



Florida High Schools Model United Nations

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UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAM (UNEP)

Human Rights and Environmental Degradation

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Introduction

The Industrial Revolution marked the beginning of humanity's ever-growing climate change problem. For centuries, people developed technologies—like cars, air conditioning, and the internet—that made human life easier but were harmful to the environment. However, since they could not yet see the negative effects of those developments, they did not create any laws to regulate production and thus limit the harm done to the planet. Only now is society feeling the effects of the last 300 years: Rising temperatures. Melting glaciers. Elevated sea levels. A damaged ozone layer. Increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. While climate change is a huge threat to everyone on Earth, not everyone is affected equally. Developed nations are the primary producers of Greenhouse gasses (GHGs). Still, developing nations are affected by climate change the most because they are more dependent on natural resources and are less able to respond to natural disasters. Since developed nations are not as affected, they are not as focused on solving the problem, but it may be too late once they decide to take action.

Historical Context

In 2012, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) established the Special Rapporteur on human rights in the environment to advise the OHCHR. The relationship between human rights and environmental degradation was long overlooked but began to evolve in 1994 when the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment (separate from the modern OHCHR position) produced a report entitled Human Rights and the Environment: Final Report. The report found that massive environmental degradation prevented the protection of the following human rights:

- The right to self-determination and permanent sovereignty over natural resources
- The right to life
- The right to health
- The right to food
- The right to safe and healthy working conditions
- The right to housing
- The right to information
- Popular Participation
- Freedom of association
- Cultural rights

Since this report, the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment created the Framework Principles on Human Rights and the Environment. This framework includes fifteen principles to be implemented by nations worldwide to ensure that human and environmental rights coexist. The UNEP uses aspects of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) to promote environmental protection and human rights progress.

Deforestation and its effects

Deforestation is one of the world's largest issues today. The Americas, Africa, Eurasia, Brazil, Tanzania, and Indonesia have some of the highest deforestation rates in recent history. The preservation of life on land is Goal 15 of the Sustainable Development Goals and is considered extremely important to the mission of the UNEP. Deforestation has many harmful repercussions. Trees and vegetation work to regulate the water cycle, so without them, less water

is available to be used by living plants. Additionally, the lack of trees can cause soil erosion and flooding.

A significant consequence of deforestation is an increase in carbon emissions. Trees are nature's natural defense against carbon dioxide emissions because, through photosynthesis, they convert greenhouse gasses into oxygen. As fewer trees exist and industrial areas increase in size and population, less oxygen is created to replace the emitted greenhouse gasses. The following are examples of how deforestation has affected regional ecosystems, environments, habitats, and human living situations.

The Amazon Rainforest: "Agro-death"

Most debates about deforestation tend to mention at least the Amazon Rainforest, the world's largest, most biodiverse, most productive forest. It is also "the planet's largest deforestation front."¹ One-fifth of the Amazon Rainforest biome has already been lost to land developers, wildfires, corporations, and governments using the cut-down trees for paper products. With this loss of land, over 8,000 native plant species and 2,300 animal species are now at a high risk of extinction in the near future.²

Unfortunately, Amazonian deforestation harms local communities and biodiversity. Already, some areas of the Amazon have seen rainfall reductions of 48% from previous years³—a reality that is terrifying for the Indigenous and other populations that live in the region and depend on that rainfall for their livelihoods. In less than three decades, the environment will have degraded so much that the big businesses responsible for the deforestation will be forced to leave. Still, they will have already destroyed the ecosystem and countless communities that depend on the biome for their culture, income, and more.⁴

Although the vast majority of the Amazon Rainforest is in Brazil, the biome is within nine different nations' borders. This means that even though Brazil is the main cause of the deforestation, all surrounding countries are also affected. The disturbed rain patterns resulting from deforestation do not occur only in the deforested areas; they occur throughout the whole biome, so hundreds of millions of people will be affected by the destruction of a single biome within the borders of a single nation.⁵ International cooperation is necessary to stop the destruction of the rainforest and thus restore natural patterns in rainfall and the water cycle before it is too late.

