

Background Guide

Human Rights Council



Letter from the Executive Board

Greetings Delegates,

We are delighted to serve as the executive board of the Human Rights Council for this edition of SMISMUN in 2026. We are living amidst millions of acres of AI data centres destroying groundwater reserves around the world, time-tested natural wonders like Great Nicobar island being stricken down for urbanisation projects, and business giants completely disregarding local ecologies for profit. This is: a global human rights crisis, unethical, complacent in governments, strategically overlooked in conglomerates, and hence, our agenda. Occupying this chair, you will step into the shoes of leaders who make international regulatory and business decisions, impacting billions.

Our 4 main domains of interest are: Artificial Intelligence, Displacement, Climate Justice, and Quality of Life. We want you to focus on: international, national, and national policy reform; climate integration into human rights policies; human rights-conscious development; climate change adaptation and mitigation-led human rights impacts; climate migration reform; technical support and practical tools for states and organisations; protecting the fundamental rights of affected populations and ensuring fair participation and consultation among other topics you may find interesting.

This background guide is intended to brief you about the agenda and its intricacies, and to help establish a background for your understanding. However, this is in no way a substitute for your own research, and we encourage you to explore and come up with innovative solutions to the agenda amongst yourselves. Good luck!

Mihir Eshan - Chairperson Shravya Rekha - Vice Chairperson Tanvi Kodali - Rapporteur

About UNHRC

1. Mandate, Activities, Functions of the Council

The Human Rights Council is the main intergovernmental body within the United Nations responsible for human rights. Established in 2006 by the General Assembly, it is responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe. The Council, composed of 47 Member States, provides a multilateral forum to address human rights violations and country situations. It responds to human rights emergencies and makes recommendations on how to better implement human rights on the ground. The Council benefits from substantive, technical, and secretariat support from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

The main objective of the UNHRC is to draw attention to human rights issues, discuss them, and give suggestions about how to properly address them; it does not directly implement any resolutions. Resolutions focus on either country specific or thematic human rights issues, and can lead to actions that help address these issues. For example, resolutions can:

- call for investigations
- call for reports by UN offices or officials
- call for panel discussions or events to allow for debate and sharing of ideas
- call for the appointment of independent experts (such as Special Procedures)
- develop norms and standards

The Human Rights Council holds regular and special sessions and organizes intersessional activities throughout the year. The Council meets for at least three regular sessions, for a minimum of 12 weeks per year. Outside of regular sessions, the Council may hold special sessions on demand to address urgent country-specific or thematic issues. In addition to the 47 elected Member States of the Council, Observers participate actively in its various activities. Observers include non-Member States, intergovernmental organizations, national

human rights institutions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The Council also holds special sessions to address emergency situations.

1. International Human Rights Law

International human rights law lays down obligations which States are bound to respect. By becoming parties to international treaties, States assume obligations and duties under international law to respect, to protect and to fulfil human rights. The obligation to respect means that States must refrain from interfering with or curtailing the enjoyment of human rights. The obligation to protect requires States to protect individuals and groups against human rights abuses. The obligation to fulfil means that States must take positive action to facilitate the enjoyment of basic human rights.

Through ratification of international human rights treaties, Governments undertake to put into place domestic measures and legislation compatible with their treaty obligations and duties. Where domestic legal proceedings fail to address human rights abuses, mechanisms and procedures for individual complaints or communications are available at the regional and international levels to help ensure that international human rights standards are indeed respected, implemented, and enforced at the local level.

The foundations of this body of law are the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly in 1945 and 1948, respectively. A series of international human rights treaties and other instruments adopted since 1945 have expanded the body of international human rights law. They include the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), among others.

About the Agenda

1. Climate Change and International Mechanisms

Climate change refers to long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns. Such shifts can be natural, due to changes in the sun's activity or large volcanic eruptions. But since the 1800s, human activities have been the main driver of climate change, primarily due to the burning of fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas.

Burning fossil fuels generates greenhouse gas emissions that act like a blanket wrapped around the Earth, trapping the sun's heat and raising temperatures. The main greenhouse gases that are causing climate change include carbon dioxide and methane. Energy, industry, transport, buildings, agriculture and land use are among the main sectors causing greenhouse gases.

The average temperature of the Earth's surface is now about 1.44°C warmer than it was in the late 1800s-prior to the industrial revolution-and warmer than at any time in the last 100,000 years. The last decade (2015-2024) was the warmest on record, and each of the last four decades has been warmer than any previous decade since 1850.

