



Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič, Permanent Observer of the Holy See
to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva
at the 40th Session of the Human Rights Council
Item 3 – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Issue of Human Rights Obligations Relating to the
Enjoyment of a Safe, Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment

Geneva, 4 March 2019

Mr. President,

The Delegation of the Holy See takes note of the report, which focuses on one of the vital preconditions for the enjoyment of other human rights, in particular the right to life and the right to health, including the necessity of having clean air to breathe. As recently estimated by the World Health Organization, globally around 4.2 million premature deaths are linked to ambient air pollution that can lead to heart disease, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung cancer, and acute respiratory infections in children. More than 90 per cent of the world's population, over 6 billion people, lives in regions that exceed WHO guidelines for healthy ambient air quality.¹

Climate change and air pollution are closely interlinked because emissions of air pollutants and climate-altering greenhouse gases and other pollutants arise largely from humanity's use of fossil fuels and biomass fuels, which leads to increased risks of extreme events that affect the social and environmental determinants of health – clean air, safe drinking water, sufficient food and secure shelter. Since the human family depends on biodiversity for survival, we cannot continue to look at nature as something separate from ourselves. The scientific data at our disposal clearly shows the urgent need for swift action, within a context of ethics, equity, responsibility and social justice.

While climate change and air pollution strike down the rich and poor alike, there is a growing evidence of its “disproportionate impact on poor people and poor communities”². Poverty causes people to rely on polluting energy sources for their basic needs, and poverty increases the health risks associated with their use. Thus, a proper ecological approach *always* includes a social approach. For the construction of the present and future of our planet, the international community is called to sincere and productive dialogue by integrating questions of justice in debates on the environment. We are all conscious of the

¹ WHO, Air Pollution and Child Health: Prescribing Clean Air, 2018 available at: https://www.who.int/ceh/publications/Advance-copy-Oct24_18150_Air-Pollution-and-Child-Health-merged-compressed.pdf?ua=1 (last consultation 19 February 2019) .

²Report of the Special Rapporteur on on the Issue of Human Rights Obligations Relating to the Enjoyment of a Safe, Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment, A/HRC/40/55, para. 35.

need to find a solution, which has “an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature”.³

The right to a healthy environment, at the national and the international levels, provides a compelling basis for a global recognition of the right to a healthy and sustainable environment.⁴ Such a common legal approach would give us a solid basis for implementing preventable measure against air pollution and for entailing large investments “to planning a sustainable and diversified agriculture, developing renewable and less polluting forms of energy, encouraging a more efficient use of energy, promoting a better management of marine and forest resources”.⁵

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman,

The transition to a reduction of hazardous air pollutants, including the short-lived climate pollutants is a challenge not only within the domain of technology, but also to public health. The quality of our air is vital with a growing body of evidence strengthening the argument for reducing concentrations of air pollutants. Poor air quality is a contributor to a wide range of adverse effects, affecting people throughout the course of their lives.

The Holy See will continue its engagement in working together for the care of our common home. Thus, my Delegation pledges the necessity “to stop thinking in terms of ‘interventions’ to save the environment in favour of policies developed and debated by all interested parties.”⁶ Air pollution is a preventable problem for which we already have some legal and technical instruments. What is needed is our engagement to move from decision and solemn commitment to action. “The effects of the present imbalance can only be reduced by our decisive action, here and now. We need to reflect on our accountability before those who will have to endure the dire consequences”.⁷

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

³ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si*, n.139.

⁴ Report of the Special Rapporteur on on the Issue of Human Rights Obligations Relating to the Enjoyment of a Safe, Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment, A/HRC/40/55.

⁵ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si*, n.164.

⁶ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si*, n. 183.

⁷ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si*, n.161.