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## Human Rights Council

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

### **Written statement\* submitted by Sikh Human Rights Group, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[31 May 2021]

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\* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



## **A Plural Approach to Tackling Climate Change**

We thank the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) whose report, A/HRC/47/46, offers an enlightened analysis into the promotion and protection of the rights of older persons in the context of climate change, including their particular vulnerabilities, such as physical and mental health risks, and their contributions to efforts to address the adverse impacts of climate change.

However, and as highlighted at paragraph 51, meaningful and effective action to address climate change requires the participation of all affected communities and groups, as guaranteed by international human rights law. Therefore, it is essential to respect, protect and fulfil older persons' participation rights, and to create meaningful opportunities for their involvement in climate action, including taking the necessary steps to provide them with relevant climate information and/or to overcome the many barriers to their inclusion. For not only do older persons bring unique and important contributions to climate action but they often support their families and local communities financially and through informal care work, and contribute to decision making and conflict resolution.

Consequently, we would like to highlight the OHCHR's findings at paragraph 52, that older persons possess important knowledge of science, history, tradition and culture that inspire and support actions by current and future generations. They also wield significant voting and economic power that can be mobilized for the implementation and enforcement of effective climate policy. However, Sikh Human Rights Group would like to respectfully remind the international community that modern environmental thinking is not the first time that human beings have thought about their relationship with the environment and other lifeforms. Therefore, we as a global community need to stop assuming that environmental threats have suddenly dawned upon us and/or that humanity has lived in a state of blissful ignorance until the sudden advancement of modern technology, lifestyles and environmental science. In other words, almost all cultures, civilizations and community belief systems have some concepts, rules and taboos that have been passed on through the generations and that can inform us about the human relationship with the environment. This deep understanding, reverence and experience, reflects the consciousness of our evolving place in the environment. For example, through our affiliates Repository of World Views of Nature Project, we can see how all communities and peoples around the world have sophisticated environmental protection concepts that date back to prehistory and that have been carried through time through the transfer of knowledge from generation to generation.

However, what has occurred through the dominance of colonial legacies is that many prominent environmental organisations and agencies marginalize the wisdoms that cultures and community belief systems carry about human relationships with nature and which are embedded and passed on through the generations through traditions, customs, festivals and outlooks. Therefore, in pursuit of imposing a universal rule of law and colonial mentality as a philosophical basis to the political doctrine underpinning our global societies, the dominant culture has displaced and disenfranchised older persons value systems which has served the close coexistence between nature and human societies since the dawn of mankind.

For instance, and as stated at paragraph 54, traditional environmental knowledge has the potential to play a crucial role in mitigating and adapting to climate change. Traditional knowledge is useful in: defining earlier environmental baselines, identifying impacts that need to be mitigated, providing observational evidence for modelling, providing technologies for adapting, and for identifying culturally appropriate values for protection from direct impacts or from impacts of adaption measures themselves. For instance, the aforementioned may include the historical understanding of weather patterns and of the signals that presage coming disasters, methods of reducing the risk of and surviving such disasters, and agriculture and herding methods that create less environmental harm while maintaining production levels. Traditional environmental knowledge can also include a holistic understanding of the natural ecosystems, giving greater visibility to environmental changes and to human responsibility for them. Traditional knowledge that incorporates a

longer time scale can also help to generate adaptability to climate change, by recognising that people are accustomed to living in a shifting environment.

Consequently, older persons are clearly invaluable and underutilised human resources that have largely been ignored by international institutions, State Governments, prominent environmental organisations and agencies and to some extent by civil society. For instance, it is an indisputable fact that many of the most powerful and wealthy persons in the world, including Heads of State and business and community leaders, fall within the older age group. However, and as noted at paragraph 55, this cohort wields enormous resources that can be invaluable when seeking climate solutions and addressing the negative human rights impacts of climate change. Nevertheless, their foremost benefit can be found within their traditional knowledge and years of experience. For instance, retirement has allowed many older persons to become devoted to educating themselves on climate issues and/or to becoming involved in climate action. For not only do they possess the knowledge and skills necessary to purposefully engage and organise young activists but they also possess the ability to utilise their powerful standing within society to amplify the voices of younger people and/or marginalised groups that have often been neglected or ignored.

In conclusion older persons clearly possess enormous amounts of knowledge, experience, skills and resilience that, as the OHCHR themselves conclude, gives them the capacity to be key contributors in global efforts to mitigate and adapt to the negative impacts of climate change. Therefore, cultivating and enabling older persons participation in climate action is not only a human rights imperative, but also a means of ensuring effective solutions for all people and for the planet. However, it is extremely important to note and as mentioned above, it is only when people rediscover the reverence for nature, biodiversity, and other life forms in their own way, through their own customs, beliefs and cultures that the human population as a whole will act with greater passion for the protection of our environment and move away from what is currently found under the prevailing utilitarian, legalistic and rationalistic approach. Nevertheless, older persons are clearly in the unique possession of being able to effect such a change by relying on and/or utilising their generational knowledge and skills. In the Sikh Human Rights Groups opinion State Governments, prominent environmental organisations and agencies and civil society organisations need to focus their attentions on ensuring older persons effective and meaningful participation at every stage of environmental protection policy development.

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