

Forum: Human Rights Council

Issue: The question of human rights and climate change

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Introduction

There has been much ambiguity about the cause of the increase in global average temperatures, since many scientists do argue that climate change is developed and is a natural process, while others argue the latter, that it is more human-induced throughout the course of human history. According to the fourth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the increase in temperature since the mid-twentieth century is very likely to be a product of human activity.

As a result, many questions have been raised regarding the implications of climate change on fundamental human rights and whether there's a correlation between the two factors. Hurricane Sandy flooded the New York Subway system, many urban communities, and caused many fires across homes in Breezy Point, Queens. Hurricane Katrina left more than one million citizens homeless and many were forced to take refuge in the Superdome stadium, which was unhygienic with sub-human conditions. Rising sea levels have bring out tremendous fear that the President of Kiribati, Anote Tong, has to purchase five thousand acres of land in Fiji as insurance policy, so its' citizens will have a place to accommodate in the worst possible case of the island being completely underwater. The devastating effects of these events have caused great uncertainty and doubt amongst the public, which leaves us with a question: "Could climate change have played a significant role in fueling these natural disasters? And how is our human rights violated through these events?"

Definition of Key Terms

Climate change:

Climate change can simply be defined as changes to the climate and surrounding environment over a prolonged period, which is directly or indirectly contributed by human activity – though this definition is still the center of many hot-heated debates between scientists. Nonetheless, the UN have defined climate change as 'man-made', according to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Paragraph 6.

The term is often confused with 'global warming', and while there is no official document stating the exact distinguishing points, most scientific publications refer to 'global warming' to surface temperature increases while 'climate change' is the general expression of global warming and every other aspect and change to the climate that increasing the greenhouse gas level will eventually affect.

Human rights:

It is the belief that all humans, regardless of nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, language, or any other status, is entitled to our human rights without discrimination. These rights are then expressed and listed by the United Nations (UN) in their Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) on December 10 1948. All member states have ratified at least one, or 80% of states have ratified four or more of the articles within the document and now have rules and regulations in place in order to protect and fulfill these fundamental human rights. According to the UDHR, all human rights are inalienable (cannot be subjected to being taken away from the possessor), indivisible and interdependent – the loss of one human right may lead to the deprivation of another.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC):

A leading international organization, initiated by the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) in 1988, to assess and inform the global community of current climate changes and their potential socio-economic and environmental impacts. As it was established by the UN, membership is available to all members of the UNEP and WMO (currently 195 countries are members). Thousands of scientists join and contribute to the works of the IPCC through roles as authors, contributors and reviewers – the IPCC does not conduct any of its' own research, and only works on reviewing and analyzing current and past published information regarding climate change.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR):

The OHCHR is an internal body of the United Nations that predominantly works to assist and protect the universal human rights as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its' many tasks include encouraging cooperation between nations to protect universal human rights, responding to cases of human rights violations, promoting and enhancing public knowledge on the articles in the UDHR.

Background Information

The significance of CO₂

Carbon dioxide, more commonly known as CO₂, is the primary type of greenhouse gas that is emitted into the atmosphere through human activity, mainly from industries. In 2013, the top ten countries liable for the most CO₂ emissions accounted for 68.2% of the world total. Emissions alone from China and the United States corresponded to 43% of the world total, with 10,540,000 kilotons from China and

5,334,000 kilotons from the United States. Though there is a substantial amount of carbon dioxide already in the atmosphere (due to the carbon cycle), human activity is contributing more by burning fuels and often taking away natural sources of emission through deforestation (which takes CO₂ from the atmosphere). The three main sources of CO₂ are – electricity, transportation and industry. The electricity sector takes account of generation, transmission and distribution of electricity and also heat generation by burning coal, oil or natural gas. The production of chemicals, iron/steel, cement, aluminum, pulp and paper are the main consumers of industrial electrical usage. Residential and commercial sectors are also very dependent on the generation of electricity, through uses such as lighting, heating and appliances. Transportation is the second greatest consumer, as it is very energy intensive and requires use of petroleum-based fuels to meet these needs.



