

**Speech given by Katrina Bullock to representatives from over 22 countries at the launch of the Youth Climate Justice Handbook in the Hague on 20 June 2023.**

Katrina Bullock<sup>1</sup>

Hi, I'm Katrina Bullock and I'm the General Counsel of Greenpeace Australia Pacific. I have had the great pleasure of supporting the inspiring work of PISFCC and the alliance with this campaign over the last few years. I am here because I live in Sydney, Australia.

**Three years ago**, I sat choking on the thick black smog that filled my lungs and smothered my city. The Black Summer Bushfires were raging. [Pregnant women](#) were ordered indoors for fear of the impact the smoke inhalation would have on their unborn babies. 3 billion [animals](#) died or were displaced. 34 [people](#) perished. Thousands were left [homeless](#).

Yet, I was one of the **lucky ones**.

**Two years ago**, I was scuba diving and found myself mourning the colorful underwater world that I fell in love with as a child. That world was no longer there. This magical and mysterious world, full of life, beneath the waves that had enchanted me growing up was lifeless. The coral was now bleached bone white as far as the eye could see. The reef I was diving in had suffered one of many severe mass [bleaching events](#) at the hands of climate change. These events destroy entire ecosystems and affect the local community's food source.

Yet, I was one of the **lucky ones**.

**One year ago**, I was with my mum as she was rushed into the emergency room of a [broken hospital](#) in Lismore, Australia. Windows were boarded up, makeshift nurse stations had been assembled, and entire wings had been ravaged. This was just after the Lismore floods. Many of my family and friends in the area were stranded. Some were trapped in buildings with no way out as the floodwater rose around them. In one week, an entire town and its heritage, its economy and its future was [decimated](#) for generations to come.

Yet, I was one of the **lucky ones**.

**Then earlier this year**, I sat helplessly in Australia messaging with a dear colleague based in Vanuatu. Shiva was ankle deep in water, with his back pressed against the door. He stayed that way for entire night, in pitch darkness, to stop it from blowing off. One of his neighbors, an elderly woman, was huddled behind him. She had already lost her door to the severe winds and torrential rain. Shiva watched as the house across from his lost its roof. He was caught in twin cyclones. Cyclones which wiped out around [40%](#) of Vanuatu's GDP in a week. Cyclones which

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<sup>1</sup> Katrina is an award-winning lawyer and the General Counsel of Greenpeace Australia Pacific. She has been working with Greenpeace's Pacific Climate Justice Team to help secure a strong advisory opinion on human rights and climate change from the International Court of Justice. Katrina began her career as a commercial lawyer at a top tier Australian law firm. She has been admitted to the Supreme Court of New South Wales and the High Court of Australia. She holds a Bachelor of Laws (Honours first class, division one) and a Bachelor of International Business (Distinction).

left [thousands](#) without homes or clean, safe drinking water, which destroyed medical centers and crops.

Yet, I was one of the **lucky ones**.

I'm not sharing these memories of climate change-related events to elicit your sympathy. I'm from a developed country. I know that, in each of these scenarios, I was afforded a great deal of privilege and safety and luck that others were not. So, I share this with you not to elicit your sympathy, but to remind you that, if you are in this room, **you are also one of the lucky ones**.

You are here. You have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to help mold international law in a way that can protect the human rights of people, in the face of the climate crisis. Protect the right to life, health, food, clean water, a safe environment, an adequate standard of living for individuals and communities across the world. This opportunity is invaluable. It will not come again in your lifetime. To the diplomats and members of country missions in this room, whether you have already realized it or not — this will be one of the defining moments of your career.

One day when you're old and grey, lying on your deathbed, hopefully having lived a full and happy life, surrounded by your family and friends, you will want to look into the eyes of your children and grandchildren, and know that you did everything in your power to create a safe and healthy world for them. That starts here. Because while you and I may be one of the **lucky ones**, **future generations won't be**. It won't matter where they live.

We all know the science. We know that, even if we fulfil the current national climate commitments, we will see warming of around [2.6 degrees within the century](#).<sup>2</sup> The climate crisis is a human rights crisis. Every part of an extra degree of global warming results in the denial of human rights to millions of people.

We are all in this together. No one country can solve the climate crisis. We must work to get every nation onboard. The Advisory Opinion request to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) is a powerful tool. It can help create a baseline for what every country must do to protect human rights in the face of the climate crisis. Country delegates, the youth of the world are beg you to be ambitious and to set a baseline that protects their future. Over [1,500](#) civil society organizations around the world are willing to back you if you take an ambitious stance. And you have incredibly helpful [materials](#) to assist you in your submissions to the ICJ — thanks to Edgardo, Maria, and the team.

This campaign for an ICJ Advisory Opinion may have been born in a classroom in the Pacific by those who are affected first and worst by climate change, but it has now grown from grassroots to global because an Advisory Opinion from the world's highest court has the power to achieve three things. First, to cement the consensus on climate change science in a way we have never seen before. Second, to increase ambition under international instruments, such as the

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations Environment Programme (2022). Emissions Gap Report 2022: The Closing Window – Climate crisis calls for rapid transformation of societies. Nairobi. <https://www.unep.org/emissions-gap-report-2022>. The report tells us that if countries achieved their unconditional NDCs, it would give the world a 66% chance of limiting warming to about 2.6 degrees Celsius by 2100 (page 36, Table 4.5).

Paris Agreement. Third, to breathe new life into multilateral negotiations and international cooperation on combatting climate change.

An Advisory Opinion in and of itself may not be binding, but the legal principles stated in the Advisory Opinion often are. The clarification that the Court can provide on how the law should be interpreted will be cited as persuasive precedents in legal proceedings around the world. Thus, the Advisory Opinion will guide local, regional, and international adjudications and domestic law-making bodies.

So, with all of this in mind — what is the role of civil society during this next phase of the ICJ campaign?

Over the next few months, you will see civil society organizations working hard to get this handbook of progressive legal arguments into the hands of governments around the world.

You will see civil society organizations apply for leave from the ICJ to make their own submissions or team up with international organizations and States to assist them in making progressive submissions to the ICJ. You will see us mobilizing your constituents to apply pressure on you to be bold.

You will see us center the voices of Pasifika, of youth and impacted communities around the world, to remind you what we are fighting for and what is coming. We will be watching.

We will bring together and hold space for legal experts and academics to author pieces which will assist the Court in its deliberations.

During the submission process, we will be celebrating countries that make bold submissions and calling out those who don't. We will be at the oral hearings and in The Hague watching and amplifying the work you do and the pivotal decisions you make.

...Because the protection of human rights should **never rely on luck**.