

Human Rights and Climate Change: A Commonwealth Perspective

The Human Rights Unit has published a discussion paper on human rights and climate change.⁴ It notes that in the debates on climate change, three key paradigms have emerged with regard to people and the environment. The first has as its focus the damage being done to the planet, which includes desertification and the increase in emissions of greenhouse gases. People are regarded as the perpetrators while the planet is the victim. The second paradigm acknowledges that people harm the planet, but also that people themselves are harmed by their results of their activities. It focuses on the impact of climate change on people and on the sustainability of their livelihoods. In the third paradigm the debate has started to focus on rights and responsibilities, particularly the impact of climate change on the adherence to and protection of human rights.

In 2008, Maldives initiated a resolution at the UN Human Rights Council, calling for a study to be conducted on the link between climate change and human rights. The resolution was supported by 79 states, with almost a third being Commonwealth states. The study was discussed at the

⁴ Sen (2009) *Human Rights and Climate Change: An approach that puts people in the forefront of the debate*. London: Commonwealth Secretariat. Available at:

<http://publications.thecommonwealth.org/human-rights-and-climate-change-755-p.aspx>

Human Rights Council in March 2009 and is essentially a compilation of evidence and information on the rights dimensions of climate change.

Key human rights impacted upon by climate change include:

- The right to life – natural disasters resulting from climate change are expected to increase deaths; vulnerable groups such as women and children will be most impacted upon.
- The right to health – it is expected that many people will be affected by increased malnutrition, disease levels and injuries as a result of extreme weather events.
- The right to adequate housing and shelter – rising sea levels, intensified storm patterns and flooding have already caused displacement and will continue to do so.

The human rights lens brings into sharp focus the important principles of voice (those affected by the impact of climate change should be able to relate their experiences); participation (those affected should be involved in a constructive and meaningful way in the decisions and discussions that affect them); and accountability (the decision-makers should be accountable to those who feel the impacts of their decisions).

Climate change and its impact on human rights is a key Commonwealth issue. Of the Commonwealth's 54 member states, 32 are small states, including 25 small island states. Many in the Commonwealth are already feeling the impacts of rising sea levels, contaminated water, depleted marine resources and erosion of shorelines. Small states

are particularly vulnerable to climate change not only due to their size but also their remoteness, isolation, poverty, susceptibility to natural disasters and environmental change, and limited human capacity.

The Commonwealth has committed itself to addressing this issue through the Lake Victoria Commonwealth Climate Change Action Plan 2007 as well as the Trinidad and Tobago Affirmation of Commonwealth Values and Principles 2009. The Commonwealth is well placed to play a role in the following types of interventions: promoting a human rights approach to climate change negotiations; planning for internal and international displacement; and supporting the rights of indigenous peoples. Already the Commonwealth Forum of National Human Rights Institutions (CFNHRI) has identified climate change as an issue requiring action. A Working Group on Climate Change has been established.