Caption #1: A bar chart showing the top 40 countries' carbon dioxide emissions in 2013.

Through the last decade, emission for transport related fuels have increased by 45% following the great demand in the transportation of goods and humans, through aviation, road or ships. Industrial use of fossil fuels is regarded as the third biggest source, may it be through direct combustion of these energy sources or through the generation of electricity. Certain industries, like the cement industry, consume and produce more carbon dioxide, so much that the production of 1000kg of cement can yield up to 900kg of carbon dioxide gas. Petrochemical products like plastic, rubber and cosmetics further aggravates the problem since these products evaporate or wear out in the long run, thus releasing even more carbon dioxide during its' lifespan.

Global warming, climate change and its' devastating effects

With the help of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the IPCC were able to publish several works to increase awareness of climate change risks. In its' latest report in 2007 (Fourth Assessment Report), the IPCC focused on three various themes – the science and theory behind the climate change, the adaptation and vulnerability of various groups and the implications of the issue. The observed and projected changes in weather patterns related to global warming are:

- Rise of sea-levels and higher sea temperatures,
- Diminishing ice-covered areas and sea ice,
- Increased recurrence of heat waves and hot extreme weather,
- Higher regularity of precipitation events and often leading to floods,
- Increase in areas which are affected by droughts,
- Higher acuteness of tropical disasters (cyclones, tsunamis, tornadoes).

With this, there is also more emphasis on how the affects of climate change is often not distributed equally, with major countries like the United States and China (the two biggest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions) suffering far less in terms of socio-economic disparity compared to small island nations like Kiribati and the Maldives, of whom are in danger of consequently losing their islands due to the rise of sea-levels. There is a greater call for these existing industrialized nations to take initiative and support the less-developed in combating risks of climate change and also to grow sustainably.

Sustainable development

Sustainable development is a concept used to describe the practice of conserving natural resources for future generations' use while still able to maintain and develop the individual country's growth, whether it is socially, economically or politically. In the recent years, there has been a rise in individuals, organizations and governments highlighting the importance of sustainable growths, through conferences such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit (2015). The scheme of sustainable development is often categorized into three dimensions or pillars: 'economic, environmental and social' or 'ecology, economy and equity'. It is commonly understood that if one pillar is weak, the entire system is unsustainable, further emphasizing for nations to focus on all three aspects of development.

Environmental sustainability

Environmental sustainability signifies that the global community is consuming natural resources such as coal, natural gas, land, water, etc. at a rational and realistic rate. It is also important to consider that scarce resources require a different approach and that extra measures are needed in analyzing the potential effects of the consumption and extraction of these sources of supply.

Economical sustainability

Having known that all businesses operate with an aim of maximizing profit, it is important that governments are able to regulate and control resources so that they are used in the most efficient manner in the long term. On a macro-economic level, economical sustainability denote a government's ability to support its' country's economic level of production indefinitely. The goal of this is not to rank the highest in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) levels, as it is not

representative of the entire population. There is more emphasis on the poverty thresholds and what governments are enforcing to maintain the lowest rate as much as possible.

Key Issues

Effect on specific human rights

In the 1972 Declaration of the United Nations Conference on Human Environment (also known as the Stockholm Declaration), Principle 1 states that there is “a fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being”, which highlights the association between human rights and climate change.

The right to life

As stated by some as the most fundamental, basic right of all humans, the right to life is now under jeopardy from the threat of climate change. Not only will there be more projected deaths due to disasters, disease and injuries from floods, droughts, fires and storms, but there will be an increase in those living in malnutrition and hunger due to the lack of resources, which will eventually have damaging consequences on the child’s growth and development. These effects can be seen more visibly in developing nations. As from 2000 to 2004, estimates of 262 million people were killed from natural disasters, of which 98% are living in developing nations.

