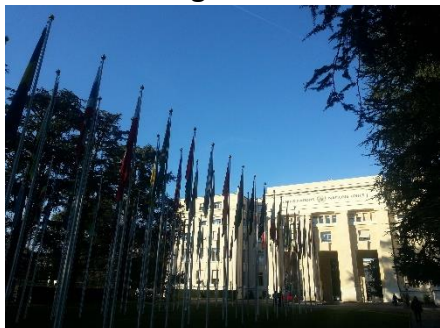


The 28th Session of the Human Rights Council Geneva. Report on the Full Day Discussion on Climate Change 6th March 2015

The Human Rights Council



Made up of 47 member States, the United Nations Human Rights Council is an inter-governmental body responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe and for addressing situations of human rights violations. The Council is holding its 28th Session between the 2nd and 27th March 2015. On Friday 6th March the Council devoted a day to a debate on Climate Change. This is part of a relatively new move to view the damaging effects of climate change as a human rights issue.

Brahma Kumaris representatives Valérie Bernard and Debbie King attended the climate change discussion and Valérie Bernard was invited to participate in a prestigious meeting held as a side event to the main debate.

The Link between Climate Change and Human Rights

There has been an increasing tendency in recent years to see the impact of climatic change not only in environmental and economic terms but also as a violation of a number of human rights. Changes in weather patterns; greater frequency of storms and typhoons; rising sea and sea temperature levels; diminishing water supplies; drought and desertification have led, and will lead further, to loss of land, farming & fishing capability, and in the worst cases loss of life itself. Certain low-lying States and small islands stand to lose large areas of land as sea levels rise, and some will be completely submerged leading to loss of home and country and turning whole communities into displaced 'climate change refugees'. The human rights thus violated include the rights to land, food, access to water, development and even to life itself.

The Councils' Discussion on Climate Change

The meeting was opened by a video presentation from by Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the



United Nations, and was chaired by Joachim Ruecker, President of the Human Rights Council. Distinguished panel members addressed the Council in its morning and afternoon sessions and Member States and NGO'sⁱ were given time to respond or ask questions. Panel members are listed belowⁱⁱ. They included **Mary Robinson**, former President of Ireland and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights from 1997 to 2002, now President of the Mary Robinson Foundation, Climate Justice, who also gave the closing remarks at the end of the day.

The discussion contained a high level of consensus that climate change is indeed impacting negatively on people's rights to life, water and sanitation, food, health, home and housing, self-determination, culture and development. It also threatens prospects for sustainable development and the rights of future generations. Further there was general agreement on the wording of the Council's concept note concerning the debate i.e. that : "While the negative impact of climate change affects people everywhere, it is disproportionately borne by persons and communities already in vulnerable situations owing to geography, poverty, sex, age, disability, and indigenous, minority, or other status. The poorest individuals, communities and countries that have contributed

the least to greenhouse emissions often bear the greatest burden. Populations of small islands and low-lying coastal lands bear some of the greatest adverse impact. For some communities, climate change poses basic issues of survival.”

Arguably the most impactful statements were made by those Member States whose survival is the most seriously threatened. Passionate statements were made by such countries as the Maldives, Fiji and by panel member H.E. Mr. Aote Tong, President of the Republic of Kiribati. These and other speakers illuminated the real and tragic cost of climate change in human terms.

It was agreed that the planet is in crisis and that regrettably progress towards reducing global CO₂ emission levels has been too slow. Emissions must be reduced and States urged to meet the targets set out in the 1997 Kyoto Protocol in order to attain the internationally agreed objective of keeping global warming to below 2^o C.

There was approval that a number of States had signed “The Geneva Pledge for Human Rights in Climate Action” on the 13th February 2015 and others were urged to do so, with Germany announcing it had indeed signed the Pledge that day. The signatories agree to collaborate and exchange expertise to build their “collective capacity to deliver responses to climate change that are good for people and the planet”. The Pledge is attached as an addendum to this report.

Suggested Action during the Council’s Discussion

Various speakers proposed that the Council send out the strongest possible message on the negative impact of climate change on human rights and urge countries to urgently reduce emissions. It was noted that the Paris Climate Conference in December of this year is a crucial event and some speakers strongly recommended that international legally binding agreements must be reached on this issue at that time.

Other suggested actions were made, including the need to gain and share information and best practice on an international level; the creation of funds to assist those communities in need of adaptation to the effects of climate change; and the need to ensure that developing communities are allowed to make their own economic transitions in a fair and just way, the phrase “no one should be left behind” being repeatedly used in that regard.

The Side Event “Climate Change and Human Rights” : The Way Forward in the HRC



This meeting was convened by The Geneva Climate Change Concertation Group and the Geneva Interfaith Forum on Climate Change and Human Rights, of which the BKWSU is a member, and other NGO’s. This was a significant meeting attended by a large number of delegates. Valériane Bernard was invited to be a member of the Panel of Speakers which was chaired by the President of the Human Rights Council, H.E. Mr. Joachim Ruecker.

Other Panel members were : Pelenise Alofa, National Coordinator, Kiribati Climate Action Network and Coordinator, EU Global Climate Change Alliance (University of the South Pacific) ; Andrea Rodríguez Osuna, Legal advisor, Climate Change Program, AIDA, Mexico ; Richard Pearshouse, Human Rights Watch ; Nico Schrijver, Member of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Professor of Public International Law, Leiden University.

