Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here today to talk to you about climate justice and human rights in Scotland. I would like to start with a disclaimer – I am here as a substitute for my colleague, Dr Diego Quiroz, who is really the expert on this topic! I am a mere pretender – but I will do my best to do justice to my organisation’s work in this area.

The Scottish Human Rights Commission is an independent body, established by an Act of the Scottish Parliament, to promote and protect human rights in Scotland. We are also accredited by the UN as a National Human Rights Institution and we play an active part of the network of similar institutions across Europe, throughout the Commonwealth and across the United Nations family. We act as a bridge – both as a bridge between the international human rights system and Scotland’s domestic protection of human rights, and as a bridge between civil society in Scotland and the legal and policy framework for human rights in Scotland.

The Commission has been operational since 2008. In the past six years, we have

* run a major project to build confidence and skills about human rights among people using and providing social care services
* developed support for public sector bodies to help them fulfil their duties to protect human rights, including an impact assessment tool and training package
* carried out a research project into human rights issues at the State Hospital
* carried out extensive research and analysis, with widespread consultation with stakeholders across all parts of Scottish society, into the main gaps and concerns when it comes to making human rights a reality in Scotland today
* developed and, last December, launched Scotland’s first National Action Plan for Human Rights – SNAP – and I’ll talk more about that later.

So that’s who we are and some of what we’ve done.

But what about climate justice? Why am I here talking to you today?

Well, for the Commission – as for many others – climate justice is all about human rights. As the Mary Robinson Foundation puts it,

“Climate justice links human rights and development to achieve a human-centred approach, safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable and sharing the burdens and benefits of climate change and its resolution equitably and fairly.”

To put it another way, climate justice recognizes and makes explicit the human face of climate change – in many cases, the human cost. As important and profound as the impact on the natural world may be – loss of species, loss of habitats, bleached coral reefs, shrinking polar ice and more – there are also big impacts on people. And, crucially, these impacts are not being and will not be felt equally unless we take a human rights based approach to dealing with the challenge of climate change.

As the UN Development Programme warned in 2008,

“Climate change is the defining human development challenge of the 21st century. Failure to respond to that challenge will stall and then reverse international efforts to reduce poverty. The poorest countries and most vulnerable citizens will suffer the earliest and most damaging setbacks, even though they have contributed least to the problem.”

Some examples of human rights that are particularly affected by the impact of climate change:

* The right to life – threatened by climate-related disasters and the particular vulnerability of particular communities to them – for example, poor communities subsisting in coastal villages who are particularly likely to be affected by flooding and changed weather patterns.
* The right to adequate food – hunger and famine continue to affect people in a disproportionate and unequal way. Changing weather patterns, subsequent food shortages and threats to established agriculture and fishing, all contribute to this.
* The right to the highest attainable standard of health, adequate housing, safe drinking water and sanitation – all threatened by flooding, drought, famine, civil unrest caused by food and fuel insecurity.

That’s the academic and policy backdrop – and I’m sure that’s more than familiar to many, if not all, of you.

So what about Scotland? What role have we played in contributing to international efforts to recognise and address climate justice issues? And what needs to happen next?

In late 2008 and early 2009, the Commission ran a widespread consultation on our first Strategic Plan. Protecting and promoting human rights is a huge agenda. This exercise was designed to help us prioritise the issues that we should focus our limited resources on. Climate change and its impact on people was identified as one of those, with stakeholders recognising and articulating the relationship between it and human rights that I’ve just outlined.

Then, in November 2009, and building on the coming into law of the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009, the Commission held a major conference in Glasgow, exploring the links between climate change and human rights. This brought civil society organisations and the Scottish Government together to explore the opportunities and benefits to be gained from seeing climate change through a human rights lens. It led to a joint communique between the Commission, the Scottish Government and civil society representatives that committed us to working together to exploring a human rights based approach to climate change.

In 2011, the First Minister visited China and as part of his preparation for that, we met with him to brief him on climate justice and the human rights impact of climate change. This perspective was then reflected in public comments that he, and the Scottish Government, began to make about Scotland’s responsibility as a global citizen and the need to address climate change from a climate justice perspective.

In 2012, the Scottish Parliament became what we think is the first legislative body in the world to explicitly recognize and support the concept of climate justice. In a motion that received cross-party support, the Parliament stated:

“The Scottish Parliament strongly endorses the opportunity for Scotland to champion climate justice, which places human rights at the heart of global development, ensuring a fair distribution of responsibilities and welcomes the Scottish Government’s commitment to ensuring respect for human rights and action to eradicate poverty and inequality, which are at the heart of Scotland’s action to combat climate change both at home and internationally.”

In a briefing to Parliament in advance of a debate on climate change, the Commission urged the Government and Parliament to take a series of actions to ensure that the principles of climate justice were implemented in policy, including developing integrated impact assessments, working with the international community to design responses to climate change using a human rights-based approach and organising an international conference to support momentum towards successful international collaboration on the issues.

Later in 2012, the Scottish Government launched its first £3 million Climate Justice Fund to support the development of water adaptation projects in four African countries - Malawi, Rwanda, Tanzania and Zambia.

In 2013, an international conference was held at Dynamic Earth in Edinburgh, bringing together senior civil servants from around the world to explore lessons learned, emerging good practice and opportunities to address climate change challenges from a climate justice perspective. Finally, at the end of last year, a second Climate Justice Fund was launched with an explicit focus on investing in human rights-based approaches to empowering and involving people in communities affected by climate change in developing adaptation and mitigation strategies. At the same time, the Scottish Government reaffirmed its commitment to championing climate justice at home and abroad, as part of its partnership with the Commission to implement Scotland’s first National Action Plan for Human Rights – known as SNAP.

So, what next? For the Commission, there are three immediate priorities. We will continue to raise awareness of human rights based approaches to climate change – this is a key part of our general work to promote human rights in Scotland and there is more that we can, and will do, both domestically and through our international role, to promote this conceptual framework, working with rights holders – those affected by climate change – and duty bearers – states and public bodies with responsibilities and decision-making powers – to ensure that people and the impact of climate change on them, are at the centre of discussions about Scotland’s role and actions on this over the coming years.

We also Chair the Working Group on Climate Change and Human Rights, which is part of the Commonwealth Forum of National Human Rights Institutions, and which is an important mechanism for sharing good practice with our counterparts around the world, and for feeding in experience from other countries to our own work in Scotland.

Finally, and most importantly, Scotland’s National Action Plan for Human Rights is now gearing up in terms of implementation and this, for us, is the vehicle through which we will keep working with Government and civil society, to agree and then deliver practical actions to deliver on the stated commitments to ensuring climate justice. A Human Rights Action Group on achieving a Better World, co-convened by us, Amnesty UK and the Scottish Government, is focusing on what needs to happen next on climate justice and we’ll be sharing more information about this as the Action Group firms up its action plan and timetable for commitments over the summer.

We would really welcome any interest anyone in this room has in being part of helping to deliver and shape the next stages of our work on climate justice, through being involved in our Better World Action Group or in SNAP more broadly. Please do get in touch or talk to me later about that, if you’re interested.

I hope that’s been helpful as a very brief canter through the history of the development of a climate justice approach in Scotland and a very brief outline of where we’ve got to and where we need to go next. We’re delighted to be here today and l’m looking forward to hearing what everyone else has to say this afternoon. I hope this can be a next step in helping to make climate justice a reality both internationally and here, at home, in Scotland.