



CLIMATE CHANGE

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ISSUE

CLIMATE CHANGE

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Overview

“ It’s abundantly clear that climate change is already having an impact on human rights. And that this impact will only intensify in coming years. ”

Kumi Naidoo, Secretary General of Amnesty International

Millions of people are already suffering from the catastrophic effects of extreme disasters exacerbated by climate change – from prolonged drought in sub-Saharan Africa to devastating tropical storms sweeping across Southeast Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific. During the summer months for the northern hemisphere in 2018, communities from the Arctic Circle to Greece, Japan, Pakistan and the USA experienced devastating heatwaves and wildfires that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of people.

While we largely understand climate change through the impacts it will have on our natural world, it is the devastation that it is causing and will continue to cause for humanity that makes it an urgent human rights issue. It will compound and magnify existing inequalities. And its effects will continue to grow and worsen over time, creating ruin for current and future generations. This is why the failure of governments to act on climate change in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence may well be the biggest inter-generational human rights violation in history.

What is climate change?

The planet's climate has constantly been changing over geological time, with significant fluctuations of global average temperatures.

However, this current period of warming is occurring more rapidly than any past events. It has become clear that humanity has caused most of the last century's warming by releasing heat-trapping gases—commonly referred to as greenhouse gases—to power our modern lives. We are doing this through burning fossil fuels, agriculture and land-use and other activities that drive climate change. Greenhouse gases are at the highest levels they have ever been over the last 800,000 years. This rapid rise is a problem because it's changing our climate at a rate that is too fast for living things to adapt to.

Climate change involves not only rising temperatures, but also extreme weather events, rising sea levels, shifting wildlife populations and habitats, and a range of other impacts.

What causes climate change?

“ We are humans who want the same thing every other human wants — a safe place to live on this planet we call home. So while our work must continue to be unbiased and objective, increasingly we are raising our voices, adding to the clear message that climate change is real and humans are responsible, the impacts are serious and we must act now. ”

KATHARINE HAYHOE, CLIMATE SCIENTIST

There is an overwhelming scientific consensus that global warming is mostly man-made: 97% of climate scientists have come to this conclusion.

One of the biggest drivers by far is our burning of fossil fuels – coal, gas and oil – which has increased the concentration of greenhouse gases – such as carbon dioxide – in our atmosphere. This, coupled with other activities like clearing land for agriculture, is causing the average temperature of our planet to increase. In fact, scientists are as certain of the link between greenhouse gases and global warming as they are of the link between smoking and lung cancer.

This is not a recent conclusion. The scientific community has collected and studied the data on this for decades. Warnings about global warming started making headlines back in the late 1980s.

In 1992, 165 nations signed an international treaty, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). They have held meetings annually ever since (called “Conference of the Parties” or COP), with the aim of developing goals and methods to reduce climate change as well as adapt to its already visible effects. Today, 197 countries are bound by the UNFCCC.

What are the effects of climate change?

“ The Wilmington community, they are mostly low income, so the heat waves are very detrimental because they cannot afford air-conditioning. And because they are still close to the refineries and to oil extraction, they have to shut their windows. ”

Alicia Rivera, Community organizer and Climate activist, USA

The effects of climate change are already being felt now, but they will get worse. Global warming has reached approximately 1°C above pre-industrial levels. Every half degree (or even less) of global warming counts.

It is important to remember that no one list of the effects of climate change can be exhaustive. It is *very likely* that heatwaves will occur more often and last longer, and that extreme precipitation events will become more intense and frequent in many regions. The oceans will continue to warm and acidify, and global mean sea level will continue to rise. All of this will have, and is already starting to have, a devastating impact on human life.

The urgent need to address climate change has become even clearer with the release of a [major report in October 2018 by the world's leading scientific body for the assessment of climate change](#), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The IPCC warns that in order to avoid catastrophic global warming, we must not reach 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels – or at very minimum not exceed that. The report sets out the massive differences between the 1.5°C and 2°C scenarios.

By working to limit the increase in average global average temperatures to 1.5°C, the IPCC states that we could for example:

- reduce the number of people both exposed to climate-related risks and susceptible to poverty by up to several hundred million by 2050;
- protect 10 million people from risks related to sea levels;
- reduce the proportion of the global population exposed to increase in water stress by up to 50%, or one in every 25 people on this planet.

Perhaps most importantly, the IPCC report gave the world a clear deadline to avoid catastrophe: greenhouse gas emissions must be halved from their 2010 levels by 2030 to avoid reaching 1.5°C. Our governments must therefore take immediate steps right now to change course. The longer we take to do this, the more we will have to rely on costly [technologies](#) that could have harmful impacts on human rights.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres [told states](#) that they must set credible targets by 2020 to stop the increase of emissions, otherwise “we risk missing the point where we can avoid runaway climate change, with disastrous consequences for people and all the natural systems that sustain us.”

Who is impacted the most by climate change?

“ You say you love your children above all else, and yet you are stealing their future in front of their very eyes. ”

Greta Thunberg, Climate activist and Founder of Climate School Strike

Climate change is and will continue to harm all of us unless governments take action. However, its effects are likely to be much more pronounced for certain groups – for example, those communities dependent on agricultural or coastal livelihoods – as well as those who are generally already vulnerable, disadvantaged and subject to discrimination.