Climate action is conceptualised in two methods: **Adaptation vs Mitigation**,

1. Reducing emissions of and stabilizing the levels of heat-trapping greenhouse gases in the atmosphere ("mitigation")

- The goal is to avoid significant human interference with Earth's climate, "stabilize greenhouse gas levels in a timeframe sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, ensure that food production is not threatened, and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner"

2. Adapting to climate change ("adaptation").

- The goal is to reduce our risks from the harmful effects of climate change (like sea-level rise, more intense extreme weather events, or food insecurity). It also includes making

the most of any potential beneficial opportunities associated with climate change (for example, longer growing seasons or increased yields in some regions).

The following international mechanisms are at the forefront of governing climate change reform and our future:

1. ***UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC):***

The UNFCCC is a legally binding international treaty which provides a cooperative framework for the nations of the world to protect humanity and our shared planet from the existential threat of climate change. There are currently 198 Parties to the Convention.

The ultimate objective of the Convention is to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations "at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic (human induced) interference with the climate system." It states that "such a level should be achieved within a time-frame sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened, and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner."

1.

Paris Agreement:

The Paris Agreement is a landmark legally binding international treaty on climate change – the first to include nearly all nations on earth in a collective pledge to tackle global heating and its worsening impacts. It was adopted by 195 Parties at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris, France, in December 2015, as a treaty under the UNFCCC framework.

It entered into force in November 2016. When it was first agreed in 2015, it aimed to hold “the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels” and pursue efforts “to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.”

In recent years, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) indicates that permanently crossing the 1.5°C threshold risks unleashing far more severe climate change impacts, this in turn risks much worse human impacts and economic losses, lower living standards and rising global instability.

1.

Conference Of Parties (COP):

COP stands for Conference of Parties, which is an international climate meeting held each year by the United Nations. “Parties” refer to all those countries who are party to the The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Countries take turns hosting an annual meeting at which government representatives report on progress, set intermediate goals, make agreements to share scientific and technological advances of global benefit, and negotiate policy. The 30th UN Climate Change Conference (COP30) was the latest major global climate summit, taking place in Belém, Brazil, in November 2025.

1.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC):

The IPCC is the United Nations body for assessing the science related to climate change. Created in 1988, the objective of the IPCC is to provide governments at all levels with scientific information that they can use to develop climate policies. For the assessment reports, experts volunteer their time as IPCC authors to assess the thousands of scientific papers published each year to provide a comprehensive summary of climate change. Through its assessments, the IPCC identifies the strength of scientific agreement in different areas and indicates where further research is needed. The IPCC does not conduct its own research.

2. Human Rights and Climate Change

Climate change is a human rights issue. All people should have the agency to live life with dignity. However, the climate crisis is causing loss of lives, livelihoods, language, and culture, putting many at risk of food and water shortages, and triggering displacement and conflict. The climate crisis impedes the right to good health as well. Rising temperatures, increased

frequency of extreme weather events, polluted air and water contribute to significant health impacts, including heat stress, disease outbreaks, malnutrition, and trauma from having lived through disasters.

Climate change threatens the effective enjoyment of a range of human rights including those to life, water and sanitation, food, health, housing, self-determination, culture and development. States have a human rights obligation to prevent the foreseeable adverse effects of climate change and ensure that those affected by it, particularly those in vulnerable situations, have access to effective remedies and means of adaptation to enjoy lives of human dignity.

OHCHR aims, in line with the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement on climate change, to promote a human rights-based approach to climate action. This requires that States take ambitious adaptation and mitigation measures that are inclusive and respectful of communities affected by climate change, aiming to achieve this through:

- Collaboration with partners to integrate human rights in environmental laws and policies;
- Support for the inclusion of civil society in environmental decision-making processes, access to information and effective remedies for victims;
- Assisting human rights mechanisms to address environmental issues, including climate change;
- Advocacy on behalf of environmental human rights defenders and supporting efforts by the UN system to protect them;
- Research and advocacy to address human rights harms caused by environmental degradation, particularly to groups in vulnerable situations.

3. Climate Justice

Climate justice is a foremost concept in the field of achieving equitable climate change impacts as well as ensuring appropriate responsibility. It means putting equity and human rights at the core of decision-making and action on climate change.

The concept has been widely used to refer to the unequal historical responsibility that countries and communities bear in relation to the climate crisis. It suggests that the countries, industries, businesses, and people that have become wealthy from emitting large amounts of greenhouse gases have a responsibility to help those affected by climate change, particularly the most vulnerable countries and communities, who often are the ones that have contributed the least to the crisis.

Currently, those who have least contributed to the climate crisis are being disproportionately affected by it. Climate justice suggests that the responsibilities in addressing climate change should be divided according to who is contributing most to the problem, while addressing systemic, socioeconomic, and intergenerational inequalities. The main barriers to achieving climate justice are,

- Lack of transparency and inclusion in climate negotiations and plans
- Lack of access to education and resources on the environment, climate change, and human rights
- Unsafe environment for defenders to come forward and demand justice.
- Need for more financial and technical support from rich countries

4. International Diplomacy

The HRC stresses the importance of addressing human rights in the context of discussions related to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Human rights mechanisms such as the special procedures of the Human Rights Council, the human rights treaty bodies and the Universal Periodic Review are increasingly addressing the human rights impacts of climate change.

