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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Biennial panel discussion of the Human Rights Council on youth and human rights

Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 51/17, in which the Council decided to convene a biennial panel discussion on youth and human rights, to be held during the September session of the Council, starting with its fifty-fourth session. The Council also decided that the theme of the panel discussion for the fifty-fourth session would be young people's engagement with climate change and global environmental decision-making processes.

The Council requested the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to organize the panel discussion following consultations with young people, youth and youth-led organizations and to prepare a summary report on the panel discussion. The present report contains a summary of the panel discussion held on 26 September 2023.



I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 51/17, the Human Rights Council decided to incorporate into its programme of work a biennial panel discussion on youth and human rights, fully accessible to persons with disabilities, to be held during the September session of the Council, starting with its fifty-fourth session. The Council requested the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to organize the panel discussion following consultations with young people, youth and youth-led organizations and to prepare a summary report on the panel discussion for consideration at the subsequent session. The Council also decided that the theme of the panel discussion to be held during the fifty-fourth session would be young people's engagement with climate change and global environmental decision-making processes.

2. The objectives¹ of the panel discussion were to: (a) provide an opportunity to explore the barriers that young people faced when engaging with climate and global environmental decision-making processes, lessons learned and good practices and opportunities for effective, active and meaningful youth participation; (b) explore the clear synergies between global youth rights, including the right to participate, and environmental processes, mechanisms and forums; and (c) set out the ways in which the United Nations Youth Strategy, the Secretary-General's call to action for human rights and Our Common Agenda needed to be leveraged to promote effective, active and meaningful youth participation in environmental forums and in decision-making processes relevant to young people, including the Summit of the Future.

3. The panel discussion was held on 26 September 2023.² It gathered young environmental human rights defenders, non-governmental organizations, representatives of United Nations agencies and funds, Member and observer States and other stakeholders.

4. The panel discussion was chaired by the Vice-President of the Human Rights Council and Permanent Representative of Luxembourg to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva, Marc Bichler. The opening remarks were delivered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, and the Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of El Salvador, Adriana Mira. The four panellists were the Climate Negotiator for Ghana, Communications Officer for EcoCare Ghana and member of the Climate Youth Negotiators Programme, Evelyn Adzovi Addor; the Campaign Director for Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change, Vishal Prasad; the representative of the Global Youth Biodiversity Network and Director of Barranquilla+20, a youth and women-led organization in Colombia, Xiomara Acevedo Navarro; and the Global Focal Point for the children and youth major group to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Zuhair Ahmed Kowshik.

II. Summary of the proceedings

A. Opening remarks

5. Opening the discussion, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights stated that, while the impacts of the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution were already evident, it was young people and future generations who would bear the brunt. He noted that it was also young people who had stepped forward with commitment and creativity to demand immediate and ambitious actions from Governments and businesses in the face of this unprecedented crisis for the planet and for human rights. To confront these challenges, it was vital to learn from young people about their experiences of participating in climate and environmental decision-making processes. The High

¹ The concept note and further details on the panel are available at <https://hrcmeetings.ohchr.org/HRCSessions/RegularSessions/54/Pages/Panel%20discussions.aspx>.

² The video of the panel discussion is available at <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1h/k1hmq3m1h>.

Commissioner emphasized the need for change to ensure that the engagement with young people was meaningful and that their views and recommendations were put into action.

6. The High Commissioner commended the decades of youth activism that had provided the momentum for many of the advances made in protecting the planet, including involvement in international processes on biodiversity and plastics and the push for recognition of the right to a healthy environment. He highlighted today's youth engagement as creative, diverse and inspiring, including the World's Youth for Climate Justice campaign and the climate-related court cases with their roots in human rights principles, led by children and young people.

7. The High Commissioner highlighted the multiple barriers that young people encountered when trying to engage in global climate change and environmental decision-making processes, despite their right to participate under international human rights law. He noted that such barriers extended from practical issues, including financial constraints, a lack of digital connectivity and limited education on the issues, to concerns about safety. Young environmental human rights defenders faced physical and online threats, shrinking civic space and the criminalization of their legitimate activities. Such barriers were multiplied for young people with intersecting forms of discrimination and those in situations of vulnerability, including those with disabilities, Indigenous young people and girls. The High Commissioner pointed out that, even in situations in which youth engagement was possible, it was often not meaningful and it was undermined by limited access, poor information and a lack of government accountability.

