



GENEVA CENTRE
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CLIMATE ACTION

SYMPOSIUM OUTCOME REPORT

DRIVING CLIMATE COMMITMENTS TOWARD A JUST TRANSITION

Human Rights, Law and
Accountability in Action

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM
15 OCTOBER 2026

HUMAN RIGHTS / CLIMATE ACTION /
LAW / ACCOUNTABILITY / JUST TRANSITION

CLIMATE COMMITMENTS IN ACTION

Key Outcomes from the International Symposium on Human Rights, Accountability and a Just Transition

FROM CLIMATE COMMITMENTS TO MEANINGFUL ACTION

How can climate commitments translate into effective action while protecting the people who face the greatest risks and costs?

This question framed the international online symposium “*Driving Climate Commitments toward a Just Transition: Human Rights, Law and Accountability in Action*”, convened on 15 October 2026 by the Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue and the tUrn Climate Crisis Awareness & Action Project at Santa Clara University, as part of tUrn’s 15th international climate conference. Bringing together diplomatic representatives, United Nations experts, practitioners and researchers, the symposium examined how international legal standards, national policies and local initiatives can advance climate action while safeguarding human rights and livelihoods.

In her introductory remarks, **Prof. Kristin Kusanovich**, representing the tUrn Climate Crisis Awareness & Action Project at Santa Clara University, highlighted the value of bringing together perspectives from international institutions, governments, local authorities, researchers and civil society. She emphasized that addressing climate change requires awareness and dialogue, as well as practical action informed by the experiences of communities living with its impacts. The symposium was designed to explore how international standards can support locally appropriate solutions while fostering collaboration across sectors and regions.

The symposium was structured around three complementary themes: *Setting the Standard*, examining human rights, international law and States’ obligations; *Living Through*, exploring how climate change and climate responses are experienced in different local and national contexts; and *The Just Transition*, focusing on labour justice, development, participation and accountability in the transition to low-carbon economies. Across the discussions, a common message emerged: **climate action must be assessed not only by the commitments made or emissions reduced, but also by the results it delivers for people and communities.**

KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

- **Implementation is the real test of climate ambition.** International commitments must translate into measurable results, effective institutions and tangible improvements in people's lives.
- **Climate action and human rights are interconnected.** Climate policies affect health, food and water security, livelihoods, cultural heritage and communities’ ability to shape their futures.
- **Affected communities must help shape climate solutions.** Meaningful participation and local knowledge can make policies more responsive to the needs and circumstances of the people they affect.
- **A just transition requires fairness and accountability.** Climate measures must be assessed not only by their environmental benefits, but also by how their costs, benefits and risks are distributed.
- **International cooperation must deliver practical support.** Accessible finance, technology and capacity-building are essential, particularly for countries and communities facing disproportionate climate risks and constraints on implementation.

These findings draw together the main themes of the symposium. The following sections explore how they emerged across the speakers' contributions and the different contexts discussed.

1. CLIMATE COMMITMENTS MUST TRANSLATE INTO TANGIBLE RESULTS

In his opening remarks, **Dr. Fabrice Crégut**, Executive Director of the Geneva Centre, emphasized that political negotiations alone have not delivered a sufficiently timely response to the climate crisis. Referring to the 2025 Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice, he highlighted the growing importance of translating international climate commitments into domestic legislation, public policy, and avenues for accountability and remedy. He also cautioned that measures presented as climate solutions can themselves create human rights risks when communities are excluded from decision-making or when transition costs fall disproportionately on workers and vulnerable groups. His remarks established a central theme of the symposium: climate action must be both effective and fair.

"Climate change is not about agreements, not about national plans; it's about protecting the people, securing the essential resources, and building a resilient future."

H.E. Akram Sa'ud Al-Harabsheh, Permanent Representative of Jordan to the United Nations Office at Geneva

Ambassador Akram Sa'ud Al-Harabsheh, Permanent Representative of Jordan to the United Nations Office at Geneva, drew attention to the pressures climate change places on Jordan's limited water resources, food security and economic development. He outlined the country's efforts to combine emissions reduction, adaptation and a fair transition, including through cleaner energy, improved water management and measures to protect vulnerable households and workers.

His intervention reinforced the importance of setting measurable objectives, assigning clear institutional responsibilities and ensuring that national climate plans lead to practical improvements.

The perspective of **H.E. David W. Panuelo**, former President of the Federated States of Micronesia, illustrated the stakes for small island states. Sea-level rise, coastal erosion and extreme weather threaten infrastructure and livelihoods, but also cultural identity and the ability of communities to remain on their ancestral lands. As he observed, climate change is not only a threat to physical survival but also to cultural continuity, collective memory and communities' ability to determine their own future.

