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# Advancing a Human Rights-Based Approach to Climate Action and Decision-Making at UNFCCC COP31

## Key Messages of the UN Environment Management Group Issue Management Group on Human Rights and Environment for the 31st meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC COP31)

### November 2026

The harmful impacts of climate change on the effective enjoyment of human rights are indisputable. These impacts often exacerbate existing inequalities disproportionately affecting people already in vulnerable situations. Yet many human rights obligations with respect to climate change remain unfulfilled, and collective climate commitments, to date, fall far short of keeping the 1.5 target of the Paris agreement in reach.

In its 2025 Advisory Opinion on Climate Change, the International Court of Justice found that "States must take their obligations under international human rights law into account when implementing their obligations under the climate change treaties". It went on to highlight that the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is both inherent in and essential for the effective enjoyment of other human rights. In its resolution 80/263, the UN General Assembly welcomes the advisory opinion and requests the UN Secretary General to produce a report outlining ways to advance compliance with the obligations contained therein.

These messages are prepared by the UN's Issue Management Group on Human Rights and the Environment, a coordination mechanism for UN agencies. They call for States to advance compliance with their human rights obligations related to climate change through their decisions at COP31 – decisions that will be critical to increase ambition, advance a just transition, and ultimately to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of those most affected by climate change. This includes addressing the differentiated needs of affected groups, promoting their leadership in climate action, supporting resilience, and advancing gender equality. COP31 outcomes should:

#### Align climate ambition and finance with human rights obligations

States are not acting quickly enough to stop climate change and address its impacts. The result is an ongoing and deepening crisis for human rights and the environment. Under international law, States must take urgent action, individually and collectively, in line with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities as well as the best available science, to prevent further harm from climate change and to ensure such harm is remedied when it occurs. Global greenhouse gas emissions must be reduced steeply and rapidly in line with a pathway that holds temperature rise to the lowest level possible. Immediate and proactive adaptation efforts that integrate principles of equity, inclusivity and justice, are needed to minimize the impacts of that temperature rise. Accountability for climate harm, including loss and damage, must be ensured to ensure access to remedy for the people and communities most affected.

This will require accelerated resource mobilization, aligned with States' human rights obligations including their duty to cooperate, for all aspects of climate action. Developed countries also have legal obligations under Article 4 of the UNFCCC and Articles 9, 10 and 11 of the Paris Agreement to provide financial resources, technology transfer, and capacity-building for climate action. Climate finance should include dedicated resources to address the impacts of climate shocks on people in vulnerable

situations, including women, children, youth, and Indigenous Peoples, and to strengthen relevant prevention and response systems. Discussions under the Climate Finance Work Programme should focus on operationalizing and building upon existing commitments, increasing accessibility predictability and effectiveness of finance, and advancing alignment with human rights obligations including non-discrimination and gender equality.

### Support a just transition grounded in human rights

COP 30 adopted a milestone decision on the Just Transition Work Programme (JTWP) using clear human rights language and deciding to develop a just transition mechanism. The review of the JTWP and the operationalization of the just transition mechanism should build upon and affirm the COP30 JTWP decision's commitment to "respect, promote and fulfil all human rights and labour rights, the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, the right to health, the rights of Indigenous Peoples, people of African descent, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations, and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity."

At COP31, the just transition mechanism should be operationalised through a whole-of-society, multi-sectoral, human rights-based approach with the goal of rapidly transitioning away from fossil fuels toward sustainable economies and societies. The mechanism should, inter alia, support and employ transparent decision-making, human rights due diligence, access to information, meaningful participation and access to justice. For example, operationalization of the JTM should prioritize the meaningful and informed participation of the people most impacted by climate change and efforts to address it, including workers, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women and youth. Steps should be taken to ensure its findings and recommendations meaningfully inform and are informed by work within and outside the UNFCCC.

### Ensure the second global stocktake (GST2) is informed by the lived experiences of the people most affected by climate change and the best available science

GST2 must be inclusive, reflecting the meaningful and informed participation of the people most affected by climate change. As the IPCC has found, a rights-based approach to climate action leads to more effective and sustainable outcomes. In this regard, GST2 should guarantee adequate space for the experiences, perspectives and knowledge of the people most affected by climate change, including women, children, youth, and Indigenous Peoples.

The right to benefit from scientific progress and its applications requires that decision-making be grounded in science. The Paris Agreement itself affirms that climate action should be guided by the best available science. This includes GST2 which should articulate science-based pathways to limit climate change and build upon the GST1 commitment to transition away from fossil fuels. GST2 should also be comprehensive integrating human rights in a cross-cutting manner and addressing all facets of climate action including mitigation, adaptation, loss and damage, just transition, finance, and means of implementation.

### Take effective measures to protect civic space and environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs)

In order for EHRDs, Indigenous Peoples and other rights-holders to contribute safely and effectively to climate action, including at UN climate conferences, protection of their rights to, inter alia, freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and public participation is essential. Ongoing discussions around, inter alia, rules of procedure, institutional arrangements, host country agreements and arrangements for intergovernmental meetings should advance efforts to ensure the safe, meaningful and inclusive participation of environmental human rights defenders, Indigenous Peoples and other rights-holders in climate decision-making.

Effective human rights-based climate action must ensure the rights of EHRDs who continue to face loss of life, violence and harassment, legal action, smear campaigns, surveillance and other threats. The reference to environmental defenders in the Belém Gender Action Plan should be built upon through the rapid development of the guidelines to ensure the safety of women environmental defenders as called for in the Plan. In addition, the protection of EHRDs must be integrated into relevant workstreams across the climate negotiations. The negotiations of the new Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE) action plan offer a critical opportunity to adopt new commitments to develop tools and support for EHRDs and more broadly to ensure that ACE implementation is firmly grounded in international human rights law including the human rights to access information, education, and meaningful and informed participation.

**For more information on the work of the Environment Management Group Issue Management Group on Human Rights and the Environment see:**

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