8. The High Commissioner noted that his Office had issued guidelines on the effective implementation of the right to participate, which had been shared across youth networks and served as a practical resource for States. He emphasized that youth engagement was central to the Human Rights 75 initiative. He referred to the invaluable insights contributed by the Human Rights 75 Youth Advisory Group to the initiative. He also noted that the Youth Advisory Group was developing a youth declaration, drawing on the views and recommendations that had emerged from the global youth consultation convened by his Office.

9. Referring to the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the High Commissioner urged all States to respond to the voices of young people and to prioritize their participation in climate and environmental processes. He noted that this could happen only by working with urgency to dismantle barriers to meaningful engagement and actively engaging young people as knowledge holders, change-makers and partners in designing solutions. The High Commissioner concluded by stressing that the radical changes needed to protect the planet for future generations could be delivered only by working together.

10. In her statement by video message, the Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs of El Salvador, Adriana Mira, noted that, since June 2019, El Salvador had undergone a national transformation process focused on the well-being of every Salvadoran and prioritizing the creation of more and better opportunities for development. She emphasized that comprehensive development could not be contemplated without considering the impacts of climate change, guaranteeing the protection of the environment and adapting policies to address the challenges. Referring to climate change as one of the most pressing concerns for El Salvador and globally, she emphasized the need to implement actions and to shoulder commitments and shared but differentiated responsibilities. The global challenge posed by climate change did not recognize generational barriers or geographical frontiers.

11. The Vice-Minister highlighted that the world currently had the highest number of young people in history, with 1.8 billion individuals between the ages of 10 and 24 years. She stated that children and young people had been set as a priority for the administration of El Salvador. She referred to the aspirations of young people in El Salvador to preserve the environment for future generations. Reaffirming the urgency of climate change as a challenge facing humanity, she stressed the importance of properly informing and preparing future generations to address the issue.

12. The Vice-Minister noted that, to address the challenges, El Salvador had established the national plan for climate change 2022–2026 aimed at coordinating the response to the

adverse effects of climate change and promoting resilience and a transition to a decarbonized economy. El Salvador had also updated its nationally determined contributions. To ensure the constant evaluation of progress, a system for monitoring and tracking the implementation of climate-related actions had also been defined.

13. The Vice-Minister noted that such efforts directly connected with young people by recognizing their crucial role. The Government had provided young people with the opportunity to serve in high-level positions in various sectors and had involved them in decision-making. Since 2021, the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, in collaboration with the Directorate for Social Fabric Reconstruction, had implemented environmental education and training programmes in urban centres around the country. In addition, the national “zero waste” plan had had a transformative impact across the 14 departments of the country and in more than 50 municipalities. Furthermore, El Salvador had initiated a programme in 2020 aimed at raising awareness and training students in higher education institutions to encourage their participation in environmental management.

14. At the international level, the Vice-Minister highlighted the participation of El Salvador in the Youth Climate Summit held in 2019 at United Nations Headquarters, which had marked the first United Nations summit entirely devoted to young people and their work in climate action. She noted that it was possible to address the present challenges and to ease them for future generations through intergenerational cooperation and by implementing tangible actions. She concluded by reaffirming the commitment of El Salvador to combating climate change and building a sustainable, resilient future for both present and future generations.

B. Presentations by the panellists

15. Ms. Addor stressed that ensuring sustainable development required the rights of young people to be made central in every decision-making process. She highlighted the significant youth population globally and in Africa, where the number of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 years was expected to increase to 830 million by 2050. This was a clear indication that young people were important stakeholders in shaping the world.

16. Ms. Addor noted that, as scientific evidence had confirmed, the evergrowing and unsustainable human demand for resources had instigated a global climate crisis that threatened the future of all humans, especially young people. The adverse impacts of climate change, including extreme weather events, water shortages and the spread of diseases, had had negative consequences on fundamental human rights, including the rights to life, health, self-determination, land, water and food.

17. Ms. Addor highlighted that the impact of climate change on young people was significant and multifaceted. Africa, which had the world’s youngest population, was also the most susceptible to both the physical and psychological effects of climate change. Young people faced increased health risks, including respiratory problems, malnutrition, infectious diseases and death, due to climate change. It also affected their mental well-being, causing anxiety, fear and powerlessness. Furthermore, climate change jeopardized the future of young people by undermining their access to such basic rights as education, clean water and a safe environment. She referred to an example from Ghana, where the education of young people, especially females, was negatively affected by water scarcity, as they were often responsible for collecting water. This had an impact on their education and perpetuated gender inequality. She stressed the importance of recognizing and addressing such impacts to protect the well-being and future of young people in Africa and across the world.