The meeting posed the following questions: “Where are the lines between moral and legal obligations? How do human rights obligations relate to UNFCCC principles, such as the Principle of Inter-generational Equity and the Principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities? What are the implications of extra-territorial human rights obligations with respect to climate change?”

Valériane Bernard was able to speak about the moral obligations upon individuals, nations and the international community to respond to the harm caused by climate change. Action is needed at the individual level on lifestyle change and at international level on energy efficiency and other practices. She called for a Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Climate Change to be appointed by the UN. This recommendation had in fact been echoed by other speakers in the main discussion.

Conclusion

It was asserted by a number of key speakers that 2015 is a defining year for this issue and Planet Earth. JOACHIM RÜCKER, President of the Human Rights Council, said the world was at a crossroads and 2015 is the year which defines our response. The United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Flavia Pansieri, said that “A human-rights-based approach could drive more effective climate policy and action because it sought to identify and satisfy the most pressing needs of vulnerable persons living in their highly inequitable global society. A new legally binding climate agreement would strengthen existing commitments to ensure respect and protection of human rights. The international community had an ambitious agenda for 2015 which included finalizing the new sustainable development goals, setting out a universal, legally-binding agreement on climate change, and new agreements on financing for development. The decisions made in the coming months would have far-ranging consequences and it was vital that they fully reflected the human rights obligations of States and the related responsibilities of private sector actors.”

Finally, BAN KI MOON stated that “climate change threatened the ability of peoples to achieve sustainable development, and in some cases their very survival. It could fuel famine, political upheaval and conflict over resources. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s most recent assessment confirmed that climate change had a disproportionate impact on women, the poor, indigenous peoples, traditional farmers, coastal communities and migrants. People living in developing countries, particularly in small island developing States, in Africa and in the least developed countries, had contributed the least to dangerous carbon emissions but bore the brunt of the hardships. It was time for climate action. The world must transform economies and harness the potential of a low-carbon future. Reaching a meaningful universal agreement at the Paris Climate Conference in December this year was a vital step along that path. The Secretary-General counted on Members of the Human Rights Council to demonstrate leadership in this historic year to achieve the progress that the world so urgently neededⁱⁱⁱ.”

ⁱ Non-Governmental Organisations

ⁱⁱ The panellists were : Morning Session : Anote Tong, President of Kiribati; Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh; Mary Robinson, President of the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice; Dan Bondi Ogolla, Coordinator and Principal Legal Adviser at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change; Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples; and Mithika Mwenda, Secretary-General, Pan-African Climate Justice Alliance. Afternoon session : H.E. Mr. Enele Sosene Sopoaga, Prime Minister of Tuvalu ; Mr. Renan B. Dalisay, Administrator, National Food Authority, Philippines ; Ms. Xiangjun Yao, Director, Geneva Office, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations ; Mr. Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary, World Council of Churches ; Ms. Elizabeth Mpofu, General Coordinator, La Via Campesina ; Ms. Ana-Maria Suarez Franco, Permanent Representative in Geneva, Food First Information and Action Network (FIAN) International.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted from a Human Rights Council press release

ADDENDUM :
The Geneva Pledge for Human Rights in Climate Action

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”¹

We, the undersigned, note that climate change-related impacts have a range of implications, both direct and indirect, for the effective enjoyment of human rights, and recognize that while these implications affect individuals and communities around the world, the effects of climate change will be felt most acutely by those segments of the population who are already in vulnerable situations owing to factors such as geography, poverty, gender, age, indigenous or minority status and disability.

We also note that human rights obligations and commitments have the potential to inform and strengthen international and national policymaking in the area of climate change, promoting policy coherence, legitimacy and sustainable outcomes.

We recall that this relationship between climate change and human rights has been recognised by both the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change² (UNFCCC) and by the Human Rights Council³ (HRC), and can be further strengthened. As a diverse group of national governments engaged with both the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the processes of the Human Rights Council, we work on behalf of our people in defence of a climate system that is safe for all humanity, and allows for the benefits of development to be reaped by all.

On the occasion of the meeting of the Ad Hoc Working Group for the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action in February 2015, we, the undersigned, pledge to enable meaningful collaboration between our national representatives in these two processes to increase our understanding of how human rights obligations inform better climate action.

We will facilitate the exchange of expertise and best practice between our human rights and climate experts to build our collective capacity to deliver responses to climate change that are good for people and the planet. To realise this we will strive to include human rights knowledge in our delegations to the UNFCCC and where applicable, climate change expertise in the HRC. We cannot overlook the injustice faced by the poorest and most vulnerable people who are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change. In a transition to a low carbon economy we want to ensure that no one is left behind. We will promote and respect human rights in our climate actions. We stand in solidarity with our people and future generations to take urgent action on climate change.

Signed in Geneva, Switzerland, on Friday the 13th of February 2015.

Costa Rica – Chile – Guatemala – France – Ireland – Marshall Islands – Kiribati – Maldives –
Micronesia – Mexico – Palau – Panama – Peru – Philippines – Samoa – Sweden – Uganda –
Uruguay –

¹ Article 1, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

² decisions 1/CP.16 and 1/CMP.6

³ resolutions 7/23, 10/4, 18/22, and 26/27.