

Position Paper: Human Rights and Climate Justice

"I believe that climate change is the biggest human rights issue of the 21st century."

Mary Robison, President of the Mary Robison Foundation – Climate Justice.

The report of Working Group II of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released in April 2014 highlights the current and future impacts of climate change on people¹ in the context of food security, health, access to water and personal security. The Report also clarifies that while people all over the world are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, the poor and marginalised are most vulnerable. This confirms earlier statements from the Human Rights Council that climate change undermines human rights including the right to life, the right to adequate food, the right to water, the right to health, the right to adequate housing, and the right to self-determination.

It is imperative that any action to address climate change should not further undermine human rights, but protect and respect them. This can be achieved with a climate justice approach: climate justice links human rights and development to achieve a human-centred approach, safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable and sharing the burdens and benefits of climate change and its resolution equitably and fairly. Climate justice is informed by science, responds to science and acknowledges the need for equitable stewardship of the world's resources. The Principles of Climate Justice² are founded in legal and moral imperatives of human rights and respect for the dignity of the person, making them the indispensable foundation for action on climate justice.

¹ See [IPCC Working Group II Report](#)

² [Principles of Climate Justice](#)

Human rights and climate change– the progress so far at the international level

Over the last decade the Human Rights Council and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change have explicitly addressed the links between human rights and climate change.

In 2008 the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted Resolution 7/23 on Human Rights and Climate Change which, for the first time in a UN resolution, stated explicitly that climate change *“poses an immediate and far-reaching threat to people and communities around the world and has implications for the full enjoyment of human rights”*. A subsequent study published by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in January 2009 asserts that global warming *“will potentially have implications for the full range of human rights”*.

In response to the OHCHR Report the Human Rights Council adopted a second resolution on Human Rights and Climate Change in March 2009. Resolution 10/4 notes that *“climate change-related effects have a range of implications, both direct and indirect, for the effective enjoyment of human rights”*, and that the effects of climate change will fall hardest on the rights of those people who are already in vulnerable situations *“owing to factors such as geography, poverty, gender, age, indigenous or minority status and disability.”*

Resolution 10/4 informed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations at COP16 in Cancun. The Cancun Agreements note Resolution 10/4 of the United Nations Human Rights Council on Human Rights and Climate Change. Decision 1/CP.16 includes a reference to existing human rights obligations in the overarching section on a shared vision for long-term cooperative action, it *“emphasises that Parties should, in all climate change-related actions, fully respect human rights.”*

In September 2011, Human Rights Council Resolution 18/22 affirmed that human rights obligations, standards, and principles have the potential to inform and strengthen international and national policy making in the area of climate change, promoting policy coherence, legitimacy, and sustainable outcomes.

What next for Climate Justice?

The failure to adequately mitigate the causes of climate change means that adaptation to climate change is now a significant and costly problem requiring international support consistent with the provisions of the Climate Convention. A continued failure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions will result in climate impacts that surpass our capacity to adapt and which amount to loss and damage³, thereby aggravating the injustice experienced by those least responsible for the causes of climate change. The solution is to make a rapid transformation of our economic systems away from a dependence on carbon while protecting the right to development of the poorest and most vulnerable people and countries.

Having acknowledged the negative impacts of climate change on the enjoyment of human rights since 2008, the next 18 months provide an opportunity to take action at the international level to halt the injustice of these impacts on the poor and vulnerable.

The international community is working to agree a new climate agreement and a post 2015 Development Agenda, which together have the potential to transform societies and enable inclusive and equitable development around the world. A climate justice approach uses human rights standards and commitments to inform these processes, creating important connections between them and ensuring a people-centred approach which delivers outcomes which are fair, effective and transformative.

At the national and local level, rights-based approaches can contribute to climate justice. Rights-based approaches focus on all people achieving at least the minimum conditions for living with dignity, through the realisation of their human rights. For example, women in Maradi, Niger⁴, traditionally lacked access to rights making them particularly vulnerable to food crises caused by recurrent droughts. Rights-based approaches have been used at the community level to improve women's access to and control over land, as well as access to information and credit. This is enabling women to adapt their agricultural practices, improve household nutrition and generate income. Helping women and other vulnerable groups to claim their rights is essential to climate justice.

³ [Statement on Loss and Damage](#)

⁴ <http://www.mrfci.org/our-work/womens-land-rights-in-maradi-niger.html>

Three important steps for Climate Justice in 2014 and 2015:

- 1. A 2015 climate agreement under the UNFCCC with a human rights framing** so that actions to address climate change protect and respect human rights. All Parties to the UNFCCC have agreed to keep global temperature increases to within 2 °C over the pre-industrial average. This is critical to avoid unmanageable climate impacts which would significantly undermine human rights. The next step is to shape commitments and actions to achieve the 2°C goal that fully respect and protect human rights.
- 2. Renewed recognition by the Human Rights Council of the urgent need for ambitious and equitable action on climate change.** The human rights community can emphasise the need for urgent action on climate change to protect human rights. The HRC must strengthen its call for a global response to climate change informed by human rights standards and commitments so that countries take actions which respect human rights while protecting the planet.
- 3. Human rights form the foundation of the post 2015 development agenda.** The protection of human rights is fundamental to inclusive and equitable, sustainable development. To date we have not adequately grounded our approach to development in rights, nor have we adequately addressed climate change as a core element of sustainable development. Climate change starkly illustrates the need for a joined up approach, safeguarding the right to development while taking actions to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

Conclusion

A climate justice approach can ensure that rights are protected and that the actions taken to, solve the climate crisis benefit, rather than burden, the vulnerable who are after all, least responsible for the causes of the global problem.