-led adaptation, access to justice, and accountability through tools for national human rights institutions, businesses, and judicial actors.

He concluded that effective climate solutions are inherently integrated, locally grounded, and community-driven, and reaffirmed UNDP’s commitment to working with partners to deliver lasting, rights-based solutions.

Finally, **Ms Chantelle Khan, Commissioner, Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission, Fiji**, highlighted climate change as an existential reality for Pacific Island communities, marked by displacement, loss of livelihoods, and threats to cultural heritage. She drew on outcomes from the Pacific Business and Human Rights Forum, emphasizing persistent exclusion of marginalized groups—particularly women, youth, persons with disabilities, migrants, Indigenous Peoples, and LGBTI+ communities—from decision-making processes.

She underscored the need to shift climate narratives from political framing toward lived inequalities and human impacts. Using Fiji as an example, she cited data showing hundreds of communities facing relocation due to climate impacts and called for translating global commitments into local, community-led action.

Ms. Khan emphasized the critical role of National Human Rights Institutions in advancing climate justice through awareness, data collection, accountability, and alignment with international standards, noting their limited presence in the Pacific. She concluded with a powerful metaphor of the Fijian *drua*, stressing that collective strength, cooperation, and unity are essential to addressing climate inequalities and upholding human rights.

Conclusion

The discussions underscored a shared and unequivocal conclusion: climate change is fundamentally a human rights and inequality crisis, rooted in historical and structural injustices. Across regions and institutions, speakers emphasized that those who have contributed least to global greenhouse gas emissions—particularly Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries, Small Island Developing States, Indigenous Peoples, women, children, persons with disabilities, and marginalized communities—are bearing the most severe and often existential impacts. Climate change is already undermining the effective enjoyment of a wide range of rights, including the rights to life, health, food, water, housing, education, development, and self-determination, while slow-onset events and recurrent disasters erode livelihoods, culture, territory, and, in some cases, statehood itself.

A second core takeaway was the growing legal clarity and normative convergence at the international and regional levels. Recent advisory opinions of the International Court of Justice and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights have decisively affirmed that States have binding obligations under international law to prevent climate harm, protect the climate system, cooperate internationally, and ensure accountability, particularly where vulnerable States and communities are concerned. These developments reinforce the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, confirm that a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is indispensable for the enjoyment of human rights, and strengthen the global legal architecture for human-rights-based climate action. The climate crisis was thus framed not as a failure of political will alone, but as a matter of legal responsibility and justice.

Finally, speakers converged on the urgent need to translate commitments into implementation through integrated, people-centred solutions. Raising mitigation ambition in line with the 1.5°C limit, scaling up predictable and grant-based climate finance for adaptation and loss and damage, reforming the international financial architecture, operationalizing vulnerability-based allocation tools, and ensuring universal early warning systems were identified as immediate priorities. Equally critical is breaking institutional silos, embedding the right to development and just transition frameworks into climate action, and placing affected communities at the centre of decision-making. Only through genuine international cooperation, equity-driven financing, and accountability can climate inequality be transformed into climate justice and a just, sustainable future be secured for present and future generations.

Session 1 - Addressing adverse impacts on selected socio-economic rights

The first session of the international conference focused on discussing ways to address the adverse impacts of climate change on rights to food, housing, education, and health, in particular. Climate change and natural disasters present hazards to individuals and communities. The damages associated with storms, droughts, and slow climate changes are shaped by the social, political, and economic vulnerabilities of people and societies on the ground.¹¹

Environmental and social sustainability are interlinked, as environmental and climate change risks and related economic activities and policy measures affect regions, sectors, workers and population groups in different ways.¹²

Prof. David Boyd, Professor, University of British Columbia; former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, framed the climate crisis as unequivocally a human rights crisis, drawing on extensive first-hand observations from across the world. He recounted the devastating impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities, including the relocation of Indigenous villages in Fiji, the deaths of Sámi reindeer due to climate disruption in Norway, heat-related mortality in Botswana, and the experiences of wildfire, drought, and flood survivors in Portugal, Chile, and the Maldives. He also highlighted the unprecedented heatwave in British Columbia that resulted in the deaths of over 600 people, predominantly older persons and persons with disabilities, illustrating that climate vulnerability exists even in high-income countries.

Professor Boyd emphasized that those most affected by climate change are consistently the communities that have contributed least to the problem. Climate change undermines a wide range of human rights, including the rights to life, health, food, water, housing, an adequate standard of living, development, culture, children's rights, and the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Given the scale and severity of these impacts, he stressed that the focus must be on States' legal obligations, not discretionary policy choices.

He underscored that international, regional, and national courts—including the International Court of Justice, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the European Court of Human Rights, and domestic courts—have now provided clear legal guidance on States' obligations related to mitigation, adaptation, international cooperation, and climate finance. Wealthy, high-emitting States' attempts to evade responsibility have been consistently rejected, and the legal space for inaction has effectively closed.

Professor Boyd stressed that, while the specific mitigation targets contained in Nationally Determined Contributions are not themselves legally enforceable, States are under binding procedural and due diligence obligations under the Paris Agreement to prepare, communicate and maintain progressively ambitious NDCs, consistent with equity and the 1.5°C objective. He called for accelerated fossil fuel phase-out, an end to fossil fuel subsidies and new exploration permits, the reversal of deforestation,

¹¹ World Bank. 2009. *Economic Policy and Poverty Impact: Electricity Sector Development*, December. Washington, DC: World Bank.

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/970361468324546268/pdf/520970PUB0EPI11C010disclosed0Dec091.pdf>.

¹² Griffin, Míde, Endre György, Katarina Jakšič, and Frank Siebern-Thomas, with contributions from Stefano Filauro and Tim van Rie, Eurofound, Cambridge Econometrics, the Social Situation Monitor, and the Joint Research Centre unit on Economics of Climate Change, Energy and Transport. 2019. *Chapter 5, ESDE 2019: Towards a Greener Future: Employment and Social Impacts of Climate Change Policies*. Unpublished manuscript, accessed.

and the transformation of industrial agriculture. He also highlighted the need to reform investor–State dispute settlement mechanisms that obstruct climate action.