"The ocean is not simply the water that surrounds our islands; it is part of who we are. Our land, reefs, forests, shorelines and waters sustain our families and connect generations to their ancestors and to one another."

H.E. David W. Panuelo, Former President of the Federated States of Micronesia

Drawing on his experience in diplomatic negotiations, Panuelo stressed that ambitious commitments alone are insufficient. Successful implementation requires sustained investment, technical capacity, maintenance, and coordination across institutions. He highlighted how renewable energy and climate-resilient infrastructure can strengthen energy security, maintain access to schools and healthcare, and support broader development objectives.

He also emphasized the value of traditional knowledge and community participation in ensuring that climate investments respond to local realities and needs. His intervention further underscored the importance of accessible, predictable and timely international support. For countries that have contributed little to global emissions yet face disproportionate consequences, climate cooperation should ultimately be measured by whether resources reach communities and improve resilience in practice.

“The centre of the evidence base of any climate decision must be the lived experiences of the human rights holders who are most affected.”

Professor Elisa Morgera, UN Special Rapporteur on climate change

Prof. Elisa Morgera, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Climate Change, situated these challenges within the wider relationship between climate action, biodiversity, water, food systems, health and sustainable development. She argued that human rights provide an essential framework for identifying which responses to climate change strengthen resilience and which risk reproducing existing inequalities. Morgera stressed that the lived experiences of those most

affected by climate change should form a central part of the evidence base for policymaking, alongside scientific expertise. She called for more integrated approaches that address the interconnected drivers of environmental degradation rather than treating climate change as an isolated issue.

Her intervention also highlighted the need to accelerate the transition away from fossil fuels across their full value chain, while strengthening the regulation of private actors, reforming harmful subsidies, and supporting community-led renewable energy and food systems. International cooperation, she argued, should help prevent vulnerable countries from becoming locked into new forms of dependency during the transition. Morgera further identified health as an important entry point for advancing climate action. The effects of climate change and fossil fuel dependency are increasingly experienced through impacts on human health, food systems, air quality and access to water. Addressing these connections can help identify more effective climate measures and build wider public understanding of the need for transformative change.

2. LOCAL COMMUNITIES MUST HELP SHAPE CLIMATE SOLUTIONS

Climate policies are ultimately experienced at local level. Their effectiveness depends partly on whether they respond to the needs of affected communities and whether people have a meaningful role in shaping decisions. The discussions illustrated how participation, local knowledge and attention to social and economic circumstances can strengthen climate action while helping prevent new inequalities.

The examples presented by **Ms. Maria Zotti**, Manager of Climate and Sustainability at the City of Unley in South Australia, illustrated how local government can translate broader climate objectives into practical initiatives. Through Unley’s Community Climate Action Plan, shaped by input from approximately 1,600 people, residents helped identify priorities relating to renewable energy, affordability and community resilience. Zotti highlighted a programme enabling residents to purchase solar panels and home batteries at reduced costs, as well as a community battery initiative that allows eligible social housing residents to benefit from renewable energy without installing their own equipment. These examples demonstrated how local climate action can make the energy transition more accessible to lower-income households and help prevent existing inequalities from being reinforced.

The discussion of Afghanistan offered a contrasting perspective on local climate vulnerability. **Mr. Abdulhadi Achakzai**, Founder and CEO of the Environmental Protection Trainings and Development Organization (EPTDO), described the combined effects of drought, flooding, glacier loss, water scarcity and declining agricultural productivity. These pressures are compounded by poverty, limited institutional capacity and barriers to accessing international support. Initiatives supporting agriculture, reforestation, sanitation and women’s entrepreneurship illustrated how adaptation can address environmental pressures alongside social and economic vulnerabilities.

The contribution of **Dr. Sonia Dias**, Waste Sector Specialist at Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), provided a further example of why participation must go beyond consultation. Dias highlighted how waste pickers contribute to recycling systems while often remaining excluded from decision-making processes. Drawing on experiences from Brazil and other contexts, she demonstrated how organization, advocacy and participatory governance can help secure recognition,

improve working conditions and ensure that workers have a voice in climate policies affecting their livelihoods.

Fr. Pedro Walpole, Director of Research at the Institute of Environmental Science for Social Change in the Philippines and leader of Ecojesuit, the Global Ignatian Advocacy Network for Ecology (GIAN), was unable to speak live due to connectivity problems caused by a storm in the Philippines and subsequently shared a video message. Drawing on his experience alongside the Indigenous Pulangiyan community in Mindanao, he highlighted how drought and unpredictable weather threaten food security and livelihoods, while land and resource conflicts further compound community vulnerabilities. He stressed that a just transition must protect Indigenous peoples' rights, ensure their meaningful participation in decisions affecting their territories, and strengthen accountability. He concluded that climate action must be informed by local knowledge and assessed by its impact on communities on the frontlines of climate change.