Deforestation and its Effects on Women and Girls

As a UN report bluntly states, "the threats of climate change are not gender-neutral."⁶ Because of traditional, male-centered views, women in both developed and developing nations are much more likely to be home caretakers than men. As caretakers, they are often responsible

¹ <https://ballardbrief.byu.edu/issue-briefs/deforestation-in-the-amazon-rainforest>

² Natasha Vizcarra, "UN Science Panel Calls for End to Amazon Deforestation," *#ThinkLandscape* (blog), August 31, 2021, <https://thinklandscape.globallandscapesforum.org/54277/u-n-science-panel-releases-initial-findings-of-upcoming-overview-of-the-amazon/>.

³ Vizcarra, "UN Science Panel Calls for End to Amazon Deforestation."

⁴ Vizcarra, "UN Science Panel Calls for End to Amazon Deforestation."

⁵ Vizcarra, "UN Science Panel Calls for End to Amazon Deforestation."

⁶ UN WomenWatch, "Women, gender equality and climate change," 2010, http://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate_change/.

for cooking and acquiring the materials needed to do so, and these processes increase their exposure to the effects of climate change. Take, for instance, the example of deforestation. In much of the developing world, wood-burning stoves are still primary sources of heat for food preparation and keeping warm. As deforestation occurs and women & girls must travel farther to find this wood, they are not able to spend as much time on other things like education.⁷ Furthermore, burning wood inside a home to produce heat can lead to respiratory and other health issues; women are more at risk of these illnesses because they are the ones who carry out these chores. Strategies like replanting trees to address deforestation and using different sources of fuel for heating and cooking can help minimize multiple problems.

Carbon Emissions and its Effects

The Industrial Revolution was, as its name implies, revolutionary; it sparked extraordinary economic growth and development. However, this progress came at a steep cost to the environment. Burning fossil fuels like coal and oil releases carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere.⁸ These emissions have continuously increased since the Industrial Revolution and have, as a result, significantly damaged Earth's climate. The impacts of manufactured climate change are wide-ranging, disproportionately affecting underprivileged regions.⁹ All industries and nations must work together to save society from a warming world. Greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide (CO₂) are needed for life on Earth because they trap heat in the atmosphere, warming the Earth enough for humans to survive. However, since the Industrial Revolution, human activities, such as driving and producing goods in factories, have pumped out too much of these gasses.¹⁰ CO₂ levels today are the highest in at least 800,000 years. These increased amounts of greenhouse gasses cause extra heat retention, causing global temperatures to rise in the long run. The past five years have been the hottest on modern record.¹¹

Rising temperatures do not affect all regions equally but lead to fundamental changes worldwide. Increased heat melts glaciers and ice caps, which raises sea levels. This is especially dangerous for islands at low altitudes because, if the tide rises enough, they may soon be completely underwater.¹² Currently, sea levels may rise 2-7 feet higher by 2100. This would leave millions of people who live on coastlines homeless and in need of immigrating to another country.¹³ Notably, the countries least responsible for GHG emissions - such as small island states and the Least Developed Countries - tend to be hit hardest by the effects of climate change.¹⁴ To make matters worse, these poorer nations have fewer resources to help them bounce back from environmental disasters, so their ways of life, food security, shelter, and health are all at risk. Drought, changing rainfall patterns, and crop failures also unfairly impact developing nations because their economies rely heavily on farming.¹⁵ The injustices of climate change must be addressed.

⁷ UN WomenWatch, "Fact sheet: women, gender equality and climate change," 2009.