These are some of the ways climate change can and is exacerbating inequalities:

- Between developed and developing nations:

At a national level, those in low-lying, small island states and less developed countries will be and already are among those worst affected. People in the [Marshall Islands](#) already regularly experience the devastating flooding and storms

that destroy their homes and livelihoods. The 2018 heatwave in the northern hemisphere made headlines across Europe and North America, but some of the worst effects were also felt in places like Pakistan, where more than 60 people died – mostly labourers already working in intense heat – as temperatures soared above 44°C.

- Between different ethnicities and classes:

The effects of climate change and fossil fuel-related pollution also run along ethnicity and class lines. In North America, it is [largely poorer communities](#) of colour who are forced to breathe toxic air because their neighbourhoods are more likely to be situated next to power plants and refineries. They experience markedly higher rates of respiratory illnesses and cancers, and African Americans are [three times](#) more likely to die of airborne pollution than the overall US population.

- Between genders:

Women and girls are [disproportionately affected](#) by climate change, reflecting the fact that they are more likely in many countries to be marginalized and disadvantaged. This means that they are more vulnerable to the impacts of climate-related events as they are less able to protect themselves against it and will find it harder to recover.

- Between generations:

Future generations will experience the worsening effects unless action is taken now by governments. However, children and young people are already suffering due to their specific metabolism, physiology and developmental needs. This means, for example, that the forced displacement experienced by communities impacting a whole range of rights – from water, sanitation and food to adequate housing, health, education and development – is likely to be particularly harmful to children.

- Between communities:

Indigenous peoples are among the communities most impacted by climate change. They often live in marginal lands and fragile ecosystems which are particularly sensitive to alterations in the physical environment. They maintain a close connection with nature and their traditional lands on which their livelihoods and cultural identity depend.

Why is climate change a human rights issue?

“ Climate change is a human rights issue not only because its devastating impacts affect the enjoyment of human rights, but also because it is a man-made phenomenon which can be mitigated by governments. ”

Kumi Naidoo, Secretary General of Amnesty International

Human rights are intimately linked with climate change because of its devastating effect on not just the environment but our own wellbeing. In addition to threatening our very existence, climate change is having harmful impacts on our rights to life, health, food, water, housing and livelihoods.

The longer governments wait to take meaningful action, the harder the problem becomes to solve, and the greater the risk that emissions will be reduced through means that increase inequality rather than reduce it.

These are some of the ways climate change is impacting and will impact our human rights:

Right to life – We all have the right to life, and to live in freedom and safety. But climate change threatens the safety of billions of people on this planet. The most obvious example is through extreme weather-related events, such as storms, floods and wildfires. Typhoon Yolanda in the Philippines claimed the lives of [nearly 10,000 people in 2013](#). Heat stress is among the most deadly impacts. The summer heatwave in Europe in [2003 resulted in the deaths of 35,000 people](#). However, there are many other less visible ways that climate change threatens lives. The [World Health Organization predicts that climate change will cause 250,000 deaths per year between 2030 and 2050](#), due to malaria, malnutrition, diarrhoea and heat stress.

Right to health – We all have the right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. According to the IPCC, the major health impacts of climate change will include greater risk of injury, disease and death due to more intense heatwaves and fires; increased risk of under-nutrition as a result of diminished food production in poor regions; and increased risks of food- and water-borne diseases, and vector-borne diseases. Children exposed to traumatic events such as natural disasters, exacerbated by climate change, can suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders. The health impacts of climate change demand an urgent response, with unmitigated warming threatening to undermine health systems and core global health objectives.

Right to housing – We all have a right to an adequate standard of living for ourselves and our families, including adequate housing. However, climate change threatens our right to housing in a variety of ways. Extreme weather events like floods and wildfires are already destroying people's homes, leaving them displaced. Drought, erosion and flooding can also over time change the environment whilst sea-level rises threaten the homes of millions of people around the world in low-lying territories.

Rights to water and to sanitation – We all have the right to safe water for personal and domestic use and to sanitation that ensures we stay healthy. But a combination of factors such as melting snow and ice, reduced rainfall, higher temperatures and rising sea levels show that climate change is affecting and will continue to affect the quality and quantity of water resources. Already more than one billion people do not have access to clean water, and climate change will make this worse. Extreme weather events such as cyclones and floods affect water and sanitation infrastructure, leaving behind contaminated water and thus contributing to the spread of water-borne diseases. Sewage systems, especially in urban areas, will also be affected.

Who is responsible for stopping climate change?

“ After placing plaintiffs in a position of climate danger, defendants have continued to act with deliberate indifference to the known danger they helped create and enhance. A destabilized climate system poses unusually serious risks of harm to plaintiff's lives and their bodily integrity and dignity. ”

Juliana vs United States Government, Lawsuit filed by Children Against the US Government

States

States have the obligation to mitigate the harmful effects of climate change by taking the most ambitious measures possible to prevent or reduce greenhouse emissions within the shortest possible time-frame. While wealthy states need to lead the way, both internally and through international cooperation, all countries must take all reasonable steps to reduce emissions to the full extent of their abilities.