Local knowledge and community leadership can strengthen climate responses, but participation must be supported by adequate resources, accessible public services and institutions able to act on community priorities.

3. A JUST TRANSITION REQUIRES FAIRNESS, SAFEGUARDS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The transition to low-carbon economies creates opportunities for sustainable development, but it can also generate new inequalities. Renewable energy investment, demand for transition minerals and economic restructuring may affect land, employment and livelihoods, particularly where safeguards and participation mechanisms are inadequate. The discussions highlighted the need to consider not only the intended benefits of climate measures, but also who bears their costs and risks.

Mr. Seán O'Connell, UNDP's Global Focal Point on Environmental Justice, highlighted the opportunities the energy transition offers for sustainable development in the Global South, including greater energy sovereignty, economic opportunities and poverty reduction. However, he cautioned that the rapid expansion of renewable energy projects and critical mineral extraction, particularly lithium, can displace communities and deepen existing inequalities when safeguards are lacking. Drawing on UNDP's work with coal-dependent communities in Montenegro, he stressed that a just transition requires meaningful community participation in decisions affecting their future, alongside sustained international financial and technical support.

Dr. Kennedy Mbeva of the University of Cambridge examined how power, finance and global inequalities influence the implementation of a just transition. He argued that debates about climate action inevitably raise questions of distribution and responsibility, including who benefits, who bears the costs, and whose priorities shape decision-making. Drawing attention to sovereign debt, climate finance and the terms under which transition minerals are extracted, he stressed that local transition outcomes are often shaped by structural inequalities at the international level. Meaningful participation, he noted, is essential not only for better outcomes but also for democratic legitimacy.

Prof. Raphael J. Heffron, Dean of the College of Law at Abu Dhabi University, emphasized the importance of assessing progress through indicators that reflect emissions reductions alongside fairness, distributional impacts and social outcomes. He noted that the transition to a low-carbon economy is a journey shaped by different national circumstances, capacities and constraints, making it essential to assess progress in ways that reflect both environmental and social dimensions. Heffron argued that accountability requires robust evidence of whether policies are improving fairness in practice, while also considering factors such as finance, risk and the time required to deliver meaningful change.

Moderated by **Prof. Darren McCauley** of Newcastle University, the third panel brought these considerations together through a discussion of labor justice, development, participation and accountability. In his concluding reflections, McCauley emphasized that the climate transition is ultimately about people, livelihoods and identity. Climate policies must therefore be designed around the lived experiences of workers and communities undergoing change, alongside technological and economic objectives.

The discussion highlighted that a just transition cannot be defined by environmental targets alone. It also depends on how decisions are made, how risks and benefits are distributed, and whether institutions can demonstrate that policies are delivering fair outcomes. Human rights safeguards, transparent decision-making and meaningful participation are essential to ensuring that the transition does not reproduce existing inequalities or create new forms of harm.

Human rights safeguards, meaningful participation and clear accountability mechanisms must be integrated into the design and implementation of climate policies, rather than treated as considerations to be addressed afterwards.

KEY PRIORITIES FOR CLIMATE ACTION

The symposium highlighted four connected priorities for translating climate commitments into action:

- **Put people at the center of climate policy.** Assess climate measures according to their effects on human rights, health, livelihoods and access to essential resources, alongside their environmental impact.
- **Make participation meaningful.** Enable affected communities, workers and local stakeholders to influence decisions, drawing on their knowledge and experiences from the earliest stages of policy development.
- **Strengthen accountability.** Establish clear institutional responsibilities, measurable objectives and mechanisms for assessing both environmental progress and social outcomes. Ensure that climate solutions themselves are subject to appropriate human rights safeguards.
- **Reinforce international cooperation.** Improve access to climate finance, technology and capacity-building, particularly for countries and communities facing significant climate risks and constraints on implementation.

CONCLUSION: MAKING THE TRANSITION JUST IN PRACTICE

In his concluding reflections, **Dr. Fabrice Crégut** highlighted participation and accountability as the common threads connecting the symposium. Whether discussing legal obligations, local adaptation or labor justice, speakers consistently emphasized the need for affected communities to influence decisions and for institutions to demonstrate concrete results. He noted that accountability must address both historical responsibility for climate change and the contemporary choices that determine how the costs and benefits of transition are distributed.

The symposium highlighted the importance of connecting international legal standards and climate commitments with the realities faced by communities. While the challenges differ across countries and regions, the discussions pointed to a shared requirement: climate action must deliver tangible results while protecting rights, livelihoods and opportunities for participation.

Ultimately, the measure of climate action is not simply the ambition of commitments, but whether they help people and communities live with greater security, dignity and resilience.



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