The human rights treaty bodies are committees of independent experts that monitor implementation of the core international human rights treaties. The treaty bodies have addressed climate change and human rights in a number of statements, decisions, concluding observations, General Comments and General Recommendations. This body of work provides guidelines for the interpretation and application of State party obligations deriving from the

respective Covenants and Conventions in relation to climate action and constitutes part of the evolving international human rights law framework that is increasingly addressing climate change. Below are some illustrative examples:

- Decision adopted by the Human Rights Committee in the case *Teitiota v. New Zealand* involving a climate refugee from Kiribati seeking asylum in New Zealand
- Joint statement by five treaty bodies in relation to the United Nations Climate Action Summit (2019)
- The Human Rights Committee: General comment No. 36 (2018) on article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, on the right to life.

Case Studies

1. AI, Quality of Life, Development: Data Centres

AI systems, particularly high-computation models, require significant amounts of energy for training and operations and energy resources are already constrained or heavily reliant on fossil fuels. Additionally, water consumption is a key sustainability concern, as cooling AI data centres and infrastructure can strain limited freshwater supplies, particularly in water-scarce island nations.

The life cycle of AI technologies systematically stresses energy supplies and contributes to GHG emissions.

Northern Virginia is one of the largest concentrations of data centers anywhere in the world. This area is often referred to as the “Data Center Alley”, handling an estimated 70% of the world’s internet traffic.

Data centers in Virginia are a major source of air pollution attributable to their round-the-clock energy-intensive operations, a critically strained electric grid, and backup diesel generators. The estimated power use is 5,050 megawatts.

The reliance on fossil fuels, primarily natural gas, which consists of 70–90% methane, contributes to greenhouse gas emissions and air pollutants such as sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide (NO₂), particulate matter (PM), and carbon dioxide (CO₂) exacerbating climate change

and worsening air quality-related health risks. Air pollution has been linked to reduced fertility, lower live birth rates, and increased risks of miscarriage and stillbirths, highlighting significant concerns for female reproductive health.

Collectively, data centers in Northern Virginia consumed nearly 2 billion gallons (7.57 billion liters) of water in 2023, a 63% increase since 2019, underscoring how this new demand compounds longstanding pressures on Virginia's water system. Past studies have shown that energy poverty forces vulnerable families to choose between paying for energy and meeting essential needs such as food, healthcare, and education. Virginia has privacy protections for consumer data, but it does not have a comprehensive data-center law in Virginia that directly addresses quality-of-life impacts for citizens from the proliferation of data centers. This is currently done using a patchwork of environmental and local laws.

More than 190 countries have adopted a series of non-binding recommendations on the ethical use of AI, which covers the environment. Governments are racing to develop national AI strategies but rarely do they take the environment and sustainability into account. The lack of environmental guardrails is no less dangerous than the lack of other AI-related safeguards.

Quality of Life is defined as "An individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns." How quality of life is perceived and how much progress is achieved reflects resources and values, choices and traditions, and the complexities of the economics and politics governing societies. The role of the state remains important in the redistribution of income that can improve the quality of life of the least favoured sectors of the population, even when their own income level is unchanged.

2. Displacement and The Right to Statehood: Tuvalu

Climate change and displacement are increasingly interconnected. As extreme weather events and environmental conditions worsen with global heating, they are contributing to multiple and overlapping crises, threatening human rights, increasing poverty and loss of livelihoods, straining peaceful relations between communities and, ultimately, creating

conditions for further forced displacement. The majority of people forcibly displaced by persecution, conflict and violence today live in countries that are highly vulnerable and ill-prepared to adapt to climate change.

Most refugees and internally displaced people also come from highly climate-vulnerable countries where weather shocks and worsening climatic conditions add to the challenges that make sustained peace and safe return difficult to achieve. Without help to prepare for, withstand, and recover from climate-related shocks and stresses, they also face increased risks of becoming displaced again. Addressing climate change as a root cause of displacement is crucial to breaking this cycle and finding lasting solutions.

Tuvalu is an island nation located between Australia and Hawaii, consisting of nine low-lying coral atolls. They face the highest levels of sea level rise globally, known as a “sinking nation,” with their entire population at risk of displacement and vulnerability of becoming “climate refugees” in the coming decades. This narrative diminishes the agency of Tuvaluan people in their futures, further amplifying calls for just climate action.

