

Venice Statement “Towards a New Era for Human Rights”

25 August 2023

We, the Global Campus of Human Rights and Right Livelihood, convened members of the global human rights community in Venice on July 14 and 14, 2023 for the third annual Conference on the Global State of Human Rights. Our shared aim was to reflect on achievements in the field of human rights and to deliberate on the actions urgently required to address today’s most pressing challenges, developments and human rights violations.

We reflected on the 75 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, the 30 years since the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights and the consensual adoption of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (VDPA) - milestones that created solid normative and institutional frameworks for the promotion and protection of human rights worldwide. While recognising the significant progress made in the past, we are now witnessing deeply disturbing trends of a ‘human rights recession’ and attacks by powerful governments and alliances on the very principle of the indivisibility and universality of human rights, and the multilateral institutions underpinning agreed laws and accountability for violations.

We are gravely concerned that impunity for serious violations of international law will only fuel further crimes, human suffering and destruction of our climate and biodiversity. Justice matters!

Today, we are faced with the urgency of a triple planetary crisis: human-induced climate change, biodiversity loss and environmental pollution destroying our planet and resulting in systemic, grave and widespread violations of the human rights of both present and future generations. Climate rights are human rights, and climate action, as set out in international agreements and law, is not a luxury; it is an obligation, and it is urgent. Those responsible for grave climate, environmental and biodiversity crimes should be held criminally liable and should be forced to change their ways and required to pay for reparations, loss and damage.

Also, there should be no impunity for launching manifestly illegal wars, crimes of aggression, campaigns of atrocity crimes, or brutal purges on dissent, human rights and peaceful activism. Perpetrators and those aiding and abetting violations should face accountability and justice.

Unregulated artificial intelligence (AI) is posing serious new challenges that could threaten human rights, and further exacerbate discrimination, inequality, and injustice. AI is a tool that can bring benefits to the world; however, if unchecked it carries the real risk of amplifying and reproducing existing systems of inequality and discrimination and strongly interfering with human dignity, agency and autonomy.

In light of all these challenges, we will be unwavering in our defence of international human rights law. We stand firmly with the brave activists and rights defenders around the world. Their courage, tenacity and dignity are sources of profound inspiration and serve as rallying calls for global action, solidarity and justice.

With this Venice Statement, we declare our commitment to forge a new era of human rights that affirms the universality of international human rights law as the normative basis for governance at local, national, regional and international levels as well as for national and transnational non-state actors. We will give priority to the enforcement of existing international law, interpreting it in innovative and ambitious ways to advance the protection of rights in relation to today’s urgent challenges. At the same time, we continue to push for the adoption of new laws, regulations and mechanisms to effectively ensure the human rights of present and future generations. We call on members of the global human rights community to use their individual and collective agency to help build momentum for this new era of human rights so that we can rise

to the challenges ahead and build a more equitable, sustainable, just and peaceful future. A future that firmly recognises our joint humanity and is based on the power of the rule of law, as opposed to the rule of the powerful – be they states or corporations. We are aware that these are complex realities to which no one has all the answers. Thus, we should have the humility to work collectively across organisations, regions, communities, with youth and children and all other stakeholders, to arrive at solutions to the crises facing humanity and be guided by a sense of ‘Ubuntu’.

Six core messages stand out from the conference:

1. Now is the time for action.

- a) This is a turning point in the history of humanity and the planet. The triple planetary crisis and unregulated developments in the field of AI require urgent legal and policy action at the national, regional and international levels.
- b) A comprehensive transformation of the global economic and financial system is imperative. It is not only paramount to force divestment from the fossil fuel sector but also to meticulously reallocate these resources toward substantial investments in renewable energy technologies and efforts. Simultaneously, it is imperative to combat the ongoing biodiversity decline, deforestation and the unrelenting pollution of oceans and waterways. Binding regulations and agreements should set out such multidimensional approaches ensuring thorough and holistic efforts in addressing the intricate challenges posed by human rights, climate obligations and ecological equilibrium. To truly anchor such efforts, it is imperative to further advance robust regulatory frameworks mandating human rights and climate due diligence across governments, corporations and financial institutions. Such regulations are critical in holding entities accountable for their actions and driving a collective pursuit of responsible and sustainable practices.
- c) The ‘human rights recession’ is a call for action to advocate for rigorous implementation and new interpretation of existing law, and the adoption of new standards and mechanisms. Inspiration should be taken from new initiatives like the Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations (published in June 2023) and the concept of Earth Trusteeship to inform and rethink modes of governance, responsibilities and justice. These initiatives should be supported, disseminated and applied across regions, professional fields and to all stakeholders.
- d) Action must be rooted in strong local communities, in which a spirit of trust, hope and agency is actively cultivated. The human rights framework provides an entry point; however, the human rights community must open its institutional doors to new voices and find ways of listening and communicating its relevance to the lived experience of everyone.
- e) All states and non-state actors have an obligation under international human rights law to pursue pacific settlement of disputes as set out in the Charter of the United Nations, including referring matters to the International Court of Justice. Armed conflict in the 21st century runs contrary to all achievements of civilisation, endangers the survival of the species and violates the rights of present and future generations. When rebuilding begins after conflict, catastrophes and crises, such reconstruction must be future-proofed and guided by the principles of sustainability and respect for the environment with an innovative vision for a better future.