States must also take all necessary steps to help everyone within their jurisdiction to adapt to the foreseeable and unavoidable effects of climate change, thus minimizing the impact of climate change on their human rights. This is true irrespective of whether the state is responsible for those effects, because states have an obligation to protect people from harms caused by third parties.

States must take steps to tackle climate change as fast and as humanely as possible. In their efforts to address climate change, they must not resort to measures that directly or indirectly violate human rights. [For example](#), conservation areas or renewable energy projects must not be created on the lands of Indigenous peoples without consulting them and getting their consent.

In all measures, states should respect the right to information and participation for all affected people, as well as their right to access effective remedies for human rights abuses.

However, the current pledges made by governments to mitigate climate change are completely inadequate, as they would lead to a catastrophic 3°C increase in average global temperatures over pre-industrial levels by 2100. People in countries including France, the Netherlands and Switzerland are taking their governments to court for their failure to establish sufficient climate mitigation targets and measures.

Corporations

Businesses also have a responsibility to respect human rights. To meet this responsibility, companies must assess the potential effects of their activities on human rights and put in place measures to prevent negative impacts. They must make such findings and any prevention measures public. Companies must also take measures to remedy human rights abuses they cause or to which they contribute, either by themselves or in cooperation with other actors. Such responsibilities extend to human rights harms resulting from climate change.

Corporations, and particularly [fossil fuel companies](#), must also immediately put measures in place to minimize greenhouse emissions – including by shifting their portfolio towards renewable energy – and make relevant information about their emissions and mitigation efforts public. These efforts must extend to all the major subsidiaries, affiliates and entities in their supply chain.

Fossil fuel companies have been historically among the most responsible for climate change – and this continues today. [Research shows](#) that just 100 fossil fuel-producing companies are responsible for 71% of global greenhouse gas emissions since 1988.

There is [growing evidence](#) that major fossil fuel companies have known for decades about the harmful effects of burning fossil fuels and have attempted to suppress that information and block efforts to tackle climate change.

Why do we need to stop climate change?

Because we all deserve equal protection.

We are all born with fundamental human rights, yet these rights are under grave threat from climate change. While climate change threatens all of our lives in some way or other, people who experience discrimination are among those likely to be the worst affected. We are all equally deserving of protection from this universal threat.

Because there is nothing to lose from acting, and everything to gain.

Fighting climate change gives us a chance to put the wellbeing of people first by ensuring a right to a healthy environment. This will give us an opportunity to enhance human rights, for example by enabling more people to access cleaner and cheaper energy resources and create job opportunities in new sectors.

Because we have the knowledge, power and ability to stop climate change.

Many people are already working on creative, inspiring and innovative solutions to address climate change. From citizens to companies to cities, there are people all over the world actively working on policies and campaigns and solutions that will protect people and the planet. Indigenous peoples and minority communities have for centuries developed sustainable ways of living with the environments that they call home. We can learn from them and, with their consent, benefit from their know-how to inform our own efforts to find a different way of interacting with our planet.

What is Amnesty doing to address climate change?

“ There is an urgent need to put people and human rights at the centre of the climate change conversation. For Amnesty International and other human rights organizations, this means pushing for accountability for states who fail to act on climate change, just as we do with other human rights violations. ”

Chiara Liguori, Policy Adviser, Amnesty International

Amnesty International’s work on climate change has included standing up for human rights in the [Paris Agreement](#) on climate change, contributing to stronger human rights standards on climate change, and supporting environmental groups as they put forward human rights arguments.

Given the urgency of this issue, we will deepen our involvement by playing a galvanizing role for the human rights community as it shows how climate change is impacting people’s rights and how people are responding to the reality and the threat of climate change.

Amnesty will work with a variety of different groups in key countries to mount pressure against governments and corporations which are obstructing progress. Amnesty will support young people, but also Indigenous peoples, trade unions and affected communities, to demand a rapid and just transition to a zero-carbon economy that leaves no one behind. Litigation and the use of national and regional human rights mechanisms will be additional tools to keep up the pressure.

Amnesty International will build on its work in support of environmental defenders to specifically facilitate the work of those protecting land, food, communities and people against climate impacts, extraction and expansion of fossil fuels and deforestation. Defending the civic space for information, participation and mobilization will also contribute towards promoting more progressive climate policies.

Our demands

Amnesty is calling for governments to:

- Do everything they can to help stop the global temperature rising by more than 1.5°C.
- Reduce their greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2050 at the latest. Richer countries should do this faster. By 2030, global emissions must be half as much as they were in 2010.
- Stop using fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas) as quickly as possible.
- Make sure that climate action is done in a way that does not violate anyone’s human rights, and reduces rather than increases inequality

- Make sure everyone, in particularly those affected by climate change or the transition to a fossil-free economy, is properly informed about what is happening and is able to participate in decisions about their futures.
- Work together to fairly share the burden of climate change - richer countries must help others.