⁸ "Fossil Fuels and Climate Change: The Facts," ClientEarth, December 21, 2023,

⁹ "Fossil Fuels and Climate Change: The Facts," ClientEarth, December 21, 2023,

¹⁰ "FAQ: What Is the Greenhouse Effect?," Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet, n.d.,

¹¹ "FAQ: What Is the Greenhouse Effect?," Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet, n.d.,

¹² "Climate Change: Global Sea Level," NOAA Climate.gov, April 19, 2022,

¹³ "Climate Change: Global Sea Level," NOAA Climate.gov, April 19, 2022,

¹⁴ "Smallest Footprints, Largest Impacts:Least Developed Countries Need a Sustainable Transition," UNCTAD, n.d.,

¹⁵ "Smallest Footprints, Largest Impacts:Least Developed Countries Need a Sustainable Transition," UNCTAD, n.d.,

The diverse impacts of climate change will amplify existing social inequities. Within countries, minorities, children, the elderly, disabled individuals, and outdoor laborers will be most endangered by storms, heat, and changing disease patterns.¹⁶ Food and water insecurity due to droughts and crop failures will increase poverty and conflict globally. Climate change thus threatens human health, livelihoods, and stability, particularly in areas already struggling with resource shortages.¹⁷ All nations must commit to dramatically reducing greenhouse gas emissions, transitioning to renewable energy, setting stricter regulations for production, and improving agricultural practices and land use. In addition to minimizing climate change, they must also help the already affected communities. This can be done through building flood barriers, expanding social services, improving hospitals, and simplifying the migration process for those who need to evacuate their homelands. Success depends on the cooperation and dedication of the international community.

Positively, the Paris Climate Agreement and frameworks like the UN's Sustainable Development Goals demonstrate a growing demand for climate action. Many governments, corporations, and individuals are trying to reduce emissions and prepare their communities for the changing climate. However, what is currently being done is not enough to reach the goals of the Paris Agreement.¹⁸ What we do in the next ten years will make or break our future: if we act now, we may avoid doomsday, but if we do not, we will face the consequences of our irresponsible actions.

Climate Diaspora

Climate change is increasingly recognized as a factor that will increase political instability and spark mass displacement. As global temperatures rise, extreme weather events decrease the availability of resources, especially in vulnerable developing nations, forcing growing numbers of people to migrate in search of habitable environments.¹⁹ However, this climate diaspora—large groups of people obligated to migrate due to climate change—often results in a decrease in the protection of human rights.

Climate change can directly displace people through worsening storms, floods, erosion, and rising sea levels. Rising seas submerge coastal communities and islands, leaving entire populations without homelands. In Bangladesh alone, up to 20 million people may be displaced by encroaching shorelines this century. Storm surges, which occur right after hurricanes and typhoons, reach further inland, resulting in the displacement of even more people.²⁰ Drought also leads to migration because rural families can no longer produce crops on their farms, so they move to cities. Experts estimate that up to 1 billion people could be driven from their homes by 2050 due to climate disruptions alone. The sudden flood of immigrants into new regions can cause overcrowding and tension between the local and migrant populations. Migrants often live in informal settlements that lack proper sanitation, health services, or economic opportunities, making it difficult for them to thrive in their new home.²¹ Tensions may rise between migrants

¹⁶ World Health Organization: WHO, “Climate Change,” October 12, 2023,

¹⁷ *Poverty and Climate Change* (n.d.),

¹⁸ “Climate Plans Remain Insufficient: More Ambitious Action Needed Now,” UNFCCC, n.d.,

¹⁹ World Health Organization: WHO, “Climate Change,” October 12, 2023,

²⁰ Tim McDonnell, “Climate Change Creates a New Migration Crisis for Bangladesh,” *Environment*, May 3, 2021,

²¹ Sarah S. Willen et al., “Flourishing: Migration and Health in Social Context,” *BMJ Global Health* 6, no. Suppl 1 (April 1, 2021): e005108,

and host communities as they compete for limited jobs and resources. Additionally, migrants who are ethnically or religiously different from native populations may clash with local cultural norms.²² Climate migration thus requires international cooperation and support to protect the rights of migrants while stabilizing the communities that receive them.