2. Collective and inclusive action underpinned by strong institutions is required.

- a) Efforts must be focused on strengthening the political constituency of human rights. This can be achieved by increasing human rights literacy across populations which in turn can ensure that advocating for human rights is relevant to state officials and decision makers.
- b) It is important to analyse and reflect on whether current human rights institutions at local, national, regional, and international levels remain fit for purpose in the face of current challenges. If not, how can they be improved? What voices are missing and how can they be included?
- c) The inherent inclusivity of human rights, which emphasises ‘all human rights for all’, needs to be translated into effective and accessible institutions that leave no one behind. A selective application of human rights standards by many governments, alongside persistent corruption erodes trust in and the legitimacy of political office and democratic institutions. To address this and to refute claims that human rights are a ‘luxury’, institutions capable of addressing violations in a credible way need to be nurtured and strengthened.
- d) Children and youth are the living representatives of future generations, and their access to and participation in all discussions is a right and of pivotal importance. We need to take cognisance and inspiration from the actions taken by youth and children across the planet. The world they inherit is a world of our making and our decisions must be shaped by their vision for the future.

3. Education, and particularly human rights education, is a fundamental part of the solution.

- a) Knowledge is the catalyst of change: Human rights education is an indispensable tool for building an equitable future, including in relation to climate change. Educational institutions and networks like the Global Campus of Human Rights are incubators for knowledge, debate and the exchange of ideas that lead to creative solutions to current global challenges.
- b) By educating present and future generations, creating and debating scientific knowledge and serving their local and international communities, public and private academic institutions must realise their social responsibility and be a force for good.
- c) Educational institutions in all contexts should include human rights and complex global challenges, including the climate crisis, as mandatory elements of the curriculum in all disciplines and areas of study. The Global Campus of Human Rights and Right Livelihood are committed to promoting the introduction of basic climate literacy and evolving normative principles such as the Human Rights of Future Generations in curriculums of partner universities and educational institutions worldwide.

4. Human rights communication needs to be reimagined, rearticulated and responsive to a changing world.

- a) Strategic and creative thinking is required to understand the best entry points for dialogue on human rights with actors who remain unconvinced. This applies equally to entry points from a thematic perspective and in terms of the available platforms.
- b) A new playbook for action is required to reimagine human rights communication and creativity should be at the heart of this endeavour. The arts, including music, film, performing arts, as well as literature or sports, can more effectively reach diverse audiences than ordinary reporting and are best placed to deliver new visions for the future and cultivate empathy and compassion for all sentient and non-sentient beings on our planet.
- c) The nature of communication today has drastically changed since 1948 and 1993: one person can now instantly communicate to the whole world with a device small enough for a child to hold. Social media platforms have fundamentally changed how we speak and listen. These platforms have enormous capacity to empower communities but also to foment distrust, falsehoods and hate. For

this reason, independent and traditional news media retain their vital function as guardians of truth in a world increasingly dominated by disinformation and division.

- d) Human rights and the grave impact of climate change are already communicated persuasively by those most affected by and fighting against violations and environmental degradation. The voices, experiences, knowledge and demands from Right Livelihood Laureates, the Sakharov Award and human rights, climate and environmental defenders who devote their lives to the service of their communities should be systematically integrated into policy and law-making debates and efforts at the national, regional and international levels.

5. Global commitment to accountability and justice needs a renewal.

- a) Impunity encourages those who cynically calculate that they can, without facing consequences, deploy grave crimes to solidify their unchecked power, wealth and privileges. We need to constantly improve law and practice to ensure accountability and justice for grave human rights and environmental crimes. We must fight double standards in the application of justice and insist on justice for violations anywhere. Only then can international rules serve as credible tools for the protection of human rights, the environment and climate everywhere.
- b) Dedicated efforts to investigate human rights violations are essential to validate reports. The professional gathering, analysing and safeguarding of evidence of grave violations by independent and impartial bodies and mechanisms is of pivotal importance to ensure accountability and justice, and to address mis- and disinformation.
- c) The International Criminal Court (ICC) is the key international authority on international crimes, and it is the only available court that can prosecute sitting state and government leaders who continue to enjoy undeserved functional immunity from prosecution by national courts. States that have not already done so should move to ratify the ICC's Rome Statute and its amendments including on the crime of aggression. Other regional and country-specific justice mechanisms that can respond swiftly, comprehensively and meaningfully to emerging conflicts and crises should be strengthened.
- d) International legal experts have defined the crime of ecocide as unlawful or wanton acts committed with the knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment being caused by those acts. State parties to the Rome Statute should urgently add ecocide as the fifth international crime that the ICC prosecutes alongside war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and the crime of aggression. States that have not already done so should also amend their criminal laws to include the crime of ecocide.
- e) National and transnational non-state actors should be held fully accountable to international human rights standards in all areas of business, including new technologies and AI. Strong due diligence legislation is key, and the EU's pioneering role in this area should serve as an example for other regions to adopt legally binding human rights and climate justice due diligence regulations.

6. The human rights architecture needs more resources to be effective and timely.

- a) Budgets of international organisations, including regional and international courts, should be defined by their mandates and activities, not by political expediency.
- b) The United Nations should increase the financial resources from the regular budget available to its human rights architecture as the organisation's important third pillar.
- c) The European Union should continue and significantly increase its priority funding to human rights institutions, above all the OHCHR, the ICC and the Global Campus of Human Rights (as explicitly named in the financial instrument).