18. Ms. Addor noted that, despite the adverse impacts of climate change on young people, very little space was created for them in decision-making processes relating to environmental governance at the community, national and international levels. Addressing this phenomenon was crucial for finding a sustainable solution to the climate crisis. She stressed that the dreams and aspirations of young people were at stake due to the unsustainable use of natural resources. They deserved to share their perspectives and experiences at the decision-making table to ensure that climate policies and actions were equitable. Moreover, young people brought unique perspectives, knowledge, innovation and skills to climate action.

19. Ms. Addor reflected on the significant progress that had been made both locally and internationally in the effort to include young people in decision-making processes, as demonstrated by the increased number of young negotiators at the twenty-seventh session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. She thanked the Youth Negotiators Academy for bringing young individuals from over 50 countries, including herself, and for training and supporting them to negotiate on behalf of their respective countries. She noted that seeing young negotiators had inspired enthusiasm among the young people of Ghana, leading many to further develop their capacities. Ms. Addor also commended the Environmental Protection Agency of Ghana for supporting and empowering young negotiators to represent the country in various thematic areas during the twenty-seventh session of the Conference of the Parties. She encouraged other countries to provide more opportunities for young people. She also called upon all stakeholders to continue to support the Climate Youth Negotiators Programme and to include more young people from other countries. She highlighted the need for capacity-building, funding and social networking to enable young people to continue to be part of the process.

20. Ms. Addor pointed out that, despite progress in including young people in policymaking, several barriers still prevented meaningful youth participation. She mentioned a lack of climate education as one of the key barriers, in particular in developing countries. This knowledge gap prevented the adoption of climate adaptation and mitigation lifestyles. Another barrier was access to finance to support the development of innovative solutions, especially in Africa. She noted that, according to the African Development Bank Group, African countries together required over \$3 trillion to implement their mitigation and adaptation actions under their nationally determined contributions.

21. Referring to the loss and damage due to climate change in most communities, Ms. Addor noted the severe impacts of climate change, including reduced agricultural yields, drought, loss of livestock, increased rural-urban migration and problems caused by sea level rise. She mentioned the specific example of Keta, a coastal town in Ghana, which was nearly destroyed. Ms. Addor called on OHCHR to take issues of loss and damage seriously. She highlighted the grave injustice that, despite the minor contribution of Africa to global greenhouse emissions, it suffered the most from the impacts of climate change.

22. Ms. Addor concluded by emphasizing that climate change was a human rights issue. She noted that, without safeguarding human rights, enhancing inclusion and listening to young people and their suggested solutions, efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change would have little result. She called for sustained dialogue between OHCHR and young people to address climate-related concerns in order to find mutually beneficial and sustainable solutions.

23. Mr. Prasad drew on his experience as a young Pacific islander to speak about witnessing the devastating impacts of the climate crisis on Pacific Island communities. He added that he had also observed the power and resilience of young people as they fought to protect their homelands, cultures and identities.

24. Mr. Prasad highlighted the youth campaign to seek an advisory opinion on climate change and human rights from the International Court of Justice. In 2019, 27 students from the University of the South Pacific had convened to explore the ways in which international law could address the climate crisis. The proposition was to seek an advisory opinion from the Court on the obligations of States regarding climate change. In March 2023, after four years of campaigning, and with the support of 132 co-sponsoring countries, the General Assembly adopted a resolution by consensus to request an advisory opinion from the Court. Mr. Prasad stated that that had been a significant achievement for a youth-led campaign and a testament to the fact that young people could contribute to meaningful, tangible action that could have a significant impact on the world's future. It had underscored their determination to shape international laws, institutions and systems to make them progressive, powerful and capable.

25. Mr. Prasad noted the numerous barriers that they had had to overcome during the journey of the youth campaign. The first and most significant barrier had been tokenism, with young people not being taken seriously. Mr. Prasad said that young people were seen as symbols or as box-ticking necessities. He referred to numerous scenarios that he had

witnessed where young people's voices had been invited and welcomed, but where their voices had had essentially no impact. Tokenism was not limited to the international space. He stressed that young people needed to be included meaningfully at the country level to ensure that the path forward reflected the values, aspirations and ideas of young people.