On solutions, Professor Boyd pointed to positive global trends, including rapid expansion of renewable energy, reforestation, ecosystem restoration, and agroecology. He emphasized that governing natural resources in ways that benefit the public—illustrated by contrasting oil governance in Norway and Nigeria—is essential to fulfilling the rights to development and a healthy environment. When States respect these rights together, he concluded, they achieve the core of sustainable development.

However, in the majority of situations, the vulnerability of poor, marginalized, and underrepresented people remains widespread.¹³ This is largely because poorer communities are excluded from access to essential services, secure land tenure, social protection systems and decision-making processes, which significantly intensifies their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related risks.¹⁴

Dr David Wilgenbus, Executive Director of the Office for Climate Education, framed climate change as a profound social and human rights crisis that directly undermines the right to education, often in less visible but deeply structural ways. He highlighted how climate shocks are increasingly destroying school infrastructure, disrupting schooling cycles, and forcing children—particularly those from vulnerable communities—out of education. Even where physical access to schools remains intact, extreme heat, food insecurity, air pollution, displacement, and psychological stress significantly impair concentration, learning outcomes, and cognitive development.

He distinguished between two dimensions of the climate–education nexus: first, the ways in which climate change harms education systems; and second, the transformative role education can play in responding to the climate crisis. While acknowledging the severe disruptions caused by climate impacts, he placed particular emphasis on education as a long-term structural response. Societies, he argued, cannot address climate change through technology and finance alone. They also require informed citizens capable of understanding complexity, navigating uncertainty, building trust, and engaging in collective action—particularly in contexts where climate impacts intensify social tensions and resource competition.

Dr Wilgenbus described Climate Change Education (CCE) as a transformative instrument that equips young people with systems thinking skills, critical reasoning, scientific literacy, and emotional resilience to cope with eco-anxiety. By strengthening evidence-based reasoning and dialogue, climate education can reduce polarization and misinformation, thereby contributing not only to climate resilience but also to social cohesion and peacebuilding.

He identified three enabling conditions for effective climate education:

- (1) coherent and structured curricula that integrate climate change as a core cross-cutting issue;
- (2) adequately trained and supported teachers, with sustained professional development; and
- (3) high-quality, locally adapted educational materials grounded in scientific integrity.

¹³ World Bank. 2009. *Social Dimensions of Climate Change: Equity and Vulnerability in a Warming World*, edited by Robin Mearns and Andrew Norton. Washington, DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/970361468324546268/pdf/520970PUB0EPI11C010disclosed0Dec091.pdf>

¹⁴ Ibidem.

He noted that only a very small proportion of countries—estimated at around 2 percent—have fully integrated climate change across their national curricula, revealing a significant global implementation gap.

Dr Wilgenbus further stressed that education systems themselves must be protected and made climate-resilient. Extreme weather events, environmental degradation, and protracted crises increasingly threaten school infrastructure, enrollment, and continuity of learning. In this regard, he referenced emerging policy guidance, including work by the World Bank Group, identifying four priority areas for safeguarding education systems: resilient education management systems; climate-resilient school infrastructure; mechanisms to ensure learning continuity during climate shocks; and mobilizing students and teachers as agents of change.

Education indeed plays a key role in responding to climate change, including teaching and building trust and our ability to work together. Climate education can help people navigate and make sense of the diverse and complex phenomena, as well as their eco-anxiety. Additionally, education can also reduce social polarization and empower younger generations to take decisive actions about protecting the planet.¹⁵ For this to happen, the education system needs to integrate climate change into its curricula, to make a strong and sustainable effort in supporting the teachers by providing quality education materials and by putting a strong emphasis on their professional development. Governments and politics are the main challenges in adopting climate change in education curricula.¹⁶

Education can encourage people to change their attitudes and behaviour; it also helps them to make informed decisions. In the classroom, young people can be taught the impact of global warming and learn how to adapt to climate change. Education empowers all people but especially motivates the young to take action. Knowing the facts helps eliminate the fear.¹⁷ Schools may help students understand reasons, impacts, and work on projects in order to investigate, debate, respectfully share ideas, and design together solutions.

Education needs to be protected from climate change. The climate crisis is largely limiting access to education, with children remaining among the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Extreme weather events threaten learning, enrollment, and the future prospects of students through both direct and indirect channels.¹⁸

However, education remains overlooked in the climate policy agenda. According to the World Bank Group, there are four concrete ways in which governments can protect education systems from climate change so that their positive impacts on economic development, poverty alleviation, and social cohesion can be sustained and boosted. These are: (i) education management for resilience; (ii) school infrastructure for resilience; (iii) ensuring learning continuity in the face of climate shocks; and (iv) leveraging students and teachers as change agents. The paper presents an actionable agenda for each of these with operational examples in different contexts.¹⁹

¹⁵ Marsh, Jane. 2024. "Is the Education System Overlooking Climate Change?" *Earth.Org*, January 24, 2024. <https://earth.org/international-day-of-education-2024-is-the-education-system-overlooking-climate-change/>.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ United Nations, "Education Is Key to Addressing Climate Change," *UN.org*, 14 July 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/climate-solutions/education-key-addressing-climate-change>.

¹⁸ World Bank. 2024. *The Impact of Climate Change on Education and What to Do About It*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099043024150036726>.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

On the spectrum of the socio-economic rights, a critical consideration should be given to the housing inequalities, how housing inequalities exacerbate vulnerability levels, how a weakening rule of law and weak institutions exacerbate climate damages, and also what are some of the most creative and humane solutions in those cases which have major impacts on everyone's future, particularly the most vulnerable, and many of the impacts of food issues will be health impacts.

In this context, housing is a key player in meeting both adaptation and mitigation goals. Solutions must be resilient to hazards and low-carbon by design—and they must be affordable, scalable, and inclusive.²⁰ Scaling resilient housing requires systems change. It needs political will, supportive regulations, financing, and coordinated actions.²¹

In this regard, **Professor Letnar Čerňič, Professor of Constitutional and Human Rights Law, New University, Slovenia**, addressed housing as a central dimension of climate inequality, highlighting how recurring climate hazards disproportionately affect vulnerable populations' access to adequate housing. He emphasized that floods, earthquakes, and sea-level rise increasingly cause displacement, homelessness, and housing insecurity, particularly where governance failures and weak rule of law exacerbate climate impacts.

