

“Intergenerational Justice and Human Rights in a Time of Planetary Crises in Africa”

Graça Machel Keynote – October 27, 2023 – Leiden University

Good Morning! It is my pleasure to be here with you all and I would like to thank Professor Doctor Hester Bijl, Rector Magnificus of Leiden University, for her kind invitation to be with you today. I also acknowledge:

- Prof. Janine Ubink - Interim Vice Dean of Leiden Law School - representing the faculty board of Leiden Law School
- Prof. Ann Skelton - Chairperson of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child
- Chairman of the Senate of the Dutch Parliament, His Excellency Jan Anthonie Bruijn
- His Excellency Vusimuzi Madonsela, Ambassador of the Republic South Africa,
- Her Excellency Ms Berta Cossa, Ambassador of the Republic of Mozambique
- Her Excellency Ms Clara Nunos dos Santos, ambassador of the Portuguese Republic and other members of the diplomatic corps
- Prof. Ton Liefwaard, UNICEF Chair in Children’s Rights
- Prof. Jaap Doek - Former chair of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child
- And Dr. Joan Nyanyuki and colleagues from the Africa Child Policy Forum

I must start off with an admission that I do not come bearing the answers to some of the most complex dilemmas of our times. My task here is to shine a light on challenges and raise questions which I hope your bright minds and stellar scholarship might some day soon answer. After all,



academia is the space for exchanges in learning, interrogating paradigms, and generating knowledge to carry humanity forward.

Intergenerational justice, as I understand it, is essentially concerned with the duties and responsibilities that present generations have to past and future generations, and the moral considerations that ought to be considered when actioning these duties and responsibilities.

I will aim to speak briefly to a few threats facing our world— the climate crisis, the nuclear threat, and the scourge of inequality -- and the intergenerational responsibilities incumbent upon us to leave a legacy of longevity, prosperity and vibrancy for generations to come. These planetary crises are challenges that we face collectively as one human family, and must be overcome with the richness of our full diversity.

< Climate Change >

The current climate emergency is a result of the irresponsible models of development and the greedy method in which we have exploited natural resources in our path to industrialization. We have violently destroyed the equilibrium of nature. And in every corner of the globe, she is responding furiously to our aggression. Not one of us is escaping her fury: extreme temperatures, unpredictable weather events, and devastating natural disasters are befalling every corner of the globe with unprecedented severity.

Our generation is failing our youth and generations to come in how we dance with nature, and we must take ownership of this injustice. Thankfully it is not too late to make amends. Humanity has a rapidly closing window to secure a liveable future. The responsibility lies with us to reverse the trend of ignoring the science and have the moral courage to place ‘planet above profit.’ We must take the adequate, bold measures required to contain the destruction we have created, renew what has been destroyed, and provide fertile ground for a much healthier planet. We have less than a decade left to hold the global temperature rise to 1.5°C, and avoid irreversible effects on the planet. We must halve emissions by 2030 and arrest the biodiversity crisis. The climate emergency is unfairly hitting the most vulnerable hardest.

As my colleagues here from the Africa Child Policy Forum will attest, their rich research points to the severe intergenerational impacts of climate change. Children are bearing the brunt of climate change now, and are growing into adulthoods where the impacts of this emergency are on course to becoming even more devastating.

UNICEF has reported that 25 of the 33 countries identified in the Children’s Climate Risk Index as those worst affected by climate change are in sub-Saharan Africa.ⁱ About 490 million children under the age of 18 in these 35 African countries are in the highest risk category for suffering the impact of climate changeⁱⁱ. In light of these alarming statistics, we must move at a much quicker pace to strengthen policy and legislation around climate.

Centering human rights to move from climate *action* to climate *justice* is an imperative of both older and young generations alike to build a more equitable and healthier planet for all. I offer a few examples from Africa--a continent, which we all know bears the disproportionate burden of climate disasters and negative impacts.

There are examples of how National Human Rights Institutions in Africa are using their various mandates to address climate change and human rights issues. One example is an investigation by Kenya's National Commission on Human Rights into rights violations including killings, forced evictions, inadequate compensation for resettlement and the non-recognition of the land rights of indigenous communities within the framework of the Water Towers Protection and Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Programme.

Climate change is not just an environmental and economic issue, it is also a human rights issue. Litigations brought forth by climate activists in addressing questions of fact or law around the causes and effects of climate change is increasing. As of July 2022, there were 14 reported cases in Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, South Africa and the East African Court of Justice (in the latter case, against the governments of Uganda and Tanzania). Nine of the 14 cases hail from South Africaⁱⁱⁱ. Among the reasons for the marked uptick include increasing youth climate activism and international solidarity. The winds of change are blowing from continent to continent, and fertilizing human-rights centered movements of action across borders.

All over the world, child-led climate activism has grown exponentially, providing further impetus to popular demands for climate action and adding a new facet to the debate: intergenerational

justice and equity. Despite their overall exclusion from the political processes that influence climate policy, African children have galvanized around the need for climate action and worked to have their voices heard, sometimes at great cost – whether it is Kenya’s “Super Kids” saving forests, or school children in Nairobi, Cape Town, Kampala, and Lagos walking out of their classrooms in climate protests.