26. Mr. Prasad mentioned that young people still faced such logistical challenges as finance, education, training, mentorship and exposure. Drawing on his experience with the advisory opinion campaign, he noted that young people were fluid, adaptable and tenacious in their efforts to find a way forward in the face of challenges. For instance, during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, when it was not possible to travel, they had launched campaigns internationally with the help of young people around the world and had formed World's Youth for Climate Justice as an umbrella youth organization to facilitate the process. He added that the use of social media and digital media tools was becoming mainstream in the work of young people, as traditional platforms remained relatively closed to them.

27. Mr. Prasad emphasized the importance of harnessing the potential of young people by Governments, institutions and systems. He noted that the world would be in a better position to solve its common problems if the uniqueness of young people were realized and their inputs valued. While youth forums and conferences provided safe spaces for young people, it was important that they not be viewed in isolation. Instead, it was necessary to find a way to transform such forums and conferences so that they produced substantial outputs. He highlighted the need to instil credibility and integrity into the world's systems. Noting the growing disillusionment among young people with the existing systems, which they saw as ineffectual, he stressed that accountability, transparency and honesty were key to restoring lost faith in the current systems.

28. Referring to the advisory opinion campaign, Mr. Prasad said that the participants had fought for justice because the existing systems were not working for them. He emphasized the importance of countries ensuring that the voices of young people were heard by the International Court of Justice during the ongoing submission process. Young people's call for justice had launched the campaign, and States should enable them to make their statements before the Court. He noted that the campaign was providing an opportunity to correct past wrongs through the participation of young people and marginalized groups. He concluded by stating that the world was at a crossroads: either genuinely involve young people in shaping it or continue with minimal, meaningless and disconnected youth involvement and a lack of empowerment for young people.

29. Ms. Acevedo Navarro highlighted the 12-year commitment of the Global Youth Biodiversity Network to training and mobilizing young individuals in the fight against biodiversity loss. She pointed out that the crises of biodiversity and climate change were interconnected and rooted in systemic injustice and inequality.

30. Ms. Acevedo Navarro noted that, with the largest young generation ever in the world, there was an unprecedented opportunity to shape global decision-making and alter prevailing approaches, especially in conservation and climate action. However, that potential remained untapped, as Governments, other stakeholders and traditional approaches often overlooked the power of young people. She stated that, despite many youth-led initiatives and organizations, young people's voices, especially from the global South, were absent. Moreover, youth participation in global decision-making had been criticized as "youthwashing" and tokenism.

31. Ms. Acevedo Navarro stressed the importance of adopting intersectionality to bridge the gap between young people's aspirations and their meaningful inclusion in global environmental decision-making. Such inclusion required addressing existing vulnerabilities. She highlighted that young people did not make up a homogeneous or gender-neutral group but rather encompassed a spectrum of gender identities and expressions and ethnicities. Efforts aimed at fostering youth participation had to consider the specific challenges and opportunities for young people in the exercise of their rights, whether they were Indigenous, of African descent, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex, women or girls, farmers, environmental or human rights defenders or rural young people.

32. While acknowledging the progress in recognizing the importance of youth engagement, Ms. Acevedo Navarro stressed that more action was needed, including the provision of funding and resources for youth-led initiatives. She stated that statistics showed that young people received less than 1 per cent of climate grants from the world's largest climate foundations. Furthermore, to facilitate access to decision-making forums, States had to address such practical barriers as visas, Internet access and language obstacles. Economic barriers also presented significant challenges for young people seeking to connect with nature, participate in conservation efforts, attend in-person negotiations and engage in other crucial initiatives.

33. Ms. Acevedo Navarro noted that the youth movement dedicated to biodiversity was actively engaged in translating such global commitments as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, adopted in December 2022, into tangible initiatives on the ground. Such efforts encompassed transformative education, advocacy campaigns, conservation, ecosystem restoration and human rights advocacy. Ms. Acevedo Navarro highlighted the mobilization of the Global Youth Biodiversity Network at the local, regional and national levels. The Network was engaged in the ongoing updating of the national biodiversity strategies and action plans. They were also mobilizing in support of regional strategies to safeguard human rights in environmental democracy, including the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean and the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters. She noted that empowering young people with tools designed by and for them was instrumental for expanding their right to participate. In this vein, the Network had initiated various programmes, including "The Convention on Biological Diversity in a nutshell", a guidebook whose development was led by young people, that enabled active participation in the process of implementing the Convention on Biological Diversity and served as a resource for negotiators. In addition, the Network hosted capacity-building workshops on biodiversity and the Convention on Biological Diversity to foster holistic comprehension of the socioecological crisis.

