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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.

[24 May 2025]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



A Pluralist Approach to the Human Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment

Sikh Human Rights Group welcomes the recent advances in the recognition of the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, a right now enshrined in the corpus of fundamental rights necessary for human dignity. This right is indispensable for the enjoyment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, and its protection is a prerequisite for the achievement of sustainable development goals.

The global environmental crisis - marked by climate change, loss of biodiversity, soil degradation and air and water pollution - is having a profound effect on people's living conditions, exacerbating social, economic and health inequalities. Against this backdrop, the assertion of the right to a healthy environment appears to be a major normative response, but also a call to rethink the relationship between human societies and nature.

While the universalism of human rights provides a common frame of reference, it is important to recognise that conceptions of nature, human responsibility and sustainability are neither homogeneous nor universal. A pluralist approach makes it possible to integrate the diversity of ethical, spiritual and cultural systems that, throughout the world, shape people's relationships with their environment. Indigenous knowledge, spiritual traditions, customary norms and local practices express a variety of conceptions of the interdependence between human beings and nature. These traditions, often handed down from generation to generation, bear witness to the ecological wisdom accumulated over the centuries. They provide essential tools for understanding and preserving ecosystems, regulating the use of natural resources and maintaining social and environmental balance.

All too often, the dominant models of environmental governance have sidelined local knowledge and practices in favour of utilitarian, technocratic and legalistic approaches shaped by essentially Western perspectives. Yet local and indigenous communities are forcefully demonstrating that sustainability cannot be reduced to a normative or legal framework. It is also rooted in day-to-day practices, deep symbolic links with the territory and collective commitments that forge the social and ecological fabric. Recognising and integrating these dimensions is essential if we are to build environmental policies that are fair, inclusive and truly sustainable.

Indigenous peoples, local communities, women, young people and the elderly play a central role in responding to environmental challenges. Their knowledge and experience do not simply complement public policies: they are the basis of their legitimacy, effectiveness and sustainability. Ensuring their full, fair and effective participation in the decisions that affect their lives and territories is an inescapable responsibility of governments, in line with international commitments on human rights and environmental governance. Women, in particular, play a central role in the management of natural resources and in the transmission of environmental knowledge within families and communities. Young people contribute creativity, innovation and social mobilisation, while older people pass on ecological knowledge that is rooted in the collective memory. Fully recognising these contributions and giving them a central place in the development of public policies is essential if we are to build strategies that are inclusive, fair and genuinely effective in the face of environmental challenges.

Concrete examples illustrate the relevance of a pluralist approach. In Norway, the institutionalised consultation of the Sami people makes it possible to reconcile economic development with the protection of traditional ways of life. In Finland, the creation of the Youth Group for the Agenda 2030 provides a platform for participation by the younger generations, helping to integrate their concerns into sustainable governance. Initiatives such as these demonstrate that the inclusion of diverse voices strengthens collective capacities to respond to ecological crises.

The pluralist approach also helps to challenge the purely instrumental view of nature as a reservoir of exploitable resources. It promotes recognition of the intrinsic value of ecosystems, a vision shared by many indigenous cosmologies that see humans as an integral part of a living network.

This perspective commits us to thinking of the environment not just in terms of human interests, but also as a wider moral community, in which humans have duties towards other forms of life.

Since the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, the issue of ethical diversity has played an increasingly important role in international debates. UNESCO's publication of *Universalism and Ethical Values for the Environment* highlighted the importance of reconciling universal aspirations with cultural roots. National and local experiences show that the most sustainable environmental responses are often those that draw on the cultural, moral and spiritual resources specific to each society. Recognition of ethical pluralism does not mean relativising the fundamental principles of human rights. It means recognising that there are many paths to environmental justice, and that these involve listening to, respecting and integrating the voices, knowledge and experiences of all communities. In this sense, the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is not just a material right; it also has cultural, identity and spiritual dimensions, which are essential to the achievement of global ecological justice.

Building a sustainable future means preserving both biological and cultural diversity. Ecosystems and cultures are intimately linked, and their mutual destruction fuels a spiral of vulnerability. Asserting the right to a healthy environment also means defending the diversity of ways of inhabiting the world and coexisting with living things.

Sikh Human Rights Group reaffirms the importance of recognising and valuing the diversity of ethical approaches in implementing the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. This recognition is a fundamental lever for strengthening the resilience of societies, promoting social peace and encouraging the emergence of solutions adapted to local contexts.