Intergenerational dialogue is increasingly at the heart of our climate efforts in Africa, as are championing the voices of new youth and women climate leaders. Our youth must be equipped from a young age with the knowledge and tools of climate action, and supported by those of us already in positions of influence and authority to lead us into a more sustainable future. We need to take them by the hand and sit them at the decision making tables with us. They are already at the forefront of the response to climate change, and are some of the loudest and most effective voices.

< Nuclear Weapons>

Unfortunately, we have created a world where climate change is not the only threat to our existence and to future of generations to come....

I am part of a group of independent global leaders known as “the Elders”, who were brought together by Nelson Mandela in 2007, to work together for peace, justice, human rights and a sustainable planet. We work on existential threats to humanity that require a collective response - the climate crisis, pandemics, and nuclear weapons. It is the nuclear question which I would like us to register today.

The Elders, in an attempt to carry forward intergenerational justice, and armed with a bit of wisdom that comes with aging, seek a world where current and future generations are free from the threat of nuclear destruction.

It is man's suicidal attraction to the machinery of war which has brought us to the brink of unprecedented destruction. Within the dark cloud of nuclear warfare, sits the potential for uncontrollable conflict, geopolitical instability, long-term environmental and health effects, and societal collapse to rain down on us all. What kind of madness is this? Why do we spend billions of dollars developing technologies to kill ourselves?

The competition for geopolitical supremacy is a dangerous driving force behind this irrational race for nuclear armament. Despite reductions in nuclear stockpiles since the end of the Cold War, it is estimated that almost 13,000 nuclear warheads remain in existence. Experts suggest these numbers are set to rise. Some nuclear states are modernizing or intensifying their capabilities, while some have increased the role of these weapons in their security policies. New technologies, including hypersonic nuclear-capable missiles, Artificial Intelligence, and cyber capabilities, are impacting decision-making by leaders in crisis settings, and increasing the risks of nuclear conflict through accident or miscalculation.

Each of us have a moral obligation to humanity to work in our spheres of influence and contain the nuclear threat. For universities, we look to you to nurture generations of young scholars, future government decision makers, and captains of industry to use their training and talents for the wellbeing of humanity, not its destruction. We encourage young legal minds to serve as front line defenders for our humanity and advocate for the prohibition of nuclear weapons. Civil society and every day citizens—particularly youth and women-- must mobilize around diverse, grassroots movements that are anti-nuclear and influence the nuclear policy community to de-escalate threats. We must shift our mindsets to clearly understand that nuclear weapons are a source of insecurity, not security.

<Inequality>

And speaking of narratives and paradigms which must be shifted, I will close with a brief exploration of inequality as a planetary crisis.

The socio-economic approaches of previous centuries and prior decades are no longer fit for purpose. Overall global economic growth over the past few decades has not translated into widespread positive wellbeing outcomes for us as a human family. COVID uncovered hard truths that the divides of global inequality are deepening and expanding. From most recent World Bank estimates this year, nearly 10% of the world's population, or over 700 million people, are living in extreme poverty and on an income of less than \$2.15 a day.

We are witnessing an upsurge in conflicts and violence the world over, which impacts us all. Extreme inequality is eroding our social cohesion and sowing division within and between

nations. Gross imbalances in access to quality education, healthcare and food security, as well as the horrific violence women face due to gendered power dynamics, are a stain on our moral conscious for which we must all be held to account. The exclusion of marginalized groups from mainstream political, economic and social life is not only an injustice to them, but denies us all the benefits of contributions from the fullness of our human family. Our current social and economic landscapes are insensitive to human rights and respecting the human dignity in us all, and therefore inevitably perpetuate inequalities and sustain poverty.

And this inequality perpetuates itself across generations. Children born into disadvantaged circumstances are often denied the full spectrum of their human rights and face obstacles to success, creating a cycle of disadvantage that persist for decades.

These vicious cycles of inequity are man-made, and must be broken! Without conscious efforts to centre human rights and dignity for all at the core of how we live and operate in society, we risk the perpetuation of unhealthy power imbalances we have lived with for far too long.

To the intellectuals and change agents here at this fine institution of higher learning and beyond, it is our charge to help us figure out how we all close these inequality gaps and redesign our societies into ones of equity, justice, security and prosperity for all. We must not fail in our responsibility to redesign human relationships into one of mutual respect and equity.

As I close this morning, I ask us all to acknowledge that the choices we make today profoundly impact future generations. These generations have the right to inherit a planet that can sustain life, with access to clean air, water, and a stable climate. That is free from the scourge of poverty and the devastation of war and threat of nuclear disaster. Together, we can build a world where the human rights of every child and every person are protected and celebrated. Let us take up this mantle with vigor and passion, and be the champions of change our world so desperately needs.

I thank you.

ⁱ <https://www.unicef.org/reports/climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/africa/climate-change-490-million-children-in-africa-most-vulnerable-76595#:~:text=Published%3A%20Wednesday%2021%20April%202021,a%20child%20rights%20non%2Dprofit.>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://africanchildforum.org/index.php/en/sobipro?sid=281>