34. Ms. Acevedo Navarro concluded her remarks by highlighting that genuinely incorporating young people into the process of shaping environmental policies was imperative for combating the decline of ecosystems. She called upon the United Nations and Member States to prioritize the following recommendations: (a) support the full, effective, equitable and inclusive participation of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, women and girls, children and young people and persons with disabilities, especially from the global South; (b) bridge the finance gap for youth-led initiatives and organizations, ensuring their access to funding as it is key for achieving justice and rights; (c) guarantee the human rights, care and protection of environmental defenders; and (d) continuously encourage meaningful participation between young people and decision makers.

35. Mr. Kowshik noted that a lack of uniformity between the civil society engagement mechanisms of different multilateral governance processes had led to a fragmented engagement landscape. The patchwork of mechanisms across various environmental governance bodies often left young people feeling like outliers in the decision-making process. He highlighted the necessity of addressing this challenge by adopting a unified civil society engagement framework, across all multilateral environmental governance processes that recognized constituent groups, including young people, as essential stakeholders.

36. Mr. Kowshik acknowledged that many agreements had been formalized before the imperative need for the active involvement of civil society and young people in decision-making had become apparent. Consequently, no proper mechanism for such engagement had been incorporated into the procedural rules of those agreements. He noted, however, that there had been instances where commendable efforts had been made to enhance meaningful youth participation with regard to environmental conventions. He referred to actions taken by the parties to the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat at the fourteenth session of the Conference of the Parties, where the parties had resolved collectively to encourage Governments and international organizations to include young people in delegations and programme activities. The

dedicated Ramsar Youth Working Group, comprising youth representatives from various regions, had also been established, showing the potential for progress in that domain.

37. Mr. Kowshik noted that another barrier was the lack of capacity-building support and the low level of environmental and human rights education standards. Education was the cornerstone of informed and effective participation, yet current education systems often failed to adequately prepare young people for engagement with environmental and human rights issues. That deficiency stifled their potential. He highlighted the need to invest in comprehensive and accessible environmental and human rights education that equipped young people with the necessary knowledge, skills and tools for engaging meaningfully in multilateral environmental governance processes. Capacity-building programmes tailored to the challenges faced by young people had to be at the forefront of such efforts.

38. The importance of the right of young people to access to decent, green and sustainable jobs was also highlighted by Mr. Kowshik. He noted that empowering young people to actively participate in green industries was both an economic necessity and a human right. They had the right to contribute to the global effort to combat the triple planetary crisis while ensuring their livelihoods. In that context, he emphasized the importance of supporting the Green Jobs for Youth Pact, jointly promoted by UNEP, the International Labour Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

39. Mr. Kowshik emphasized the necessity of promoting youth engagement, both in international agreements and in the decision-making processes that drove their implementation, particularly regarding multilateral financial mechanisms and the interface between science and policy. He stressed the importance of acknowledging the diverse roles of young individuals, from entrepreneurship and scientific inquiry to legal, financial and research expertise. Encouraging their active participation in such influential science-policy platforms as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services and the International Resource Panel was fundamental to ensuring the incorporation of intergenerational perspectives and innovative solutions into scientific assessments. Mr. Kowshik noted that such engagement facilitated the translation of scientific findings into tangible local applications. He highlighted that youth participation in financial mechanisms, including the Global Environment Facility, the Green Climate Fund and the newly established loss and damage fund, held the promise of aligning fund allocations with the enduring interests and necessities of succeeding generations.

40. Mr. Kowshik concluded his remarks by emphasizing that the world was at a pivotal point in the collective journey towards a sustainable future. For overcoming challenges, he stressed the importance of unity and collective action, the commitment to equip young people with resources, education and capacity-building support, the promotion of green, sustainable jobs for young people and the inclusion of young people in political, scientific and financial decision-making processes. He urged the adoption of a youth resolution at the sixth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly of UNEP. He said that the resolution should shed light on the indispensable roles that young individuals assumed in the advancement of environmental multilateralism, recognizing their rights and empowering them within the context of global environmental collaboration. He emphasized that now was the moment for action and change.

