

# CLIMATE CHANGE & THE HUMAN RIGHTS SYSTEM

The different organizations and committees that make up the international human rights system work to promote and protect what individuals and communities need to be safe and well. This 2-sider explores how climate change is addressed within the human rights framework and how to get involved in advocating for climate action that addresses human rights and social inequality.

## THE BACKGROUND

Human rights are the universal standards to uphold the safety and well-being of everyone. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted in 1948 following the destructions, immense loss of life and suffering wrought by the Second World War, formally enshrines the rights of all human beings. It ensures the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family [as] the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”

Incorporating human rights into climate policies and actions is known as a human rights-based approach. At its adoption, the Paris Agreement had more human rights language than any previously existing environmental treaty. The preamble of the Paris Agreement states that countries “should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights.” According to UN research, integrating human rights-based approaches into climate policy can create more coherent, legitimate and sustainable outcomes, based on the duties countries are already committed to under existent human rights laws.

At the same time, it is important to bring the topic of climate change into the corresponding human rights framework. With its many moving parts, the human rights framework, established under the United Nations, informs how countries are expected to promote, protect, and realise the rights of individuals in their country. The UN has defined a range of internationally accepted rights and established mechanisms to promote and protect them. However, the human rights system is also a space where countries are constantly negotiating and (re)defining human rights. This is why political engagement is critical.

Citizens can engage directly through branches of the human rights system itself. The table below outlines the international human rights system, alongside routes for how individuals may participate.

WHAT	HOW
<b>Human Rights Council</b>	Since 2006 the council has met three times a year. Through interactive dialogues and thematic sessions, it aims to promote human rights education, follow up on human rights commitments made by countries, and prevent and respond to human rights violations. You can submit information directly here: <a href="https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/ComplaintProcedure/Pages/HRCComplaintProcedureIndex.aspx">https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/ComplaintProcedure/Pages/HRCComplaintProcedureIndex.aspx</a>
<b>High Commissioner for Human Rights</b>	Since 1994 the High Commissioner has acted as the international face for human rights. Their office focuses on human rights standard-setting, human rights monitoring, and supporting human rights implementation at the country level.
<b>Special Procedures</b>	These fact-finding missions can focus on certain themes, with renewable mandates of three years, or on specific countries, with one-year renewable mandates. They are brought either by Special Rapporteurs, Independent Experts, or Working Groups within the Human Rights Council. You can submit information directly here: <a href="https://spsubmission.ohchr.org/">https://spsubmission.ohchr.org/</a>
<b>Treaty Bodies</b>	Each specific human rights treaty <sup>4</sup> has its own treaty body that oversees its implementation. Each of these bodies differ slightly in terms of length of review cycles, mandates, and activities. You can submit information <sup>5</sup> directly here: <a href="https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/TBPetitions/Pages/IndividualCommunications.aspx">https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/TBPetitions/Pages/IndividualCommunications.aspx</a>
<b>Universal Periodic Review</b>	Begun in 2008, this process provides systematic peer reviews of all human rights obligations of a country every four and a half years, irrespective of the treaties that country has ratified. Other countries give recommendations to the country being reviewed, which decides to accept or note them, with the option to reject being used in more extreme or politically volatile cases.



This page is an excerpt from QUNO’s “People’s Climate Empowerment Series”, a publication that explains international efforts on climate change and how these can help us support fair, ambitious and inclusive climate action.

**To find out more visit:**  
<https://quno.org/resource/peoples-climate-empowerment-series>

## WHERE TO FIND CLIMATE CHANGE AT THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

**RESOLUTIONS** - the Human Rights Council has two climate-related resolutions. These ensure that expert research is undertaken on a specified topic and then presented in the Human Rights Council to representatives from countries across the world. Since 2009, the Resolution on Human Rights and Climate Change explicitly connects human rights with climate change. The Resolution on Human Rights and the Environment has also addressed the impact of climate change on human rights. These resolutions provide information on why climate action needs to be inclusive, urgent, and rights-based and can be referred to when talking to politicians and other community leaders.

**UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEURS** - these are independent, unpaid human-rights experts appointed by the Council. They are assigned to specific issues and will conduct research on particular themes or country contexts, on which they will publish a report. These reports often get picked up by national press and significantly help shape political debates and outcomes. Special Rapporteurs can also listen to complaints from individuals or organisations – for which there is an online form - and respond to them by including them in reports or providing letters of support in court. The Human Rights Council appointed the first ever **Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change** in 2022. There is also a **Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the**

A formal text negotiated among States and adopted by a UN body; they represent the position of member States. The resolutions contribute to how human rights are defined, reflecting the existing obligations that countries have to their people or establishing new standards.

**Environment**, who has been mandated since 2012. They regularly launch calls for input on specific topics that they are researching, to which anyone can respond via the email addresses shared on their webpages.

**TREATY BODIES** - Treaty Bodies monitor the human rights obligations of countries, respond to inquiries, and issue General Comments or Recommendations, which define what rights entail and what countries ought to do to protect human rights. These comments, though not legally binding, are used in courts to clarify legally binding treaties and include climate change impacts on human rights. An example is the ground-breaking recommendation by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which stressed that there are gender-differentiated climate change consequences, and underscored “the steps that need to be taken to achieve gender equality as a factor that will reinforce the resilience of individuals and communities globally in the context of climate change and disasters.” Other treaty bodies that are active on human rights and climate change are the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; Committee on the Rights of the Child; Committee on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families; and Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

### The Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment

In October 2021, the right to a clean, health and sustainable environment was first recognized in a Resolution adopted by the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. Eight months later, in July 2022, the UN General Assembly followed by passing a resolution recognizing this right at the highest level of the UN. This historic achievement came after decades of campaigning by civil society, Indigenous Peoples organizations and the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment at both the international and grassroots level. The right to a healthy environment is already recognized in many countries’ constitutions or legislation but this is the first recognition of the right on a global scale, for everyone, everywhere.

We can expect to see the impact of this recognition in the strengthening of environmental legal frameworks across the globe and enhanced accountability deriving therefrom. It is also a strong catalyst for continued advocacy and actions protecting the environment. Crucially, the resolutions recognize that climate change and other environmental damages have negative implications for the protection and fulfillment of all human rights.

## WHAT TO DO NOW – PRACTICAL STEPS

**Everyday:** 1.) Consider how we can change our everyday behaviors to have less impact on our planet - this can include changing what we eat and throw away, the way we use energy at home, or how we travel. 2.) Talk with the people around us, especially those who may not understand the human impact of climate change or feel powerless and don’t know how to help. 3.) Spread the word about innovative new laws on climate and related campaigns on the streets, via social media or other channels.

**Medium-Term:** 1.) Keep track of the development of climate laws on the online Climate Laws of the World Database. 2.) Engage with local groups or local chapters of organizations or movements we respect (be that environmental groups, faith community initiatives or a sports club).

**Long-term:** 1.) Engage politically – this spans getting involved in local, regional and national politics and making sure we vote in every election. 2.) Campaign, research or contribute to public consultations. Public participation in climate policy making is our legal right!

The Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) is an expert observer of the UNFCCC, IPCC and Human Rights Council. QUNO has been supporting work on climate change at the international level through diplomacy, advocacy and education initiatives since 2012. Please consider making a donation to help us continue with this work.