The right to adequate food

As a result of climate change, many countries are suffering from decreased level of food production due to lack of resources or factor of production mobility. With the increase of global average temperatures from 1-3 degrees, there is a lower potential yield for crops, further increasing risks for food insecurity and hunger in less developed countries.

The right to health

Climate change affects the health of citizens by malnutrition, hunger, increase in infectious diseases and injuries. There are also many major issues with the availability, accessibility and quality of health care in less developed countries, especially those in Sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, it is significant that governments promote education and public health initiatives, making priority in more isolated communities and individuals.

The right to self-determination

Self-determination means that a country is able to determine its' own body of government and statehood, and it is an important element in international law. Climate change events such as the rise of sea-level and more extreme events, such as hurricanes, tsunamis and typhoons are posing as a threat to the livelihood of many in small island states, such as Kiribati, and in more hazard-prone areas like Eritrea, where the government are not always economically sufficient and would not be able to immediately respond to these disasters.

Effects on specific groups

The effects of climate change and human rights violations can be felt the most for groups that were already suffering from discrimination or at a situation of vulnerability in society. The reasons include their age, gender, financial situation, minority status and disability. Women are the usual targets as they are already subjected to gender discrimination, inequality and often-existing gender roles, and those living in rural areas prove to be more susceptible to gender-based violence during times of natural disasters.

Displacement

As mentioned before, the countries emitting the most carbon dioxide gas are the ones least vulnerable from it, compared to small island states like Kiribati and Maldives that are struggling to manage this environmental crisis (a normal Kiribati citizen would emit 0.64 metric tons while an average South Korean citizen would emit 11.49 metric tons). A report published by the IPCC in 1990 estimated that in 2050, 150 million people could be displaced due to events that are climate change-related, such as desertification, droughts, tsunamis and rise of sea level. There are controversies as to the status of those who are forced out of their homes, as different government would recognize them differently and thus different conditions about length of stay could be applied too.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

The People's Republic of China

China has developed many strategies to address the issue, for example by publishing the white paper in November 2011, which details the country's policies to help combat climate change effects and their successes during the five-year period (2006-2010). It is one of the first developing countries to have created a national action plan and have accomplished economic and industrial reformation that exceeded the goals in its' action plan.

The United States of America

Though the United States was a signatory to the Kyoto Protocol, has not ratified the agreement as the US Senate declined the decision to join the Protocol. In 2015, Obama's administration declared the Clean Power Plan that aims to control and minimize carbon dioxide emissions from power plants.

The Maldives

The Maldives was one of the first communities to have suffered directly from the effects of climate change and also tried to give publicity to the issue at hand. Being the flattest country on Earth, the country is faced with the issue of rising sea level and by the end of the century may be underwater. Its main source of income comes from tourism and fishing, and with the majority of housing and critical infrastructure located very close to the coastline; there is a great threat to the socio-economical wellbeing of the nation if sea levels continued to rise. The Maldives has taken many initiatives in addressing the issue by creating a policy framework for the course of ten years (2014-2024) which tackles five key issues which are:

- Bringing awareness and cooperation between countries in international conferences that will act in favor of more vulnerable and small island nations,
- Creating and improving upon infrastructure that is resilient to current and future natural disasters across towns and communities,
- Strengthening and empowering sustainable economic growth despite of negative environmental implications,
- Devise strategies that would ensure a low emission development and energy security for the Maldives,
- Guaranteeing financial aid to all the clauses above.

If the situation continues to decline, the Maldives will be expected to lose 77% of its' land by 2100, with migration being one of the solutions for the people. In November 2008, the president expressed his interest to purchase new land, however this would come at a financial burden and also a cultural disgrace to his country.

Timeline of Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

Date	Description of event
	Agreement and ratification of the Kyoto Protocol
December 11, 1997	The Kyoto Protocol is an international treaty which is the follow up of the 1992 UNFCCC that assigns ratified member nations the task of reducing their nation's greenhouse gasses emissions, with the recognition that (a) global warming

exists and (b) man-made CO₂ have caused it.