Drawing on recent examples from Italy, Slovenia, and Spain, he illustrated how inadequate mitigation, adaptation, oversight, and institutional accountability led to widespread destruction, loss of life, and displacement. In Slovenia, record floods in 2023 displaced thousands and destroyed homes, disproportionately affecting socioeconomically marginalized communities. Similar failures in Spain resulted in catastrophic flooding and mass displacement.

Professor Letnar Čerňič emphasized that climate impacts are amplified where housing is substandard, institutions are weak, and affected communities lack adaptive capacity. He called for holistic climate mitigation and adaptation strategies that integrate housing rights, resilient infrastructure, equitable resource distribution, and strong legal frameworks.

He concluded by stressing the urgency of embedding climate justice into housing policies, ensuring participation of vulnerable communities, strengthening accountability, and prioritizing resilient reconstruction to prevent future inequalities and enhance the capabilities of affected populations.

Additionally, **Mr Igor Gryshko, Human Rights Officer/Economist, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Section, OHCHR**, focused on the right to food, examining how climate change exacerbates inequalities across food systems and livelihoods. He highlighted that climate change is already one of the leading drivers of global hunger, affecting all dimensions of the right to food—availability, accessibility, adequacy, and sustainability. Climate-related shocks such as heatwaves, droughts, floods, salinization, and sea-level rise are disrupting food production, degrading ecosystems, and undermining livelihoods worldwide.

He presented stark data showing that between 2008 and 2018, climate-related disasters caused approximately USD 109 billion in crop and livestock losses in least developed and low- and middle-income countries. Global hunger continues to rise, with over 295 million people experiencing acute food insecurity in 2024, and projections indicating that nearly 600 million people could be food-

²⁰ Build Change. 2026. "Build Change | Climate-Resilient Housing Initiative." <https://buildchange.org/>.

²¹ Ibidem.

insecure by 2030 if current trends persist. Climate change also drives food price volatility, disproportionately affecting net food-importing and climate-vulnerable States, particularly SIDS.

Mr. Gryshko emphasized that climate impacts at the household level deepen poverty, reduce incomes, and limit access to adequate nutrition, especially for communities dependent on climate-sensitive agriculture. These impacts are compounded by high debt burdens and constrained access to external finance, which reduce fiscal space and limit States' ability to mobilize the maximum available resources for the realization of economic, social and cultural rights.

He highlighted opportunities emerging from the outcomes of the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, including commitments to progressive taxation, debt cooperation, and expanded social protection. However, he stressed that access to adaptation finance remains inequitable, with complex accreditation processes and costly risk-mitigation instruments excluding smaller and capacity-constrained States.

Mr. Gryshko concluded by calling for human-rights-based integration of climate action into NDCs, National Adaptation Plans, and national budget frameworks, linking food security with water, health, housing, and education. He emphasized the importance of transitioning toward sustainable and climate-resilient food systems, including agroecology, regenerative agriculture, and ecosystem-based fisheries, and aligning trade and investment policies with human rights obligations.

In conclusion, having a strong, holistic, interrelated human rights-based approach to climate change policy is really important to prevent the systemic effects of climate change. Climate inequality should be addressed through the lens of the concept of equality of capabilities, the concept which was initially developed to address and respond to emergencies, to catastrophes, to the way of state obligations.

Economic policies should be aligned with the obligations of the state under the human rights law and broader under the rule of law in general. The way States operate each one separately, but also the way they operate together, is the matter of the human rights.

Ms Preeti Saran, Chair, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), emphasized that the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is indispensable for the effective enjoyment of all rights enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and is inseparable from the right to development and the right of peoples to self-determination. She underscored that peoples must be the primary beneficiaries of the exploitation of natural resources, with benefits shared fairly and equitably.

She highlighted the Committee's adoption of a General Comment on the environmental dimension of sustainable development, reflecting the growing recognition of climate change as a systemic threat to economic, social and cultural rights. Climate degradation, driven largely by unsustainable resource use in developed countries, disproportionately affects individuals and States least able to cope, undermining rights to food, housing, health, education, culture, and an adequate standard of living.

Ms. Saran stressed that climate justice requires fulfilment of States' obligations of international assistance and cooperation, including financing and technology transfer, in accordance with common but differentiated responsibilities. She emphasized that a just transition must reduce, not reinforce, inequalities, including in States' extraterritorial activities such as business operations abroad.

She highlighted the disproportionate impacts of climate change on groups facing systemic discrimination and called for prioritizing mitigation, adaptation, remediation, reparation, and environmental restoration for communities bearing the greatest burdens. She also emphasized the implications of climate change for employment, food systems, and health, calling for long-term resilience strategies grounded in sustainable resource use.

Ms. Saran concluded by affirming that the outcomes of the conference would provide valuable guidance for the Committee's ongoing work.

On the same note, **Ms Marianna Leite, Director of Programs, Center for Economic and Social Rights**, focused on the right to the highest attainable standard of health, emphasizing the often-invisible ways climate change undermines health through its impact on the social determinants of health. She highlighted the limitations of the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement in addressing health-related human rights violations, underscoring the necessity of integrating climate governance with international human rights law.

She explained that climate inequality is deeply embedded in economic stability, health systems, built environments, social contexts, and education, and that many of these determinants are shaped by avoidable and unjust policy choices. She criticized austerity measures, privatization, and conditionalities promoted by international financial institutions, noting their well-documented role in exacerbating inequality and undermining health outcomes.

Ms. Leite drew extensively on international human rights law, including CESCR General Comment No. 14, to demonstrate that States have individual and collective obligations to prevent harm, regulate private actors, cooperate internationally, and guarantee non-repetition of violations. She highlighted the importance of recent advisory opinions from ITLOS, the ICJ, and the IACtHR in clarifying States' due diligence obligations in the climate context.

She proposed a multi-level way forward, calling for rights-based macroeconomic reforms, redirection of fossil fuel subsidies to public health investments, health-centered NDCs and NAPs, and meaningful participation of affected communities in policy design. She concluded that reducing inequality is essential to avoiding unintended harms of climate responses.