C. Interactive discussion

41. During the interactive discussion, the following States and observers made statements: Bahamas, Bahamas (on behalf of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM)), Bahrain, Belgium, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Croatia, El Salvador (on behalf of Côte d'Ivoire), Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Republic of Moldova, Morocco, Philippines, Portugal, Tunisia and Uzbekistan), Finland, Germany, Iraq, Ireland, Italy, Libya (on behalf of the Group of Arab States), Lithuania, Maldives (on behalf of the small island developing States), Malawi, Oman (on behalf of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf), Portugal, Qatar, Samoa, Timor-Leste (on behalf of the Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries),

United Arab Emirates, European Union and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

42. Representatives of the following national human rights institutions and non-governmental organizations made statements: Conseil national des droits de l'homme (Morocco), Istituto Internazionale Maria Ausiliatrice delle Salesiane di Don Bosco, Save the Children International, Stichting Choice for Youth and Sexuality, World Jewish Congress and World Vision International.

43. The following delegations were unable to make statements because of a lack of time: Albania, Angola, Armenia, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Egypt, Gambia, International Jamaica, Malaysia, Morocco, Oman, Paraguay, Philippines, Poland, Romania, Russian Federation, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Thailand, Togo, Tunisia, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United Republic of Tanzania, Vanuatu, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), Organization of la Francophonie, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and UNICEF.³

44. For the same reason, statements by the following national human rights institutions and non-governmental organizations were not delivered: Akshar Foundation, Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women, Beijing Guangming Charity Foundation, Beijing NGO Association for International Exchanges, Chongqing Centre for Equal Social Development, Environment Conservation Organization – Foundation for Afforestation Wild Animals and Nature, International Committee for the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas, Rencontre Africaine pour la défense des droits de l'homme, Sindhi Adhikar Manch and Stichting Global Human Rights Defence.⁴

45. Delegates commended the panellists for their enriching presentations and welcomed the panel discussion as timely. Several delegations highlighted the existential crisis caused by climate change and environmental degradation, emphasizing that young people had a critical role to play in addressing that crisis. Speakers noted that the world was currently home to the largest generation of young people in history and that their voices should be integrated into the decision-making processes that had an impact on their futures. The panel discussion was recognized as an important opportunity for States to understand and confront the barriers to youth participation in environmental dialogues and decision-making processes. Some speakers pointed out that the panel was timely in the light of the recent publication by the Committee on the Rights of the Child of its general comment No. 26 (2023) on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change, in which the Committee emphasized the importance of free, active, meaningful and effective participation by children in environmental decision-making.

46. Several delegates highlighted that climate change had a disproportionate impact on young people. The representative of Maldives, speaking on behalf of the small island developing States, noted that the vulnerability of those countries' children and young people to the effects of climate change was exceptionally high. Delegates reaffirmed that a clean, healthy and sustainable environment was a human right and was also necessary for the full enjoyment by children and young people of a broad range of human rights. The impact of climate change on the enjoyment of other human rights of young people was highlighted by several States and representatives of civil society organizations. The representative of World Vision International noted the impact of climate change on the right to food and the right to education, as many girls and boys dropped out of school due to hunger. It was noted that a significant number of forcibly displaced children and young people lived in areas vulnerable to climate impacts and natural disasters and lacked access to their rights. The representative of Stichting Choice for Youth and Sexuality commented that climate change drove young people into situations in which choices concerning their own body and access to health became a privilege. Child marriage and forced marriage increased in situations of economic

³ Statements received by the secretariat are available at <https://hrcmeetings.ohchr.org/HRCSessions/RegularSessions/54/Pages/Statements.aspx?SessionId=70&MeetingDate=26/09/2023%2000:00:00>.

⁴ Ibid.

difficulty linked to climate change and, during periods of drought, there was a rise in gender-based violence and female genital mutilation. Transformative climate action, which took into account the links between climate change and other rights, should be promoted. The representative of the World Jewish Congress noted that protecting human rights was not only a matter of policy but also a moral imperative, and referred to their contribution to the youth declaration issued in the context of the Human Rights 75 initiative.

