

CommDH/Speech(2021)11

"Human Rights and Climate Change"

International virtual symposium
convened by the Royal Society of Edinburgh
and the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina

“Climate change, human rights and environmental defenders – what role for the
academia?”

Statement by Dunja Mijatović
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Edinburgh (on-line), 28 October 2021

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Professor Jaspars, Professor Zenner,

Dear Dr Boyd -- dear David,

Dear Friends,

What a pleasure to be with you today.

Environmental degradation and climate change are among the most pressing human rights problems of our time.

This is why I have chosen to make environment and human rights a distinctive priority for my mandate as Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe.

Let me start by saying what a joy it was to finally see the recognition by the Human Rights Council, on 8 October, of the human right to a clean and healthy environment.

I would like to express gratitude and recognition to David for his tireless engagement that laid the ground for this extraordinary achievement.

The link between environment and human right has also been the link connecting our mandates.

We have been [speaking](#) at same events; we have both made [submissions](#) in support of the climate change case brought to the European Court of Human Rights by six young people from Portugal (*Duarte Agostinho*). And we meet again today.

I am grateful for this cooperation and the complementarity of our efforts.

I am also happy to say that last month, also the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a [resolution](#) and a [recommendation](#) which propose to more firmly anchor the right to a healthy environment in our human rights standards.

I very much support this aim and look forward to seeing how this initiative will be followed up.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In a [human rights comment](#) I authored two years ago, I stressed that “environmental degradation and human suffering are flip sides of the same coin”.

This means that those who act to protect the environment and prevent climate change contribute to the protection of our human rights.

But the flip side of their engagement is that it often comes with heavy risks.

In many places in Europe today, environmental defenders are killed, attacked, intimidated, prosecuted and stigmatised, often without any hope for protection or remedy.

Protection of human rights defenders is among the core elements of my mandate.

In December, I convened an online roundtable with environmental defenders and published a [report](#) on the issues, threats, and opportunities related to environmental rights activism and advocacy in Europe.

I have also recently published another human rights [comment](#) on the situation of environmental defenders, with recommendations on how to protect them and to make their work safer.

And, just last week, I [supported](#) the decision of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention to establish a new mandate of independent Special Rapporteur on environmental defenders.

But let me now move from my own work to the main subject of today: **what role do I see for the academia** in this fascinating but trying field?

I can think of six (6) possible lines of action.

1

First, I think that members of the academia have a special role to play in broadening the public understanding of the link between environment, climate change and human rights and in leading the fight against climate change disinformation.

An Advice Paper [published](#) by the Royal Society of Edinburgh in March states that “*effective communication of science and policy*” on climate change is “*an important step in bringing the public on board*”. The paper proposes to use “traditional media and trusted ‘ambassadors’”, like teachers or others with influence in their community, to “*relay climate messaging in a way that resonates with people from across society.*” I think this is a great idea.

2

Second, as recommended by participants of my roundtable with environmental defenders, more research and mapping is necessary on the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation and climate change on minorities and vulnerable groups. The aim here is to try to prevent climate change from reinforcing inequalities.

3

Third, I believe that the strong collective voice of the academia can help protect environmental human rights defenders.

One such example is the [open letter](#) published in April by over 400 academics researching climate and environmental change, who voiced concern about the increasing criminalisation and silencing of environmental activists around the world.

At times, the academic community from around the world come together to protect fellow academics who expose the impact of environmental degradation on our health and human rights - for instance, through launching [petitions](#).

I think that such voices of solidarity carry a lot of weight and are extremely important.

4

Fourth – the voice of the academia is needed to safeguard public participation in environmental protests in the context of restrictions on the freedom of assembly. This is especially important during environmental summits, like the upcoming COP26 in Glasgow. To quote Greta Thunberg, “*change will not come from the COP (...) negotiations. [It] will come when there are enough people outside on the streets demanding change.*” And we learn this from history. If we are not courageous in demanding change, change will not come.

5

Greta inspired a whole generation of environmentalist activists. Nurturing new generations of environmentally aware and active citizens, through education, is a *fifth* area where academics can have a special role – and this is also something that the Council of Europe is [well placed](#) to support.

6

And my last, *sixth* point, is about making sure that the voice of the youngest generation is heard.

I am a firm supporter of promoting young people’s democratic participation. I think academia is one of the best channels to achieve this.

One good example is the RSE Advice Paper that I quoted from earlier, which was prepared with the involvement of the Young Academy of Scotland, a platform of innovative young professionals.

In another example, a paper [published](#) end of last year by young academics from “Die Junge Akademie”, affiliated with Leopoldina, called on academics to lead by example by promoting sustainability through the reduction of travel.

More ways should be found to involve young people in academic work and policy design, in a routine and meaningful manner.

Young people set very high expectations on climate action on all of us. They have a point in insisting that we all keep pace with them.

I wish you very fruitful discussions and once more thank you for giving me an opportunity to speak.