Session 2 - Responding to differentiated and disproportionate impacts

As repeatedly reported and studied, the impacts of climate change affect communities disproportionately, including indigenous, women, immigrants and refugees, people living with low incomes, communities experiencing disproportionate pollution exposure, and those with existing health issues. Children and elderly people are also more vulnerable to climate change impacts.²² Frontline communities are often hit hardest by climate change impacts, although they have often contributed the least to the causes of climate change. This is because of unjust social, political and economic structures.²³ At the same time, these communities have solutions to address climate change impacts.²⁴ The knowledge of the elders, the participatory governance, and the inclusion of everybody, including women, are very much at the heart of the climate change challenges.

The purpose of the session and of the chapter is to examine how to respond to differentiated and disproportionate impacts of climate change on children, women, older persons and Indigenous Peoples.

Mr Sebastian Duyck, Senior Attorney, Centre for International Environmental Law (CIEL), framed climate inequality as the result of a profound governance and rule-of-law failure, arguing that climate change has been wrongly treated as an exceptional policy issue rather than as a matter of enforceable legal obligations. Despite decades of scientific clarity and international negotiations, he highlighted the persistent lack of ambition in mitigation efforts, pointing in particular to the absence of commitments on fossil fuel phase-out and deforestation in current COP30 draft decisions. This failure, he stressed, reflects deeper structural shortcomings in how States apply both climate and human rights law.

He emphasized that climate harms are systematically externalized onto communities in vulnerable situations, which are treated as “sacrifice zones” for global consumption. While recent legal breakthroughs and grassroots initiatives are inspiring, he cautioned against placing the burden of accountability primarily on those already most affected. Prolonged litigation processes—often lasting many years—illustrate the injustice of expecting vulnerable individuals to shoulder responsibility for enforcing rights that States have failed to uphold.

From a strategic legal perspective, Mr. Duyck called for leveraging existing legal obligations and institutions to bring climate action back into the sphere of accountability, including judicial review, while establishing clear “red lines” for the protection of those most impacted. He stressed the importance of intersectionality, particularly through the lens of economic inequality, and highlighted the growing relevance of UN human rights treaty bodies and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in integrating climate justice across legal frameworks.

He argued that litigation alone cannot be the primary solution due to its slowness, and instead emphasized the central role of environmental and human rights impact assessments at both project and national policy levels. These assessments should be guided by three core principles: non-regression, equity (intergenerational, intragenerational, and international), and meaningful participation. Litigation nevertheless remains an essential backstop to reaffirm that States,

²² Climate Impacts Group. n.d. “Climate Inequality.” *Climate Impacts Group, University of Washington*. <https://cig.uw.edu/learn/inequities-in-climate-impacts/>.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem.

corporations, and financial actors are subject to the law, including through emerging avenues of civil liability.

Finally, Mr. Duyck highlighted the importance of access to information, public participation, and access to justice, emphasizing the role of instruments such as the Aarhus Convention and regional developments, including ASEAN initiatives. He concluded that empowering individuals and communities to hold decision-makers accountable is indispensable to addressing reckless conduct toward present and future generations.

Prof. Aoife Nolan, Professor and Director, Human Rights Law Centre, University of Nottingham, focused on children as a group disproportionately affected by climate inequality, emphasizing that climate change is already a present and pervasive reality in children's lives. Citing UNICEF's 2025 *State of the World's Children* report, she noted that nearly one billion children live in countries at extremely high risk from climate impacts, which affect children in multiple and compounding ways rather than as distant future threats.

She explained that children's vulnerability arises both from their biophysical development and from climate-induced circumstances such as forced displacement, disruption of education, food insecurity, household impoverishment, child labour, child marriage, and sexual exploitation. Even where children are not directly exposed to disasters, climate anxiety and environmental degradation have demonstrable impacts on their well-being, development, and long-term life opportunities.

Professor Nolan emphasized that children are further disadvantaged by their political and socio-economic powerlessness, including their exclusion from formal democratic processes and limited influence over decision-making institutions. While youth climate activism has been remarkable, serious questions remain about its ability to shape law and policy in practice.

She underscored that children are not a homogeneous group, noting that climate impacts are magnified for children living in poverty and for those experiencing intersecting forms of discrimination, including disabled children, Indigenous children, children belonging to minorities, and migrant and displaced children. These observations align with findings of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights on the amplification of climate vulnerability in contexts of multidimensional poverty.

While acknowledging gaps in international human rights law regarding age-based and birth-cohort discrimination, Professor Nolan highlighted significant progress in normative standards. She pointed to General Comment No. 26 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Inter-American Court's advisory opinion as providing detailed guidance on child-specific mitigation, adaptation, loss and damage measures, impact assessments, access to justice, and protection of child environmental defenders. She concluded that while standards are now well developed, the central challenge lies in implementation.

Ms Hannah Wu, Chief, Women's Rights and Gender Section, OHCHR, emphasized unequivocally that climate change is not gender-neutral, but instead exacerbates existing gender inequalities and creates new risks for women and girls, particularly those facing multiple forms of marginalization. Drawing on her experience in the Pacific and OHCHR's global work, she highlighted how gender-based discrimination and patriarchal structures limit women's autonomy, decision-making power, and access to information, services, and resources, thereby increasing their vulnerability to climate impacts.

She outlined the wide-ranging impacts of climate change on women's and girls' rights, particularly in the areas of health, care, livelihoods, and safety. Climate-induced disasters weaken fragile health systems and severely restrict access to sexual and reproductive health services, with over 60% of maternal mortality occurring in humanitarian settings. Climate crises also contribute to increases in child marriage, unpaid care burdens, displacement, and gender-based violence, including trafficking and domestic abuse.

Ms. Wu stressed that women are disproportionately affected yet remain significantly underrepresented in environmental governance and decision-making, holding only a small fraction of relevant ministerial positions. This exclusion undermines climate resilience, despite extensive evidence that women's leadership, Indigenous knowledge, and participation improve outcomes in agriculture, resource management, and disaster risk reduction.

She highlighted the critical role of women and girl human rights defenders, who lead climate activism worldwide despite facing underfunding, intimidation, and violence. Guaranteeing their protection and participation is essential to achieving climate justice.

