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Signing the Climate Change Deal Is Just the Beginning

Human rights is an essential part of implementing the new climate accord

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The [signing ceremony](#) at the United Nations this week for the [climate deal](#) brokered in Paris last year will be a moment of truth. Already, more than 130 governments, including the United States and China, have promised to be here. But what will really count is whether these governments carry out their commitments at home and how they will protect people who are already in danger of losing their homes, communities, and livelihoods due to the effects of changes in the climate.

The countries that negotiated the global climate deal are all [parties](#) to other international treaties that include binding legal obligations to protect the rights of their people including those who are most vulnerable. But what is special about this climate pact is that it is the [first agreement](#) since nations started meeting about climate change two decades ago that addresses protecting people's rights in addition to addressing the impact on the environment.

A recent [study](#) commissioned by the White House about the impact of climate change on health in the United States makes clear what is at stake. It says that climate change is already contributing to temperature increases, more frequent and severe weather events, degraded air quality, and diseases transmitted through food and water. This study says with a high degree of certainty that the impact of climate change on health can be assessed and predicted for people living in North America. "Every American is vulnerable to the health impacts associated with climate change," the report says.

However, as the report emphasizes, climate change affects people in different countries and within countries very unevenly. Individuals and groups especially vulnerable to the impact on health include those with low income, communities of color, immigrant groups, indigenous peoples, children, pregnant women, older adults, and people with disabilities.

These groups are more likely to live in flood-prone coastal stretches, houses with older or poorly maintained infrastructure, or regions with a high degree of air pollution. They are also more likely to suffer from chronic medical conditions, making them more vulnerable to the effects of climate change. The study also points out that socioeconomic and educational factors such as language skills and access to transportation, health care, and education affect people's ability to prepare for, respond to, and cope with climate-related health risks. Access to health care in particular is still spotty in many US states.

Research last year by Human Rights Watch in a remote region of [Kenya](#) where climate change and other environmental impacts have already greatly reduced the water supply found that people were getting sick for lack of water for drinking and hygiene and going

hungry because they could no longer make their living by herding livestock. The urgent needs of the people there make clear the importance of addressing the human impact of climate change now and not some time in the future.

The global agreement on climate change explicitly addresses some of these issues, saying that countries should “respect, promote and consider” human rights including the right to the highest obtainable standard of health. And it focuses on the rights of those who are disproportionately affected, citing indigenous peoples, women, migrants, children, and those in vulnerable situations.

Calling on governments to respect rights does not ensure that they will. But environmental activists, human rights organizations, women’s rights leaders, indigenous peoples, and environmental groups will work to hold governments to these commitments.

For the governments attending the UN ceremony, this is not the end of the process but the beginning. Much needs to be done—and urgently. These governments will not only need to work with one other, but also with the people in affected communities to find solutions to emerging problems. It’s crucial that they recognize that this will only be possible by fully respecting their rights.

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[1] <http://newsroom.unfccc.int/paris-agreement/april-22-paris-agreement-signing-ceremony-in-new-york/>

[2] <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/eng/109r01.pdf>

[3] <http://indicators.ohchr.org/>

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