Conclusion

Human rights are inherently universal, meaning it should not matter someone's nationality or economic status. Unfortunately, the climate crisis is primarily degrading the human rights of those in low economic classes despite being mainly caused by developed nations. The United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) is tasked with leading the world to stop the climate crisis instead of letting it continue to grow. Delegates must understand that climate change's effects on the environment directly relate to global human rights. Permanently repairing these human rights violations requires complete dedication to preserving our climate and working towards repairing the damage already done. While delegates must aim for the final goal of ending climate change, the UNEP should also consider immediate temporary measures to help the people currently suffering from a lack of human rights. Time is of the essence, and the problem is only getting more alarming.

²² Sarah S. Willen et al., "Flourishing: Migration and Health in Social Context," *BMJ Global Health* 6, no. Suppl 1 (April 1, 2021): e005108,

Resource Review

UN Documents

UN Resolution A/RES/76/300 (2021): <https://bit.ly/RES76300>

This groundbreaking resolution recognizes the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a universal and fundamental human right. Delegates can cite it to argue all states have an obligation to protect this right through environmental legislation, protections, and practices. This could be used to support calls for specific national laws and policies to protect human rights as they relate to the environment.

UN Resolution A/RES/61/295 (2007): <https://bit.ly/RES61295>

This declaration outlines the rights of indigenous peoples to sustainably develop, manage, and conserve their ancestral lands, territories, and resources. Delegates can reference this to stress that environmental policies must respect and include indigenous perspectives and land rights. Proposed resolutions should incorporate methods to ensure the representation of indigenous groups in environmental decision-making processes.

UN Resolution E/CN.4/RES/1998/7 (1998): <https://bit.ly/RES19987>

This Aarhus Convention establishes rights around access to environmental information, public participation in decision-making, and access to justice in environmental matters. Delegates can argue this proves the public has a procedural right to be included in environmental issues. Resolutions could contain specific recommendations on how states can uphold these access rights.

UN Resolution A/RES/66/288 (2012): <https://bit.ly/RES66288>

This declaration reaffirms the links between rights to food, safe water, health, housing and development, and sustainability. Delegates can cite this to promote the responsible use of resources, end of poverty, and low-carbon development that helps the poor and protects the planet.

The Amazon We Want: <https://www.theamazonwewant.org/>

This outlines a vision for the future of the Amazon focused on human rights, environmental protections, and sustainable development. It contains key principles like protecting the Amazon's biodiversity, respecting indigenous peoples' rights and leadership, ensuring fair land distribution, and promoting an eco-friendly economy. Resolutions should align with its calls for international cooperation, traditional knowledge, and climate resilience. This initiative provides a valuable model for balancing human needs with environmental protections.

Guiding Questions for Debate

1. What specific human rights are most threatened by issues like climate change, pollution, resource depletion, and loss of biodiversity? How can states better measure and monitor these impacts?
2. How can underprivileged communities whose livelihoods and human rights are unfairly impacted by environmental harm be provided greater representation in global policy-making?
3. What new laws or enforcement processes are needed to balance economic development goals with the protection of human rights and the environment?
4. How can indigenous knowledge be incorporated into environmental policies and agreements to uphold both human rights and ecological preservation?

Guiding Questions For Position Papers

1. What environmental issues pose the greatest threat to human rights within your nation? Consider climate impacts, pollution, resource depletion, etc.
2. What environmental and human rights commitments has your nation ratified? How has it ensured nations follow through on their promises? Consider treaties, agreements, etc.
3. What marginalized groups within your nation are disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation? How are their voices included in policy-making?
4. How does your nation balance development goals with protections of human rights and the environment?
5. Is your nation open to new agreements guaranteeing a universal human right to a clean, healthy environment? What specific requirements would it support or oppose?