

Report on a United Nations Panel Event on :

**Climate Change, the Extractive Industry and Human Dignity:
Ethical Perspectives**

25th September 2017

Palais des Nations, United Nations, Geneva



Panelists:

- ✚ **Ms. Athena Peralta**, Programme Executive for Economic and Ecological Justice, World Council of Churches
- ✚ **Sr. Jayanti Kirpalani**, Director, Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU) of United Kingdom
- ✚ **Mr. Benjamin Schalter**, Human Rights Officer, Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights
- ✚ **Ms. Beverly Longid**, International Indigenous Peoples Movement for Self-Determination and Liberation

Moderator:

- **Mr. Budi Tjahjono**, Deputy Director of Advocacy/Asia Pacific Coordinator, Franciscans International

Mr Tjahjono welcomed the Panel and the audience to the meeting, explaining that the Panel would cover many aspects of how mining has impacted people, including issues to do with the Rights of The Child, Migration, and Spiritual and Ethical perspectives. He asked Sister

Jayanti Kirpalani to start the meeting with her views on current international discussions and on the role of spirituality in the context of Climate Change.



Sr. Jayanti Kirpalani described some of her personal experiences in recent years and how she has seen a shift in perspectives. At the COP in Warsaw, the Philippine negotiator, Yeb Sano stayed silent at the opening, all his family in the Philippines was where storms were raging. Suddenly theory turned to reality for everyone as one man decided to fast for the climate, a spiritual practice which gave him solace. Upon the COP 21, in Paris, the interfaith delegates gathered in a cathedral near to where terrorist attacks had recently taken place. The coming together of people of different faiths in such a way at such a time was very powerful.

A shift is apparent as faith-based organisations are now much more a part of the UN international scene, taking part in panels, conferences and debate. They have a special and unique impact for, whilst science and research informs people, Faiths, speaking from the heart reach people more profoundly and can bring about massive change.

Sister Jayanti spoke about recent catastrophic storms in the Caribbean – hurricanes Irma and Maria – and how, though there is always a hurricane season there, observers are reporting an increase in intensity of the storms. The losses have been devastating – financial and personal. Where is human dignity when all is lost in this way? – all sense of identity connected to country, home, possessions, family and other relationships? Her answer is that dignity resides within the inner being. We are all aware of the external world but those who are aware of their inner world and their values feel empowered which gives them hope that they can recreate a life from the ruins around them. There are treasures carried in the human spirit which give an inner capacity and resilience to face disaster. This is the role of faith in relation to human dignity in the face of Climate Change.

Ms. Athena Peralta spoke at length about the effects of the extractive industry on the environment and human rights, giving concrete examples of abuses in Burma, India, Malawi, the Philippines and Papua New Guinea. Rights abuses are ‘rampant’, she said, affecting

people's social, economic, political, civil and cultural rights and indigenous peoples often pay the highest price.

As well as decades-old practices there is also now 'neo-extractivism' where emerging economies are becoming huge consumers of mineral products as well as producers. There has also been a relaxation of regulations in some countries as they attract lucrative mining companies at the expense of the environment and individuals, especially rural communities. The extractive sector, - oil, gas, coal and mineral mining - is an important contributor to greenhouse gas emissions and hence Climate Change.

Ms Peralta then gave country examples of human rights abuses, not only by the extractive industry but also by governments acting in collusion with corporations.

In Burma the Yadana natural gas pipeline is a joint project between Chevron, Total, a Thai energy company and the Burmese government. It is alleged that soldiers guarding the pipeline murdered two dissidents and forced others to do 'back-breaking work' to keep the gas exports flowing smoothly. India has been increasing its coal output leading to more greenhouse gas emissions. 70% of the coal is located in the Adivasi community's area. Amnesty International states that Adivasi communities have had to wait decades for the compensation and rehabilitation which they were promised, and the violation of their right to consultation and consent has had a significant impact on their lives and livelihoods. Other examples were given of industry abuses of human rights in Malawi, the Philippines and Papua New Guinea.

Ms Peralta concluded that Climate Change can be viewed in the wider context of how we invest, distribute and consume products and the human rights impact should be kept in sight. Fossil fuel extraction can be blocked on the grounds of human rights in appropriate cases and where rights are affected governments should involve all stakeholders, protect their rights and replace their losses.

Ms. Beverly Longid gave a personal testimony of her upbringing in the Philippines where 70% of the mining there takes place on indigenous peoples' land. In her home area there has been a mining industry since colonisation. Now the river of her youth has dried up due to the industry's practices, and land downstream can no longer be cultivated as there is either a water shortage or the water is polluted and toxic. The people have also experienced the sinking of land from mining operations and numerous mining accidents. The environment is highly militarised by government armies and mining industry private security forces. The law gives longstanding and established mining companies priority over people's rights which were only enshrined in law in 1997. She asserted that indigenous peoples are not against development or mining so long as it is beneficial to all and does not involve the loss of land and life. Indigenous peoples can share their knowledge on how to preserve and protect the land for sustainable development.

Mr. Benjamin Schalter thanked those who had organised the meeting and for his invitation to speak, stating his appreciation for the way in which many faith-based organisations empower people to be the stewards of our planet. All people should live a life of human dignity and Climate Change robs them of their rights, disproportionately in many cases e.g. indigenous peoples, women and girls.

Speaking about the business of the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, Mr Schalter told the meeting of a report from a special rapporteur drawing attention to the way in which the extractive industry is allegedly concealing research and science detrimental to the industry, raising troubling ethical concerns. There is active investigation of these cover-ups ongoing in the USA.

He also drew the meeting's attention to the way in which court cases against the industry or governments are becoming more prevalent, becoming an important way in which people can protect their rights and ecosystems.

The Human Rights Council has been mandated to particularly address the effects of Climate Change on the rights of children and migrants and has passed resolutions to protect these most vulnerable individuals. The Council has called upon States to comply with their obligations in this area. In fact in some cases children themselves are suing governments and industry which is a critically important and inspiring new move, showing how the young can protect and be advocates for their environment.

States' measures to address Climate Change should also include migration. Climate Change itself causes displacement but measures to combat Climate Change can also have a harmful impact and likewise lead to enforced displacement.

The effects of Climate Change are not going to get better so we have to respond better. He invited attendees to a special UN panel on the subject on 6th October at 10H until 13H.

He concluded by saying that the problems surrounding Climate Change can seem overwhelming and one can feel that one has no control. However, renewable energy technology is advancing, and we have greater capacity to hold industry and government to account. What works is showing that Climate Change is about people, not just economics.

Sister Jayanti thanked the panel for adding to her knowledge of the big picture and led the meeting in a group mediation to end the session.