Ms. Wu underscored that the international human rights system provides a strong normative foundation for gender-responsive climate action, referencing key developments by the Human Rights Council and CEDAW, including General Recommendations No. 37 and No. 40. She concluded that gender equality is not an optional add-on, but a prerequisite for effective climate action, calling for gender-responsive climate finance, equal participation, protection of defenders, and structural transformation of governance systems.

Ms Anne Mahrer, Co-President, Senior Women for Climate Switzerland, highlighted the powerful role of older women and intergenerational solidarity in advancing climate justice, drawing on the landmark legal victory of Senior Women for Climate Switzerland before the European Court of Human Rights. She recounted how the organization's eight-year legal struggle culminated in a historic judgment in April 2024, establishing for the first time a direct link between States' human rights obligations and their climate responsibilities.

She emphasized that the judgment is legally binding on Switzerland and sets precedent for all 46 member States of the Council of Europe, demonstrating the potential of strategic litigation to advance climate accountability. She further underscored the global significance of the International Court of Justice's unanimous advisory opinion of July 2025, which affirmed that climate protection is a human right and that States have obligations under international law to combat climate change.

Ms. Mahrer stressed the Court's recognition of intergenerational equity, noting that future generations will bear the greatest burden of climate inaction despite having no voice in current decision-making processes. She warned that failures to act within the critical window up to 2030 will irreversibly shift costs onto younger generations.

She expressed concern over Switzerland's reluctance to fully implement the ECHR judgment, highlighting the ongoing political phase of compliance monitoring by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. In closing, she called for sustained civil society mobilization, collective action, political engagement, strategic use of litigation, and consumer pressure to ensure that judicial decisions are respected and translated into meaningful change.

Prof. Nicolas Levrat, UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, addressed the systemic marginalization of minorities within global development and climate governance frameworks, noting that minorities are largely absent from the Sustainable Development Goals and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He highlighted Article 27 of the ICCPR as the primary binding legal provision protecting the rights of persons belonging to minorities, despite the absence of a formal definition of "minority" under international law.

Drawing on Human Rights Committee jurisprudence, he illustrated how Article 27 has been used to protect minority and Indigenous communities' ways of life, particularly in cases where development projects threaten traditional livelihoods, access to land, water, and natural resources. He emphasized that climate-related and development-related harms disproportionately affect minorities, who often live in areas exposed to environmental degradation, extractive projects, and pollution.

Professor Levrat stressed the tension between State-led development projects and minority rights, noting that economic and environmental burdens are routinely placed on marginalized communities rather than dominant populations. He argued that meaningful inclusion of minorities in climate decision-making must occur both through government representation and through recognition of minorities' distinct relationships with the environment.

He cautioned against overreliance on quantitative indicators in climate and development policy, advocating instead for qualitative, experience-based contributions from minority communities. Diversity of voices, he concluded, is essential to achieving sustainable and equitable climate solutions.

Mr Abdulhadi Achakzai, Founder and CEO, Environmental Protection, Training and Development Organization, Afghanistan, described Afghanistan as a stark example of climate inequality, contributing less than 0.1% of global greenhouse gas emissions while being among the most climate-vulnerable countries. He highlighted how extreme droughts, rising temperatures, floods, and natural disasters have devastated rural communities, forcing displacement and disproportionately affecting women and children.

Drawing on field research and community-based work, he emphasized the severe impacts of climate change on women's health, particularly for pregnant women facing destroyed infrastructure, limited access to clinics, food insecurity, and water scarcity. He noted that since political changes in 2021, Afghanistan has been excluded from global climate finance mechanisms and international forums, further exacerbating vulnerability.

Mr. Achakzai emphasized the central role of community-led resilience, rooted in local knowledge, social cohesion, and self-organization. He outlined key components of these systems, including participatory governance, sustainable agriculture, traditional water management systems such as *Karez*, social support networks, informal education, community health initiatives, and local economic structures.

He concluded by calling on the international community to support these efforts through non-monetary means, including recognition of local expertise, capacity-building, data validation, and advocacy platforms. Such support, he argued, can strengthen resilience without imposing external political dynamics, respect community autonomy, and help scale solutions that are already working on the ground.

Climate change amplifies the marginalization of people with disabilities, older adults, and other vulnerable groups.²⁵ People with disabilities in disasters face inaccessible transportation and emergency shelters, social isolation, and institutionalization. Climate change amplifies the marginalization experienced by persons with disabilities, negatively affecting health, reducing access to healthcare services, food, water, and accessible infrastructure. People with psychosocial disabilities have triple the rate of mortality in heatwaves.²⁶ Moreover, climate change can put women at increased risk of violence and abuse. Gender-based violence becomes more frequent during and after emergencies, including climate-related disasters. Climate change will therefore have an outsized effect on women. The effects will be felt both directly, through events like droughts or storms, and indirectly, by worsening poverty.²⁷ Additionally, Indigenous communities are particularly at risk. Many indigenous people inhabit coastlines, mountains, and forests. Those areas can be particularly vulnerable to the shocks of climate change and extreme weather events.²⁸

Climate change is rarely discussed in relation to violence against women. It has become a global common concern due to its role as a contributing factor in exacerbating SGBV. Though entire populations are affected by climate change, women and girls face double victimization as human beings as well as because of their gender.²⁹

Climate change and displacement are increasingly interconnected.³⁰ Displacement is one of the most obvious effects of climate injustice. However, the international law still does not recognise the notion of climate refugees. The majority of people forcibly displaced by persecution, conflict, and violence today live in countries that are highly vulnerable and ill-prepared to adapt to climate change.³¹ Without help to prepare for, withstand, and recover from climate-related shocks and stresses, they also face increased risks of becoming displaced again. Addressing climate change as a root cause of displacement is crucial to breaking this cycle and finding lasting solutions.³²

Significant research gaps exist as to how persons with disabilities are impacted by climate change and the interventions which will be most effective in promoting their human rights. People with disabilities are under-researched in the fields of science, medicine, law, and policy. The social transformation

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ Harvard University Center for the Environment. 2023. "Disability in a Time of Climate Disaster." *Harvard Environmental News*, January 19, 2023. <https://www.environment.harvard.edu/news/disability-time-climate-disaster>.