As it battles rising sea levels that threaten to put large parts of the island entirely underwater by the end of this century, its citizens are making efforts to safeguard their future while preparing for the worst impacts of climate change. In these small, isolated island communities, many with only a few thousand residents, there are scarce resources available to combat the existential threat that rising sea levels pose. It’s not just about coastal areas disappearing, it’s also the people’s sense of nationhood and also the future existence of these countries are very much under threat. “It’s not just about coastal areas disappearing, it’s also the people’s sense of nationhood and also the future existence of these countries are very much under threat,” an official said. An International Court of Justice ruling in 2025 clarified that loss of its physical territory due to sea-level rise does not automatically result in the loss of its statehood or sovereignty, allowing Tuvalu to remain a nation state with rights over its ocean resources and a seat at the UN, even if its islands are underwater.

The Australia–Tuvalu Falepili Union Treaty is the world’s first and only bilateral agreement on

climate mobility. This treaty, representing a collective security and sovereignty partnership, establishes a first-of-its-kind mobility pathway for Tuvaluans to obtain Australian permanent residency and, ultimately, citizenship. In 2025, more than 90 per cent of Tuvaluans applied for a visa scheme to obtain residency or citizenship in Australia. Just before that, in 2022, the Government of Tuvalu created the first 'digital nation' in the metaverse to preserve its statehood and culture if its physical territory disappears. We need to discuss not only how high emitting countries can take accountability, support climate movement, but also what it means for Tuvalu's future as a potentially landless identity.

3. Development vs Climate Consciousness: Great Nicobar Project

In 2021, NITI Aayog commissioned the Great Nicobar (Island Development) Project to be developed by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation Limited (ANIIDCO). It includes the construction of an International Container Transshipment Port (ICTP) at Galathea Bay, home to hundreds of endemic species.

It has become one of India's most controversial development projects. Although the government argues that the project will strengthen India's strategic position and economic growth, scientists and environmental organisations warn that it could significantly contribute to biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation, and climate change. The project involves the diversion of approximately 130.75 km² of protected tropical rainforest, one of India's most ecologically important regions. This forest acts as a major carbon sink, and its destruction is expected to increase carbon emissions while threatening endangered species such as the leatherback sea turtle and the Nicobar megapode. Construction of a transshipment port, airport, township, and associated infrastructure also poses risks to mangroves, coral reefs, and coastal ecosystems that help protect the island from storms and rising sea levels. It has raised serious concerns regarding human rights, particularly those of the Shompen and Nicobarese Indigenous communities. Critics argue that the approval process did not adequately recognise their rights under the Forest Rights Act, 2006, and that consultation with local communities was insufficient.

The project has also faced legal challenges over the adequacy of its Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), with environmentalists arguing that the long-term ecological consequences were underestimated. As a result, the Great Nicobar Project has become a prominent

example of the tension between economic development and environmental sustainability. here do we draw the line on necessary development and state-sanctioned destruction of fundamental human rights and forced cultural displacement?

Questions a Report must Answer

1. How can we develop and strengthen mechanisms to prevent further environmental harm and human rights violations that would apply to areas where there is high concentration of data centres?
2. Where do we draw the line between economic-technological development and human quality of life, considering often serious resulting human rights violations?
3. How can climate action be aligned with human rights protection, especially for displaced and marginalized communities?
4. What measures should states adopt to safeguard the human rights of displaced persons affected by climate injustice?
5. How can the right to statehood be safeguarded as a human rights issue?
6. How can the international community regard climate mobility-led displacement in its human rights approaches and policy? How can such individuals and communities be protected?
7. How can national human rights mechanisms incorporate nationally determined climate contributions (NDC)?

Important Resources and Instructions

We recognise the following sources of information as credible:

1) News Sources

Reports from state-operated agencies or international news agencies. Examples include Reuters (<https://www.reuters.com/>) and IRNA (Iran) (<http://www.irna.ir/>).

2) Government Reports

Examples include government websites such as the U.S.

State Department (<http://www.state.gov/index.htm>) and the Russian Federation Ministry of Defense (<http://www.eng.mil.ru/en/index.htm>) Reports from ministries of foreign affairs, such as India's (<http://www.mea.gov.in/>) and permanent representatives to the United Nations (<http://www.un.org/en/members>) are also valid. Reports from multilateral organisations like NATO (<http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/index.htm>) are credible.

3) UN Reports

All reports from UN bodies, such as UNSC (<http://www.un.org/Docs/sc>) and UNGA (<http://www.un.org/en/ga/>), are considered credible. Reports from affiliated UN bodies like the World Bank (<http://www.worldbank.org/>) are also valid sources of information.

Note: Absolutely no AI-generated speech or solution content will be allowed. We will be running multiple AI checks, and flagged content will be scrutinised for disciplinary action by the secretariat.

7. Documentation

The final documentation process will be explained to you in detail at the end of day 2 of committee.

Refer to this link to view how a *UNHRC Report* looks:

- <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g25/212/28/pdf/g2521228.pdf>

