

Human Rights & Climate Change – A Student Perspective

Drafted by the Human Rights subgroup of the COP30 Working Group

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Abstract

Climate justice is inseparable from universal human rights, and the safeguarding of vulnerable communities is an undeniable international obligation and responsibility. This white paper calls for stronger integration of human rights into climate policy and action via bolstered holistic inclusive and participatory policymaking processes. This paper aims to influence COP30 discussions toward fairer, more resilient, and rights-respecting outcomes.

Human Rights and Climate Justice: Our Obligations

Human rights begin with two core ideas: all people are born free and equal in dignity, and these rights apply universally without discrimination¹. Applied to climate governance, this means that rules, enforcement, and funding must not unduly burden or exclude anyone, especially vulnerable groups. Civil and political rights i.e., participation, equality before the law, and security of person, translate into concrete obligations: early-warning systems, equitable disaster response, and meaningful involvement of affected communities in decision-making. The UNFCCC echoes these principles: Article 3 requires Parties to act equitably, protect present and future generations. The ‘just transition’ concept, moreover, reinforces that climate policy must safeguard workers and communities, ensuring a fair, inclusive, and sustainable economic ‘green’ transition. Our obligations, then, are clear; but how can we achieve them?

Supporting Vulnerable Groups: An Agricultural Focus

It can be argued that by focusing policy efforts on our most vulnerable, we take care of everyone. Vulnerability can be defined here as a fluid, socio-economic condition shaped by, among other things, poverty, age, gender, disability, occupation or geographic exposure.² Notably, climate change stands to create and exacerbate vulnerabilities.³

Agriculture illustrates this nexus acutely. Workers and smallholder farmers face climate shocks that undermine livelihoods and food security, which could have reverberating impacts around the world. For Ireland, this is a particularly vulnerable sector due predominantly to expected changes in weather patterns and a fast growing population. Indeed, it is a concern we hold in common with many other states. Recent EU-wide protests have shown this is an area that

¹ United Nations. (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Articles 1 and 2. Available here: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

² TASC. (2024). Research with Vulnerable Populations Policy. Available here: https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/research_with_vulnerable_populations_policy_tasc_v_171124.pdf

³ McMichael, A.J. (2012). Insights from past millennia into climatic impacts on human health and survival, *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 109 (13) 4730-4737, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1120177109>.

requires immediate and concerted attention. Risks posed in this sphere for small island states and emerging economies similarly require urgent action.

Protecting farmers' rights requires non-discriminatory access to adaptation finance, livelihood protections, and the operationalisation of meaningful and holistic participatory governance and policymaking. The below examples illustrate what this might look like:

Domestic example: Ireland

- A working knowledge of Irish grassroots level attitudes toward climatic impacts and protection help to encourage meaningful participation in climate change mitigation by understanding what changes are feasible for farmers to accept on a short term basis, to better inform the co-creation of policies and their realistic implementation expectations.⁴

International example: Colombia

- The co-creation and distribution of easy-to-use tools for best practices for smallholder farmers in Colombia have helped with integration into a broader food market and subsistence ecosystem that assist these actors with climate related shock absorption.⁵

As with any policy area, holding inclusive and holistic policy design and implementation as a general principle is prudent. It is especially important, however, when it comes to the most vulnerable groups in our society. These case studies reinforce that agricultural adaptation (and beyond) succeeds when policies are built with, not on behalf of, vulnerable communities.

Calls to Action

At COP30, we urge Parties and stakeholders to:

1. Embed human rights—universality, equality, and participation—at the core of climate policy.
2. Operationalise the principle of 'just transition' in agriculture and beyond, with safeguards for workers and vulnerable populations via the prioritisation and bolstering of participatory governance and policymaking tools e.g., co-design, participatory budgeting, indigenous knowledge systems, and citizens' assemblies etc.

Trinity College Dublin advances these discussions through interdisciplinary research and student engagement, and we bring this paper to COP30 in the hope of shaping a climate regime

⁴ Balaine, Lorraine et al. (2025). Farm-level behavioural change towards building climate resilience: Insights from a mixed-methods study. *The Climate Change Advisory Council*, Working Paper No. 36. <https://www.climatecouncil.ie/councilpublications/councilworkingpaperseries/Farm-level%20behavioural%20change%20towards%20building%20climate%20resilience%20publication.pdf>

⁵ Dittmer, K.M., Burns, S., Shelton, S., Wollenberg, E. (2022). Principles for socially inclusive digital tools for smallholder farmers: A guide. *Agroecological TRANSITIONS: Inclusive Digital Tools to Enable Climate-informed Agroecological Transitions (ATDT)*. Cali, Colombia: Alliance of Bioversity & CIAT. <https://cgspace.cgiar.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/2b36f44a-47b2-4ba2-88ff-e0e9a69e11ea/content>

that is fairer, and therefore, more legitimate and effective in protecting human rights worldwide.