²⁷ Desai, Bharat H. and Moumita Mandal. 2021. "Role of Climate Change in Exacerbating Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Against Women: A New Challenge for International Law." *Environmental Policy and Law* 51, no. 3 (June): 137–57. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EPL-210055>

²⁸ Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). n.d. "Climate Change Inequality." *CFR Education*. <https://education.cfr.org/learn/reading/climate-inequality>.

²⁹ Desai, Bharat H. and Moumita Mandal. 2021.

³⁰ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). n.d. *Climate Change and Disaster Displacement*. <https://www.unhcr.org/us/what-we-do/build-better-futures/environment-disasters-and-climate-change/climate-change-and>.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Ibidem.

required for disability climate justice requires research, innovation, and collaboration across all these fields with organizations of persons with disabilities. Climate mitigation and adaptation approaches developed without consultation with organizations of persons with disabilities create additional barriers.

Session 3 - Right to development as a pathway to overcome climate inequality

The third session examined the right to development as a normative and operational framework capable of addressing the structural roots of climate inequality. Moving beyond sector-specific impacts, the discussion focused on systemic transformation and on how international human rights law provides guidance for reconciling climate ambition with development justice.

Climate inequality refers to the unequal distribution of both responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions and exposure to climate harms across individuals, communities and States. Those who have contributed least to climate change frequently face the most severe consequences, while possessing the least adaptive capacity. Climate change thus deepens existing inequalities both between and within countries, undermining poverty-reduction efforts and widening development gaps.

The right to development, as affirmed in the 1986 United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development (General Assembly resolution 41/128), provides a coherent legal and ethical framework to address these imbalances. Article 1(1) recognizes the right to development as an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy development in which all human rights can be fully realized. Article 2(3) places the human person as the central subject of development and emphasizes active, free and meaningful participation, as well as the fair distribution of the benefits resulting therefrom. Article 4 further establishes the duty of States to cooperate in ensuring development and to take steps, individually and collectively, to formulate international development policies with a view to facilitating the full realization of the right to development.

In the context of climate change, these provisions have concrete implications. They require that mitigation and adaptation strategies do not generate development retrogression, deepen poverty or exacerbate debt distress. They also reinforce the obligation of international cooperation — including through finance, technology transfer and capacity-building — particularly where structural asymmetries in historical emissions and economic power persist. Climate action must therefore be equitable, participatory and aligned with the realization of all human rights.

The session further highlighted that climate inequality cannot be addressed without confronting systemic imbalances in the international economic architecture. Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States have demonstrated sustained leadership in articulating the lived realities of climate injustice and in advancing principles such as equity, common but differentiated responsibilities, loss and damage, and intergenerational justice within international climate governance.³³

Evidence presented underscored that climate change compounds multidimensional poverty and entrenched socio-economic disparities. Without deliberate redistributive measures and robust international solidarity, climate responses risk reinforcing inequality. Conversely, equitable climate policies — including just energy transitions, resilience investments, and strengthened social protection

³³ Colenbrander, Sarah, and Andrew Sudmant. 2018. "How Tackling Climate Change Could Tackle Inequality." *International Institute for Environment and Development*, 26 June 2018. <https://www.iied.org/how-tackling-climate-change-could-tackle-inequality>.

systems — can generate significant social and economic benefits, particularly for the most vulnerable.³⁴

The right to development therefore emerges not as an obstacle to climate ambition, but as a principled framework capable of integrating environmental sustainability, human dignity, and structural equity. Properly operationalized, it offers a pathway to ensure that the global climate transition advances justice rather than deepens inequality, and that no people or generation is left behind.³⁵

Ms Shyami Puvimanasinghe, Human Rights Officer, Right to Development Section, OHCHR, grounded her intervention in stark global data demonstrating the deeply unequal distribution of climate impacts. She highlighted that hundreds of millions of people continue to live in extreme poverty, while children, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, small-scale farmers, Least Developed Countries (LDCs), and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) bear disproportionate climate risks despite having contributed least to global emissions.

She emphasized that climate inequality operates both between countries—from existential threats faced by SIDS to escalating heat and debt in Sub-Saharan Africa—and within countries, where climate displacement, intersecting discrimination, and gendered impacts deny rights and deepen poverty. She noted that when planetary boundaries are crossed, development itself is denied, reinforcing calls for remedies and reparations for climate harm.

Ms. Puvimanasinghe recalled that the International Court of Justice’s Advisory Opinion on climate change explicitly recognized sustainable development, Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR), and equity as guiding principles—principles that lie at the core of the right to development. She traced the right to development’s origins to the 1986 UN Declaration on the Right to Development, which articulated a holistic vision of development beyond GDP, grounded in participation, fair distribution, self-determination, and sovereignty over natural resources.

She underscored that the right to development requires integrated national, international, and collective action, compelling States to pursue equitable, inclusive, and participatory governance and to cooperate internationally through financial, technical, and capacity-building support. Development finance and climate finance, aligned with SDG 17 and the Financing for Development agenda, are essential means of implementation.

Ms. Puvimanasinghe highlighted recent normative and institutional advances, including ASEAN declarations, the work of the Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development, and emerging concepts such as Climate-Conditioned Development, which reconcile planetary limits with development justice. She concluded that forty years after its adoption, the right to development remains a critical framework for ensuring a just transition, equitable energy transformation, fair governance of critical minerals, and transformative change in the lived realities of people across the Global South.

³⁴ Ibidem.

³⁵ Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) Education. 2024. How Climate Change Worsens Inequality, updated November 14, 2024. <https://education.cfr.org/learn/reading/climate-inequality>.

Mr Seán O’Connell, Policy Specialist, Human Rights, UNDP, argued that for the Right to Development to function as a meaningful pathway to climate justice, the international community must deliver on two core pillars: finance and accountability. Drawing on UNDP’s human development data, he stressed that human development is no longer guaranteed and is increasingly regressing due to climate change, conflict, and pandemics—making sustained investment essential.

He emphasized that climate adaptation and resilience are not abstract challenges but concrete development necessities, particularly for SIDS and climate-vulnerable communities. Investments in disaster preparedness, education infrastructure, and local resilience directly safeguard the right to development. He highlighted the urgent need to adequately fund loss and damage mechanisms and ensure that resources reach local communities, not only central governments.

