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Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration

Testimony by Ms Sunemia Pranita Biswasi (India)

Catholic-Lutheran Joint Commemoration of the Reformation

31 October 2016, Malmö, Sweden

Tackling the injustice of climate change

My name is Sunemia Pranita Biswasi. I am 26 years old. I come from the small town of Jeypore in India's southeastern State of Odisha.

The majority of India's population of nearly 1.3 billion people lives below the poverty line. It is a country of contrasts—extremely wealthy people and a fast growing middle class, living alongside millions struggling for one daily meal.

We regularly face relentless disasters due to changing weather patterns. Severe storms and cyclones lead to flooding, and prolonged dry weather brings deadly heat waves and droughts. Hundreds of millions of small-scale farmers who depend on agriculture as their main livelihood are severely affected.

I have a Master's in Environmental Science but before then I knew very little about climate and the environment. From my studies I learned how climate change is amplifying extreme weather events and how global warming is continuing. In 2013 I saw my people drowning in flood waters, this was super cyclone Phailin, which caused major devastation in my own province. Thousands were rendered homeless and lost their livestock, food and shelter. Then, in December 2015, flooding again killed more than 500 people and displaced over 1.8 million others in cities in southern India. Damages and losses were estimated at between Indian rupees 200 billion to over 1 trillion, making it the costliest natural disaster.

I realized the injustice that the poorest people were facing, and I became involved in advocating for climate justice. Today, my work as a youth leader in the Jeypore Evangelical Lutheran Church involves raising awareness, trainings and climate projects with other youth on ecological and social justice issues.

In India, climate change directly impacts a farmer family, and especially the women. When drought and flooding reduce or wipe out crops, many farmers, mostly men, commit suicide out of the despair of not being able to provide for their families and repay huge loans they had taken to boost productivity. Left behind, the wife struggles to pay the debt and feed the children. In addition, many of the rural homes lack basic services with most women walking long distances to fetch water and firewood. Climate justice is also a question of gender justice.

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In the past few years I have had the privilege of being a member of The Lutheran World Federation all-youth delegation to the United Nations climate conferences in different capitals of the world. We advocate at global level because as people of faith, we have been given responsibility to care for creation and securing it for future generations. For the LWF and its members, climate change is a question of stewardship and intergenerational solidarity.

In December 2015, I witnessed the negotiations that produced the historic Paris agreement. My hope since has not been disappointed, the threshold for the Paris Agreement was achieved earlier this month, and it will come into force this Friday, on 4 November. Thanks be to God!

Today, I, a young Indian woman, stand before you—Lutheran, Catholic, and other church leaders—who have had enormous influence as advocates for millions around the world who are victims of the reality of climate change. Despite important steps in the negotiations, there remains a significant gap between where we are today and where we need to be by the end of this decisive decade. The poorest and most vulnerable who have contributed least to the causes of the problem are already experiencing the impact of climate change. This is the injustice at the core of the problem: that those least responsible are the worst affected. It's the women, the children and young people.

I urge you to increase pressure on the world's political leaders to push for recognition of the legal rights to sustainable livelihoods for millions of vulnerable people being left on the wayside by climate change in India and other parts of the world. You have the power and responsibility to guarantee a well planned future for my generation and generations to come.

We cannot change the climate but we can change the system, so let us all work together to make a one better world for all.

Thank you.

31 October 2016
Malmö, Sweden