

**Statement by Ms. Kehkashan Basu, Green Hope Foundation,
to the Panel Discussion on Climate Change and the rights of the child**

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Good morning everybody.

My name is Kehkashan – I am 16 years old. I am the Founder President of youth sustainability organisation Green Hope Foundation and the Youth Ambassador of World Future Council. It is an honour for me to be here and I am deeply privileged to have this opportunity of contributing to this forum as a voice of future generations. I was born in the year of the new millennium, the same year when the global fraternity adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – eight targets ranging from poverty eradication, environmental sustainability to building global partnerships that were supposed to transform our world and set it on the road to sustainability. In that historic summit sixteen years ago, civil society and policy makers committed to “spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty” and urged decision makers to “put people and their needs at the forefront of policy making”. But the reality is that every year since then, human suffering, in particular those of children has continued to plumb new depths and the gap between the haves and have nots widened even further. The debilitating impacts of climate change have added a new, unpredictable dimension to the challenge that the world is grappling with now. We are running the most dangerous experiment in history right now, which is to see how much carbon dioxide the atmosphere can handle before there is an environmental meltdown. Why do we keep ignoring climate change as a myth? It is the harshest reality of our times, yet we continue to underestimate or even trivialise its importance. Polar icecaps are melting, sea levels are rising, typhoons and hurricanes are wreaking havoc, forest fires are choking our skies and fossil fuel driven economies are turning our cities into veritable gas chambers. This escalating environmental degradation has given rise to a new phenomena – “climate refugees”. Millions are forced to migrate from their homes and countries devastated by floods, droughts and rising sea levels as a consequence of climate change and a large portion of these migrants are, unfortunately, children. Changing climate impacts our right to life, to health, access to education, to food and shelter, and in the case of migration from disaster zones, we suffer as a consequence of being uprooted from a stable setup to one that is fraught with uncertainty and exploitation.

As per statistics released by the World Health Organisation, climate change is contributing to the burden of disease and it is estimated to be directly responsible for approximately 2.4% of worldwide diarrhea and 6% of malaria cases with children under the age of 5 representing 80% of malaria deaths. Nearly 5000 children die every day from diarrhea alone. The plight of girls is even worse as we have to fight against an additional dimension – that of gender discrimination. In many societies, girls are still dispensable and in the face of disasters brought about by climate change, we, girls often find ourselves at the fag end of the value chain, being exploited and trafficked as if our dignity was expendable.

This must change and this is why young people like me are speaking out and demanding the right to live with dignity, because we are the citizens of tomorrow --- but we will not live to see tomorrow if our

today is not taken care of. Environmental apathy must be done away with. We, children, have a leadership role to play and mould the future the way we want it. This belief led me to establish Green Hope in 2012 on my return from Rio+20, to provide young people a platform to come together and take actions on mitigating climate change and define their own destiny. What started as an initiative by a 12 year old has now grown into a multi-regional organization with a management team comprising of children only and 1000+ active volunteers across several countries fighting for climate justice, protecting our biodiversity , stopping land degradation , promoting sustainable consumption and fighting for gender equality. I have realized that a lack of awareness amongst civil society is the greatest hurdle towards achieving a sustainable future. To combat this , we conduct “environment academies” which are tailor-made workshops and conferences conducted “by youth – for youth” and the success has been tremendous since peer to peer communication is always more effective. Through our academies, we have created effective partnerships not just within civil society but also with government utility bodies and corporates. We have negligible funding but that has not deterred us in our outreach and capacity building. Adults no longer look at us dismissively but take our actions very seriously and in many cases allow us to lead. I believe that all children are capable of what I am doing – all they need is an opportunity.

I am delighted that a child has been invited to speak today and assert our rights. This really augurs well for us and I am confident that, not too far in the future, we will be a majority while deciding our future. If there is one battle that we must win, it is the one against climate change because it is the greatest threat to our survival. I believe in it and will not wait while others are still trying to make up their minds and despite the odds we will win - because as Nelson Mandela once said *“It always seems impossible, until it is done.”*

Thank You .