Mr. O’Connell also addressed the costs of the energy transition, noting that many developing countries face severe development risks if transition finance is unavailable. He highlighted the importance of Just Energy Transition Partnerships, stressing that without access to grants and concessional finance, expectations for developing countries to contribute to global mitigation efforts are unrealistic and inequitable.

On accountability, he argued that the climate crisis has reached a stage comparable to an unresolved legal dispute: negotiation has failed, commitments have been broken, and accountability mechanisms must now be activated. Litigation and legal action, alongside political and parliamentary pressure, are increasingly necessary to ensure compliance by States, corporations, and financial actors.

He distinguished between justice for climate inaction and justice in climate action, warning that climate solutions themselves—such as critical mineral extraction—can generate new human rights violations if not carefully regulated. He concluded that climate change uniquely threatens all human rights simultaneously, necessitating a shift in narrative from climate policy to climate justice and climate accountability.

Ms Junecynthia Okelo, Economic Governance Officer, Pan African Lawyers Union, provided an African perspective on the right to development as a response to climate inequality, emphasizing that Africa suffers disproportionate economic and social harm despite being the least responsible for global emissions. She cited data showing that climate extremes cost Africa between 2–5% of GDP annually, while adaptation needs in Sub-Saharan Africa alone are estimated at USD 30–50 billion per year.

She highlighted that climate change threatens to push over 118 million extremely poor Africans into severe climate stress by 2030 if responses remain inadequate. African States face a persistent dilemma between addressing climate impacts and pursuing development amid debt crises, illicit financial flows, and structural economic constraints.

Ms. Okelo argued that a human-rights-based approach centred on the right to development offers a pathway to redress structural injustice by linking climate obligations to equity, international assistance, and shared responsibility. She emphasized the importance of legal strategies, including advisory opinions, in advancing climate justice within Africa and shaping global legal norms.

She highlighted the need for courts to address issues central to Africa’s context, including just transition, Indigenous Peoples’ rights, third-party corporate actors, illicit financial flows, and unfair global economic structures. She stressed that climate equality is unattainable without reforming global debt architecture, trade rules, tax systems, and access to supply chains.

Ms. Okelo concluded that unless these systemic inequalities are addressed, climate injustice will persist and undermine Africa's development prospects, reinforcing the urgency of using the right to development as a tool for global economic and climate reform.

Prof. Miloon Kothari, Visiting Professor, Graduate Institute; former UN Special Rapporteur on Housing, warned that development gains in many countries are being actively reversed due to climate-related policies and actions by international actors, introducing the concept of "green colonialism." He cited practices such as carbon trading, fortress conservation, and large-scale environmental projects that displace communities and undermine livelihoods in the name of sustainability.

He emphasized that acts of omission and commission by developed States—particularly their failure to regulate transnational corporations involved in extractive industries, mining, energy, and resource exploitation—are driving retrogression and human rights violations in developing countries. Indigenous Peoples, fishers, farming communities, and local populations are disproportionately affected.

Professor Kothari highlighted intergenerational equity as a central human rights obligation, referencing the *Master Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations*. These principles affirm that present actions shape future enjoyment of rights and require prevention, precaution, trusteeship of the Earth, and the elimination of intergenerational discrimination.

He stressed that these obligations imply both intragenerational and extraterritorial duties, grounded in equality, non-discrimination, economic and social rights, and the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. He concluded by expressing concern over persistent State non-compliance with landmark judicial decisions and advisory opinions, warning that legal progress is insufficient without effective implementation and political will.

Prof. Surya Deva, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Development, finally, challenged the prevailing narrative that the right to development is an obstacle to climate action, arguing instead that it is one of the most transformative human rights frameworks for addressing climate inequality. He emphasized that the right to development is holistic—encompassing economic, social, cultural, and political development—and was ahead of its time in integrating sustainability and future generations.

He illustrated development dilemmas faced by disadvantaged States through concrete examples, including fossil fuel-dependent economies and heavily indebted SIDS considering environmentally harmful practices such as deep-sea mining. He argued that climate action cannot succeed unless the international community offers viable alternatives that prevent development collapse and human suffering.

Professor Deva emphasized that a just transition must ensure no one is left behind, including communities dependent on fossil fuels for basic needs. Phasing out harmful practices must be accompanied by accessible, affordable alternatives.

He highlighted key elements of the right to development that enable equitable climate action: its collective dimension, active and meaningful participation, fair distribution of resources and benefits, and binding international cooperation obligations. He stressed that global inequality is not due to a lack of resources or solutions, but a lack of collective political will.

Finally, Professor Deva underscored that international cooperation must be understood as an obligation, not charity, grounded in historical responsibility and colonial exploitation. He concluded that centering the right to development offers a principled pathway to reconcile climate action, development justice, and human dignity.

In conclusion, integrated responses supported by the United Nations system – including UNDP and OHCHR – and the use of human rights as a lever for peace and sustainable development are essential. The holistic nature of the right to development, together with robust international cooperation, remains central to achieving equitable and sustainable outcomes. International agreements, advisory opinions and thematic reports provide important guidance on pathways to advance the realization of the right to development. However, persistent structural obstacles within the global economic system, combined with weak international cooperation and insufficient political will, continue to hinder meaningful progress.

Humanity is taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. Reversing climate change requires substantial economic resources. These are especially important to help less financially equipped countries meet their climate targets, pay for mitigation and adaptation, and mobilize more climate finance. Many developing countries, who often face the brunt of climate change, don't have enough financial backing to work on sustainable strategies.³⁶ The financial support is crucial for making the necessary changes to energy systems, infrastructure and industries these countries urgently need to decarbonize their economies and protect themselves from climate hazards. Climate finance is funding at the local, national and transnational level that supports activities needed to combat climate change. These funds sponsor a wide range of initiatives, including both mitigation efforts (actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions) and adaptation strategies (measures to cope with the impacts of climate change). The goal is to secure funds from various sources, including public funds, private investments, international aid, and innovative financial instruments, to enable countries to transition to a low-carbon and climate-resilient future.³⁷

According to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), "Climate finance refers to local, national or transnational financing – drawn from public, private and alternative sources – that seeks to support mitigation and adaptation actions that will address climate change".³⁸ Climate finance is just one of many terms employed to describe the movement of funds in the context of climate-related matters. In general, though, a distinction can be made between "sustainable finance" that takes a broad environmental, social, economic, and governance approach, and the narrower concept of "green finance", concerned only with environmental issues. Even more narrowly focused are those actions targeting exclusively climate change mitigation and/or adaptation, which we call climate finance. In all cases, though, total climate finance includes all financial flows whose expected effect is to reduce net greenhouse gas emissions and/or enhance resilience to the impacts of current and projected climate change.³⁹

³⁶ International Organization for Standardization (ISO). n.d. "Climate Change: What It Is, How It Works and Why It's Important," *ISO.org*. <https://www.iso.org/climate-change>.