47. Many delegates commended young people for the role that they were playing in addressing the global environmental crisis and for their commitment. Young people were recognized as stakeholders in addressing climate change and key partners in achieving a more sustainable future. Some delegates referred to young people as the most-aware population regarding climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss. Speakers recognized that young activists were leading the fight for climate justice and the right to a clean and healthy environment, calling for action and accountability from leaders. Young people were actively demanding that Governments strengthen mitigation and adaptation actions in their public policies. Many young scientists and advocates worldwide were advancing climate-smart technologies and sustainable infrastructure solutions, with benefits across all of the Sustainable Development Goals. Through various initiatives at the national, regional and global levels, young people had generated movements urging Governments to take decisive environmental action. Delegates highlighted several of those movements and initiatives. The representative of Samoa commended the initiative started by students at the University of the South Pacific aimed at seeking an advisory opinion on the issue of climate change at the International Court of Justice. The representative of Belgium noted the youth demonstrations and school strikes in that country and many other countries, which had created necessary political pressure and momentum for the European Union to strengthen its climate ambitions.

48. Delegates recognized that, despite the critical role of young people in addressing climate change, young people faced multiple barriers to the effective exercise of their right to participate in the decision-making processes. The representative of Istituto Internazionale Maria Ausiliatrice, on behalf of a group of non-governmental organizations, pointed out that, even when formal youth participation was ensured, its influence in the decision-making processes was very limited. This generated a distrust of political institutions and diminished motivation and engagement among young people. It was not sufficient to create formal or informal spaces for young people to express their views. Youth participation could constructively change the status quo only if the views of young people were considered when decisions were made. Several speakers further highlighted discrimination, violence, negligence, threats, intimidation and harassment against child and youth environmental human rights defenders as significant challenges. It was recalled that it was the duty of States to make sure that young people were provided with a safe framework for expressing their voices. Some delegates noted financial constraints and a lack of necessary resources and institutional support as being among the barriers to enhancing youth resilience efforts. A lack of environmental and climate change knowledge, along with gaps in environmental education, were also noted as barriers to meaningful participation. The representative of Save the Children emphasized the particular challenge children faced, noting their lack of voting rights and formal political power, which limited their ability to influence governmental decisions. The representative added that, while the rights of young people and children could sometimes overlap, children should not be subsumed under the “youth” terminology, as States had specific obligations relating to children.

49. Delegates shared good practices and contributions that had been made to strengthen effective youth engagement in decision-making, including ensuring youth participation in international decision-making processes and bodies, creating youth councils, integrating youth perspectives into national and international strategies on climate change, establishing educational programmes and encouraging youth-led initiatives. In the context of international decision-making processes, the representative of the United Arab Emirates, host of the twenty-eighth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, highlighted the country’s efforts to centre young people in the fight against climate change. These included the Universities Climate Network, comprising 31 universities and higher education institutions, which was aimed at supporting youth initiatives at the climate conference, and a programme to sponsor 100 young individuals from the least developed countries and the small island developing States to

participate in the climate summit. The representative of the European Union noted that a young delegate would be included in the official delegation of the European Union at the meetings of the twenty-eighth session of the Conference of the Parties.

50. Some delegates highlighted national and regional plans and initiatives to integrate youth views into their countries' policies. The representative of UNDP noted that its Climate Promise programme had supported over 120 countries in enhancing their national climate commitments, with 94 per cent prioritizing young people within those commitments and 60 per cent actively engaging youth groups. The representative of Timor-Leste, speaking on behalf of the Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries, noted that the organization's youth charter included a provision that its members develop mechanisms under domestic law for youth participation in decision-making on matters of public interest. The representative of the Bahamas, speaking on behalf of CARICOM, recognized the year 2023 as the thirtieth anniversary of the CARICOM Youth Ambassador Programme, which had been established to integrate youth perspectives into policy and programmes. The representative of the European Union mentioned the Youth action plan in European Union external action for 2022–2027, adopted by the European Commission as its first policy framework for a strategic partnership with young people around the world.

51. Several countries introduced their national and regional youth councils, in which young people could collectively advance their views, including the National Youth Council of Malawi. The representative of Ireland mentioned its National Youth Assembly on Climate, whose recommendations were being considered for inclusion in the 2024 update to the national climate action plan. Regional platforms were also mentioned. The representative of the Bahamas, speaking on behalf of CARICOM, spoke about the Caribbean Youth Parliament on Climate Justice. The representative of Libya, speaking on behalf of the Group of Arab States, noted the Arab Youth Council for Climate Change. Some speakers, including the representatives of Bolivia (Plurinational State of), the Conseil national des droits de l'homme (Morocco), Croatia and Qatar, shared examples of their educational and training programmes aimed at empowering young people in decision-making on climate change. For instance, Italy, in cooperation with the International Renewable Energy Agency, had launched a training programme for young climate leaders and activists in over 80 countries and developed the "I-Act" toolkit. The representative of Oman, speaking on behalf of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, noted that environmental knowledge had to be included in school programmes. Some delegates highlighted other initiatives, including the representative of Lithuania, where the distribution of funds by youth-led entities at the municipal and local levels provided a model for enabling young activists to have a voice in fund allocation.

