**44th session of the Human Rights Council  
Annual Day on the Rights of the Child:   
Realizing the rights of the child through a healthy environment**

**Statement by Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights**

**1 July 2020**

Madam President,  
Excellencies,

Today’s panel discussions give us a key opportunity to discuss realizing the rights of the child through a healthy environment – including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Council has before it, report A/HRC/43/30 prepared by my Office on this topic.

The survival, health, well-being and development of children depends on an environment that is safe, clean, healthy and sustainable.

Around the world, 93 percent of children currently live in environments where air pollution exceeds World Health Organization guidelines. WHO estimates that every year, the deaths of 1.7 million children under the age of five are due to environmental factors – notably air and water pollution and exposure to toxic substances. Twelve million children in developing countries experience permanent brain damage due to lead poisoning; and approximately 73 million children worldwide work in hazardous conditions, where they are regularly exposed to toxic substances that cause brain damage and disease.

Environmental harms severely affect the youngest children. Indigenous children and those from low-income and marginalized communities are also among those most affected. Many of the effects of environmental degradation on children and their rights are completely preventable. And today they are being compounded by COVID-19.

Over-exploitation of our environment increases the risk of infectious diseases like COVID-19 jumping from animal to human hosts. The pandemic is a very powerful example of the threat to human well-being that results from environmental damage. It intersects with other forms of environmental degradation, such as air pollution, which exacerbates people’s vulnerability to severe health outcomes when they are exposed to COVID-19. Although many children do escape the worst health outcomes from this virus, they are heavily burdened by the multiple socio-economic impacts and child protection risks the pandemic generates.

Our response to COVID-19 must focus on effective, child rights-based measures that protect and benefit those in most vulnerable situations, while advancing efforts to fulfil human rights and achieve the 2030 Agenda.

Our response to climate change and other forms of environmental degradation must focus on the needs and rights of the people most affected by these harms.

We need to build back better, and more sustainably, from this crisis. Our COVID-19 responses must be internationally coordinated, cooperative, evidence-based, child-centred – and they must integrate strong action to prevent biodiversity loss, childhood exposure to pollution and toxic wastes, and environmental harm.

It is time for global recognition of the human right to a healthy environment – recognition that can lead to stronger policies, at all levels, to protect our planet and our children.

The right to a healthy environment is grounded in measures to ensure a safe and stable climate; a toxic-free environment; clean air and water; and safe and nutritious food. It encompasses the right to an education with respect for nature; to participation; to information; and to access to justice.

Children’s specific vulnerabilities impose a heightened duty on States to make sustained efforts to protect children from harm guided by the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: non-discrimination, right to life, survival and development, best interests of the child and the right to participate.

Businesses, too, have a responsibility to protect the rights of the child, including the right to a healthy environment, in their activities and operations.

In recent years, many children and young people have joined and strengthened the worldwide struggle for protection of the environment and realisation of climate justice. I am very glad that we will be able to hear from some of these young environmental human rights defenders today.

My Office will continue to support children’s right to express their views and to have those views taken into account.

We will continue to advocate and assist governments around the world to take action to address the effects of environmental harm on the rights of the child, and ensure that no child is left behind.

We will strengthen our work to ensure that business actors adopt human rights standards, including on children's rights, throughout their operations.

And we will continue to work for a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment – one in which all children everywhere, both now and in the future, will be able to thrive and grow.

Thank you.