

Concept Note

Driving Climate Commitments toward a Just Transition: Human Rights, Law and Accountability in Action

Background and rationale

Climate action has entered a new legal phase. For decades, the international community has negotiated and pledged more than it has delivered on climate commitments. The implementation of any policies or reparations to those most affected, such as island nations, or perennially drought-stricken countries, has struggled to keep pace with the accelerating climate crisis and the quickened pace of human suffering we witness today. The July 2025 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, despite not serving as binding law, marks an important turning point for leveraging climate action: by authoritatively clarifying States' obligations under international law in relation to climate change, it strengthens the legal foundations for turning climate commitments into action in justice systems operating at the state and local levels.¹

This clarification matters beyond the international courtroom. Together with myriad legal developments being put before regional courts, and with more than 3,600 climate-related cases accounted for in 2026 across 62 countries, the ICJ report provides legislators, policymakers, courts, civil society and affected communities with stronger tools to translate climate commitments into laws, policies and remedies.² Courts are also increasingly being asked not only whether governments should act, but how climate measures should be designed and implemented to be more just.

Yet projects proposed as achieving climate action can themselves create human rights risks when transition costs are unfairly distributed or affected communities are excluded from decisions. The concept of a just transition, originating in concerns for workers affected by industrial change, now encompasses decent work, social protection, participation/voice, and the fair distribution of transition costs and benefits.³ Pledges from states need law and policy guidance that drives accountability. Accountability that will ensure that the transitions of workers from economies that are either made impossible because of climate change or that need to shift because of their contribution to climate change, to jobs that will sustain them and their environment, not only happen — but happen justly.⁴

Human rights and legal frameworks therefore have a dual role: they can drive climate action by clarifying duties, strengthening accountability and providing routes to remedy, while also

¹ International Court of Justice, *Obligations of States in respect of Climate Change*, Advisory Opinion, 23 July 2025; Inter-American Court of Human Rights, *Climate Emergency and Human Rights*, Advisory Opinion OC-32/25, adopted 29 May 2025 and notified 3 July 2025.

² Joana Setzer, Catherine Higham and Tiffanie Chan, *Global Trends in Climate Change Litigation: 2026 Snapshot*, Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2026.

³ International Labour Organization (ILO), *Guidelines for a Just Transition towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies for All*, Geneva, ILO, 2016.

⁴ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Frequently Asked Questions on Human Rights and Climate Change*, Fact Sheet No. 38, New York and Geneva, United Nations, 2021.

ensuring that the transition itself to a better global warming scenario does not deepen inequalities or unfairly burden those least able to absorb its costs.

1. A timely dialogue

The Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue proposes to convene this international symposium in partnership with the tUrn Climate Crisis Awareness & Action Project at Santa Clara University, as a satellite event of tUrn's 15th international climate conference in fall 2026. The timing is particularly important as litigation and just-transition debates increasingly shift from fairness of commitments towards fairness within implementation, and as the moral force of the powerful ICJ advisory opinion from July 2025 takes deeper root.

2. From global standards to regional realities

Regional perspectives are essential because climate policies operate within very different economic, social and institutional contexts. Differences in energy systems, labour markets, development priorities, public finances, and exposure to climate impacts shape both the opportunities and costs of transition. A just transition therefore cannot be built by transferring a standard policy model from one setting to another, however, promising and scalable models for just climate transitions in one sector might be inspired by exposure to highly localized recommendations and solutions within another sector.

Human rights provide a common framework for navigating these differences through principles including participation, non-discrimination, decent work, social protection, affordability, and access to justice. For the Geneva Centre and tUrn, connecting international standards with diverse regional and community experiences is therefore central to understanding how a just transition can work in practice.

3. Proposed dialogue

The symposium will be centered on one practical question:

How can long-standing and emerging legal frameworks on a sustainable climate as a human right such as the ICJ advisory opinion help accelerate the transition from climate commitments to effective, fair action — while ensuring justice, economic development, and industrial innovation?

Participants will include UN human-rights experts and mandate holders, representatives of Permanent Missions, policymakers, academics, legal practitioners, civil-society organizations, labor and development specialists, regional experts, young people and representatives of affected communities. The discussion will be organized around three connected conversations:

I. Setting the Standard — Human rights and states' climate obligations (high-level segment)

Panel I invites UN Special Rapporteurs, representatives of Permanent Missions, and state-level thought leaders to offer their perspectives on the relationship between law, human rights, and climate justice.

II. Living Through — Human rights and climate obligations with a regional focus

Panel II brings together UN experts, civil society and regional practitioners to explore how climate change creates distinct human rights challenges across regions. From sea-level rise in small island and coastal communities to drought, water scarcity, extreme heat, flooding and landslides, the panel will examine how local vulnerabilities shape climate impacts and responses, and how human rights and locally grounded solutions can support more effective and equitable climate action.

III. The Just Transition — Human rights, labor justice, just transitions, and climate obligations

Panel III brings together policymakers, UN and international experts, civil society practitioners and academics to explore the concepts of a just transition, a just economy and just development.

All three panels can examine how laws, court opinion, and policies work to amplify accountability on the part of nations, leaders, corporate entities, and other powerful interests, to do climate action, and to do it in ways that do not preserve or further exacerbate present inequities. The symposium chairs will identify priorities for further dialogue, and key findings will be captured in a short post-conference summary.

4. Date, Format and Partnership

The symposium will balance international, regional, and local legal and policy expertise with cultural and community wealth and perspectives, and take place online on 15 October 2026, from 13:00 to 17:00 CEST. Panel I will commence at 13:00 CEST; Panel II will commence at 14:30 CEST, and Panel III will commence at 16:00 CEST.

The symposium is informed by the Geneva Centre's human-rights mandate, its connections to UN Permanent Representatives and Special Rapporteurs, and its commitment to multilateral coalition building, and tUrn's commitments as a member of the U.N. Paris Committee on Capacity-building Network, and as a producer of interdisciplinary, intercultural programming that engages frontlines communities, elders, and youth. The co-chairing will cooperate in inviting proposals that broaden the scope or deepen the discourse. *Driving Climate Commitments toward a Just Transition* builds on tUrn's April 2026 programme, ***A Liveable Climate as a Human Right***, that examined the implications of the ICJ Advisory Opinion in partnership with the Geneva Centre,⁵ and tUrn's Fall 2025 programme, ***In the Face of a Precarious Future: Unpacking the International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion on Climate Change***, with Professor David L. Sloss, the John A. and Elizabeth H. Sutro Professor of Law at Santa Clara University.

tUrn is free and open to the public. We invite audiences to [RSVP here](#) to receive a link to the event.

To propose a session, or for further information, please contact our team at info@gchragd.org

⁵ Santa Clara University, tUrn Climate Crisis Awareness & Action Project, *Headliners*, April 2026, including “A Liveable Climate as a Human Right: Unpacking the International Court of Justice's Advisory Guidelines for government responsibilities in a climate crisis”.