52. Delegates reaffirmed their support and commitment to ensuring the effective and meaningful participation of young people in environmental forums and decision-making processes. Calling for ensuring that no young person was left behind in building peaceful, just and inclusive societies, delegates recalled the United Nations Youth Strategy, the Secretary-General's call to action for human rights and Our Common Agenda. It was noted that inclusivity, the empowerment of young voices and communication between generations were key for rebalancing global environmental decision-making. The importance of multilateral cooperation and solidarity was also highlighted. Speaking on behalf of the group of countries sponsoring the resolution of the Human Rights Council on young people and human rights, the representative of El Salvador stated that they would continue to focus their efforts on ensuring the significant and effective participation of all young people as agents for change and development partners in multilateral forums.

53. Participants posed questions to the panellists, including regarding ways to ensure that the young people most affected by climate change were meaningfully included in climate policies and global environmental processes on the global and national levels; actions that young delegates could take to ensure that the views and experiences of young people were taken into account in global environmental decision-making processes; and the most effective strategies, based on empirical evidence, for overcoming the multifaceted barriers that impeded young people's meaningful participation in those processes.

D. Closing remarks by the panellists

54. Ms. Addor, as a young negotiator, referred to the enthusiasm and sense of urgency young people brought to the negotiation room. She stressed the need to build the capacity of more young people to play an active role in climate negotiations. Ms. Addor pointed out the rising activism among African youth, who were demanding action from their Governments and the international corporations responsible for destroying the ecosystem, sometimes to the detriment of their lives. She called for international support for those young advocates, who were at the front line. Ms. Addor recommended that OHCHR identify young individuals interested in promoting human rights and support them to mainstream human rights issues within negotiations in the context of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and around loss and damage, adaptation and action for climate empowerment.

55. Mr. Prasad noted that it was clear from the panel discussion that there was an urgent need to rethink the status quo to effectively address the climate crisis and the human rights crisis. He emphasized the need to accelerate solution-oriented endeavours. He stated that, as the panel discussion showed, there was a clear understanding of the vital role of young people in that process and that it was time to move to implementation. He reiterated his call for the inclusion of young people in the pursuit of climate justice at the International Court of Justice. He urged the audience to participate in the Court's advisory opinion process by making progressive, strong submissions to recognize the threats to human rights and climate change obligations. He underscored the importance of including young people's voices in such submissions and called for a collaborative effort involving all young people and all of society to tackle these multiple crises.

56. Ms. Acevedo Navarro reiterated that young people played a crucial role in mobilizing solutions and bringing new approaches. She noted that understanding and addressing the barriers to participation that young people experienced required leaders to be more inclusive in the climate sector and to challenge business-as-usual approaches. The global goals and those of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the Paris Agreement would not be met without the work, capacities and actions of young people. She concluded her remarks by stating that young people were already empowered. States needed to cultivate new skills and capitalize on intergenerational knowledge and leadership to foster a shared understanding of current and future challenges.

57. Mr. Kowshik stated that, while it was evident from the panel discussion that the importance of youth engagement was recognized, today's conversations would be useful only if they were transformed into action. He noted the disparity between youth involvement at the global level and at the national and regional levels, emphasizing that, while there had been an increase in youth engagement globally in such areas as climate, development and biodiversity, the situation was different at the national and regional levels. He added that, in the global South, engaging with policymakers was difficult, with young people often not encouraged to participate in national policymaking processes. Global environmental instruments, when translated into national action, frequently did not include sufficient consultation with young people. He stressed the need to push for youth engagement at all levels – global, regional, national and local. He highlighted the lack of uniformity in youth participation across different policy processes, providing the example of the negotiations on a treaty addressing plastic pollution, where the adopted rules initially excluded constituent groups, including young people, by providing only observer status without speaking rights. He stressed the importance of ensuring that discussions on human rights extended beyond the Human Rights Council and were included in policy processes at all levels. He reiterated that young people were not the leaders of tomorrow but the leaders of today, acknowledging their skills, passion and motivation. He concluded by affirming the need to keep faith in the power of young people.
