

# Research impact: making a difference

## Bringing human rights into international negotiations on climate change

Research into how climate change affects human rights inaugurated a new area of international policymaking and directly influenced climate-change negotiations

### What was the problem?

Climate change poses identifiable threats to a broad range of the most basic human rights: the rights to health and even life; the rights to food, water, shelter and property; and rights associated with livelihood and culture, migration and resettlement, and personal security in the event of conflict.

The people most likely to experience human rights abuses are precisely the populations vulnerable to climate change. These are predominantly people living in poverty, whose access to natural resources is precarious and who experience poor physical infrastructure.

Devising an international regime to deal with climate change also has implications for human rights, especially as a mismatch exists between those nations responsible for causing the most harm in terms of climate change — generally wealthier nations — and those whose populations suffer most from its effects — generally poorer nations.

### What did we do?

When Associate Professor of International Law Stephen Humphreys joined LSE in 2009, he brought a wealth of scholarship and policy activity in the fields of climate change and human rights.

As Research Director for the Geneva-based International Council on Human Rights Policy (ICHRP), Humphreys had mapped the virtually unexplored territory of the way phenomena associated with climate change threaten human rights, and the degree to which the existing international framework for human rights was adequate to the task of anticipating and responding to that threat.

A first report, *Climate Change and Human Rights: A Rough Guide*, was widely circulated for comment in February 2008 and published in June 2008. In 2009, Humphreys published an edited volume with Cambridge University Press, *Human Rights and Climate Change*, which gathered together the report's main conclusions and contributions from other authors, based on their presentations to workshops convened through the ICHRP project.

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## What happened?

Humphreys' report quickly established itself as the leading text in what was then a new field. When evaluating the research in 2010, the UK's Department for International Development (DfID) called it 'a particularly influential piece of work, [which] caught the mood of the moment, was timely and authoritative'.

The report was immediately taken up by the United Nation's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), just then launching its own research into climate change. Mary Robinson, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, called Humphreys' report 'ground-breaking'.

As well as citing Humphreys' research throughout its own report, the OHCHR invited Humphreys as a keynote speaker at a subsequent consultation meeting at the UN headquarters in Geneva and continued to consult him frequently on substantive issues.

The research soon influenced governments around the world, initially through the Government of the Maldives, which introduced a resolution on climate change at the 2009 United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council. The Maldives Minister for Foreign Affairs quoted Humphreys at a press briefing in October 2009, and Humphreys' research directly influenced two resolutions proposed by the Maldives and passed by the UN Human Rights Council.

These resolutions explicitly endorsed a number of themes first highlighted in Humphreys' work and later cited by OHCHR. They set out the links, both direct and indirect, between the effects of climate change and the effective enjoyment of human rights, especially among populations already in vulnerable situations. They also drew attention to how human rights obligations and commitments have the potential to inform and strengthen national and international policymaking in the area of climate change, promoting policy coherence and legitimacy.

The research then fed into the international negotiations on climate change. A separate proposal by the Maldives, highlighting the importance of respecting human rights 'in all climate change related actions', was accepted by the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) held in Cancun in November and December 2010. This marked the first appearance of the concept of human rights in the principal international negotiating text on climate change.

In the words of Marc Limon, then Counsellor of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Maldives to the UN at Geneva, 'I think [Humphreys'] book had a significant impact. Its timing was

'The report Stephen Humphreys prepared...and his subsequent textbook were ground breaking...I believe they had a significant impact on the UN Human Rights Council in adopting Resolutions in this area....

**- Mary Robinson, former President  
of the Republic of Ireland and  
former United Nations  
Commissioner for Human Rights**

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perfect – at a moment when many States just did not believe there was any link between human rights and climate change.’

The World Bank was among several other international policy bodies to embrace the report, feeding it directly into its own *Study on Human Rights and Climate Change: A Review of the International Law* (2011). Humphreys was invited to the Bank to discuss its draft study, and also spoke frequently at international fora on the issues, addressing the UN Human Rights Council (on three occasions), the UN Social Forum, the UNFCCC and the World Bank.

The research was also cited as an influence on other governments. In its evaluation report, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) named the Swedish Foreign Ministry, Finnish Aid and DFID itself as having been 'directly influenced' by it.

DFID further listed a number of international non-governmental organisations who acknowledged the impact of the research, including: Oxfam, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the Center for International Environmental Law, the Stockholm Environmental Institute and the Global Humanitarian Forum.

A number of other international organisations also cited or quoted from Humphreys' research. Among these were UN-Habitat, the Council of Europe, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the UN Commission for Africa, the Foundation for International Law and Development, the Overseas Development Institute, the Carnegie Trust, the International Institute for Sustainable Development, the World Council of Churches and the International Institute for Environment and Development.

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