³⁷ Ibidem.

³⁸ International Organization for Standardization (ISO). n.d. "Climate Finance: The Key to a Sustainable Future," *ISO.org*. <https://www.iso.org/climate-change/climate-finance>.

³⁹ Ibidem.

Broadly speaking, three key categories receive climate financing, each supported by specialized climate finance solutions designed to mobilize and channel funds towards climate action.

- **Mitigation investments** are directed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and include funding projects related to renewable energy sources.
- **Adaptation investments** focus on enhancing resilience to climate change impacts, for example, by supporting infrastructure improvements that can withstand extreme weather events.
- **Dual-benefit investments** serve both mitigation and adaptation objectives, such as sustainable agriculture initiatives that contribute to carbon sequestration while improving food security.

Conclusion

The discussions held during the international conference underscored that climate inequality is not an abstract or future risk, but a present and deeply entrenched reality, shaped by historical injustices, structural economic imbalances, and unequal power relations. Across regions and within societies, those who have contributed least to climate change are bearing its most severe consequences, resulting in systemic violations of human rights and the denial of development opportunities.

The evidence presented clearly demonstrates that climate impacts disproportionately affect people living in poverty, children, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, small-holder farmers, fishermen, pastoralists, women, youth, Least Developed Countries, and Small Island Developing States. These groups and countries face existential threats, mounting debt, loss of livelihoods, forced displacement and retrogression in development gains, despite their negligible contribution to global emissions. Climate change, therefore, exacerbates existing inequalities and creates new forms of vulnerability, both within and across generations. As the World Inequality Lab's report on Climate Inequality noted, without decisive actions, climate change risks deepening both private and public inequalities. The global distribution of wealth will be profoundly impacted by the climate damage and the climate-related investments. To address the dual crises of climate and wealth inequality, new tools and policy frameworks are needed.⁴⁰

Against this backdrop, the right to development emerged as a critical normative and operational framework to address climate inequality. Far from being an obstacle to climate action, the right to development provides a transformative pathway to pursue climate responses that are equitable, inclusive, participatory and sustainable. Rooted in the 1986 United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development, the right to development advances a holistic vision of development that goes beyond economic growth, encompassing economic, social, cultural and political dimensions, grounded in human dignity, self-determination and the fair distribution of benefits.

The international conference highlighted how core principles reaffirmed by international law — including equity, Common but Differentiated Responsibilities, international cooperation, solidarity and intergenerational justice — lie at the heart of the right to development. Recent developments, such as advisory opinions from international and regional courts, thematic work by the Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development, and emerging regional initiatives, further reinforce the relevance of the right to development in interpreting States' obligations in the context of climate change.

At the same time, speakers emphasized that realizing the right to development in a climate-constrained world requires confronting concrete development dilemmas faced by many countries. Without adequate financial resources, technology transfer and capacity-building support, demands for rapid transitions away from fossil fuels risk deepening poverty, debt distress and inequality. Just and equitable transitions must therefore be underpinned by predictable, accessible and sufficient climate and development finance, including support for adaptation, disaster preparedness, renewable energy, and value addition in mineral-rich developing countries. The relationship between climate change and sustainable development underscores the need for integrated strategies that address environmental and socio-economic dimensions simultaneously. Addressing climate change through sustainable

⁴⁰ Chancel, Lucas, and Cornelia Mohren, eds. 2025. *Climate Inequality Report 2025: Climate Change: A Capital Challenge — Why Climate Policy Must Tackle Ownership*. World Inequality Lab Key Report. World Inequality Lab. https://wid.world/www-site/uploads/2025/10/Climate_Inequality_Report_2025_Final.pdf

development is not just a necessity but an opportunity to build a resilient, inclusive, and equitable global society. Global cooperation is central to realizing these goals.⁴¹

Accountability was identified as a second indispensable pillar. Legal avenues — including strategic litigation, advisory opinions, and regional mechanisms — are increasingly shaping climate justice discourse. However, accountability must extend beyond courts to include political processes, parliamentary oversight, corporate regulation and the enforcement of extraterritorial obligations. Professor Kothari cautioned against what he described as emerging patterns sometimes referred to as « green colonialism », greenwashing and unregulated corporate conduct, which risk causing displacement, environmental harm and development retrogression in the name of climate action.

The session also brought into sharp focus the importance of intergenerational equity. Climate action and development pathways chosen today will determine the ability of future generations to enjoy their human rights. Ensuring trusteeship of the Earth, preventing irreversible harm, and addressing intergenerational discrimination are therefore integral to fulfilling the right to development.

In conclusion, integrated responses supported by the United Nations system — including UNDP and OHCHR — are essential to operationalize the right to development as a pathway to overcome climate inequality. While international agreements, advisory opinions, and policy frameworks provide important guidance, meaningful progress remains constrained by structural flaws in the global economic system, insufficient international cooperation, and a persistent lack of political will. Advancing climate justice will require a fundamental recalibration of development models, global economic governance and power relations, placing human rights, equity and solidarity at the centre of climate action — for individuals and peoples, across nations, and for present and future generations.

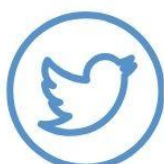
The Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue remains committed to fostering inclusive dialogue, advancing research-based policy solutions, and supporting international cooperation grounded in human rights and multilateralism.

⁴¹ Sarwar, Muhammad Saleem. 2025. "Climate Change and Sustainable Development: A Pathway for Global Cooperation." *IQÂN* 7, no. 2 (June): 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.36755/iqan.v7i2.458>.



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