Inuit sue the United States over human rights violations

December 2005

The Inuit people of Canada and Alaska filed a human rights violation case against the government of the United States, claiming they are facing extinction because of climate change. Though the United States did sign and ratify the Kyoto Protocol, it has not shown willingness to comply with the terms of reducing its' greenhouse gas emissions (which makes up 25% of the world's total). Sheila Watt-Cloutier, the chairwoman of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, claimed that winter hunting season for the Inuit and polar bears were not predictable as before as the ocean still remained warm, despite it being December. Other problems include the destruction of houses, airport runways, roads and harbours, along with seashore erosion forcing people to move inland. In the end, there were no unanimous solution however it drew public attention to the effects of global warming on specific groups, in this case the Inuit.

The establishment of resolution 7/23 by the United Nation's Human Rights Council (UNHRC)

March 2008

The resolution, titled 'Human Rights & Climate Change', recognizes that climate change is a global problem and calls for international cooperation between governments and organizations. Though the resolution is not necessarily the most detailed, it is one of the many crucial steps in which the United Nations is taking to bring attention to the problem. The resolution was adopted without a vote.

The OHCHR publishes a study on the relationship between climate change and human rights

January 15, 2009

The report mentioned important aspects of the impacts of climate change, such as to less developed or developing countries (the 'unequal burden'), the effect on specific rights and groups of people.

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20)

June 20, 2012 – June 22, 2012

This is one of the most important conferences in the modern industrial age, as world leaders, joined with thousands of participants from the private sector, NGOs and various other groups, came together to focus on two main issues: how to build a green economy for sustainable growth in the future, and how international cooperation may foster that change. As a result, more than 513 billion dollars was pledged to support the cause and resolution 66/288 titled 'The Future We Want' was created to follow up on the issue. The many issues and

goals that were mentioned were to:

- Eradicate poverty and food security
- Promote sustainable agriculture, energy fuels
- The workings towards more sustainable transportation and cities
- Promoting full and productive employment with social protection
- Fully commit to achieving the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015
- Strive to a more equal, equitable and inclusive world for its' citizens

The 2016 United Nations Climate Change Conference

November 30, 2015 - More commonly referred to as the COP21, the conference's main aim is to
December 12, 2015 maintain global warming below 1.5°C compared to industrial levels. The Paris Agreement, which was created during the course of the conference, requires member nations to review and further push their commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions every five years, to eventually be able to meet the long-term goal of greenhouse gas neutrality by 2050. Another great outcome is the continued monetary financing of over \$100bn to developing governments to be able to carry out sustainable development by means of economic reforms.

Evaluations of Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Significant conventions and agreements have directed world leaders, organizations and governments at the direction that there should be real action taken to minimize affects of climate changes to human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights demonstrate that certain fundamental human rights, such as the right to self-determination, the right to live, the right to access to water should not be breached under any circumstances. The Kyoto Protocol was one of the most famous environmental-focused treaty however its' results are equivocal as many leading nations, such as China, India or Brazil has ratified the agreement but have not taken actions, as the treaty requires.

Possible Solutions

In order to extensively promote sustainable development to all countries, conferences and conventions are highly recommended and encouraged, as it more or less directs member nations to a greater path. This can be justified by the success of previous conferences such as the Kyoto Protocol and the Rio+20 Conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Any goals or resolutions wishing to solve the issue of

climate change and human rights should be action-oriented and universally applicable to all member nations, to further prevent less developed countries from falling behind, and in worst cases, to endure the impacts of climate change to a greater extent. Additionally, this is so that the resolutions also are written with solicitude to other nation's realities, such as targets and indicators. As mentioned before, specific groups of citizens should be mentioned and taken into consideration, as some may prove to be more vulnerable than others.

Two important measures to remember are mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation is the effort to reduce the severity and impact of global warming by reducing carbon emissions and control the amount of greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere. Adaptation aims to prepare and strengthen societies to cope and adapt to cases of climate change hazards.

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