

HRC40 | Council unanimously recognises vital role of environmental human rights defenders

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The Human Rights Council has adopted a strong consensus resolution recognising the critical role of environmental human rights defenders in protecting vital ecosystems, addressing climate change, attaining the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and ensuring that no-one is left behind.



The [resolution](#) meets many of the civil society demands [ISHR expressed in a joint letter along with more than 180 groups](#). By formally acknowledging the important role of environmental human rights defenders, the Council highlights the legitimacy of their work, helps counter stigmatisation and can contribute to expanding their operating space.

Though the resolution falls short in some key areas, its adoption by consensus is a positive step towards better protection of environmental human rights defenders. It must now be followed by implementation at the national level by all relevant stakeholders, including States, UN agencies, businesses and development finance institutions.

'We all want to breathe clean air, drink safe water, and to be able to provide sustenance and a healthy, dignified life for our families. Human survival and well-being rest on a biodiverse and healthy environment and a safe climate', said Salma El Hosseiny, Human Rights Council Advocate at the International Service for Human Rights.

'Environmental human rights defenders help us to achieve just that. Through this resolution, the Council recognises and celebrates their work. It will hopefully lead to more breathing space for defenders, and therefore for us all,' El Hosseiny said.

While the resolution needs to be translated from the paper adopted in Geneva to real action on the ground, this is the first time that the world's top human rights body has explicitly and with one voice called for the protection of environmental human rights defenders. It can be used by civil society as a lever to push for concrete action.

The resolution was led and presented by Norway, on behalf of 60 States from all regions. In particular, many Latin American States strongly supported the resolution, which is significant given the dangerous situation for defenders in many of those countries. The consensus on the protection of environmental human rights defenders is a welcome sign of unity by the international community in recognising their vital contribution to a biodiverse and healthy environment, to peace and security, and to human rights.

'We now look to States, business enterprises and development finance institutions to take rapid and decisive steps to address the global crisis facing environmental human rights defenders', said Michael Ineichen, Programme Director at the International Service for Human Rights.

'This means States need to create protection mechanisms which guarantee the security of defenders. States must also ensure that businesses put in place specific policies and processes allowing for the inclusion of human rights defenders and their concerns in due diligence processes', Ineichen said.

Key points of the [resolution](#):

- Expresses alarm at increasing violations against environmental defenders, including killings, gender-based violence, threats, harassment, intimidation, smear campaigns, criminalisation, judicial harassment, forced eviction and displacement. It acknowledges that violations are also committed against defenders' families, communities, associates and lawyers;
- Recognises that the protection of human rights defenders can only be achieved through an approach which promotes and celebrates their work. It also calls for root causes of violations to be addressed by

- strengthening democratic institutions, combating impunity and reducing economic inequalities;
- Pays particular attention to women human rights defenders, by stressing the intersectional nature of violations and abuses against them and against indigenous peoples, children, persons belonging to minorities, and rural and marginalised communities;
 - Urges States to adopt laws guaranteeing the protection of defenders, put in place holistic protection measures for and in consultation with defenders, and ensure investigation and accountability for threats and attacks against environmental human rights defenders; and
 - Calls on businesses to carry out human rights due diligence and to hold meaningful and inclusive consultations with defenders, potentially affected groups and other relevant stakeholders.

While the resolution was adopted by consensus, the unity came at the price of a lack of specificity in certain areas. For instance, the resolution does not clearly recognise all of the root causes of the insecurity facing environmental human rights defenders, as documented by UN experts, nor comprehensively name the perpetrators or the most dangerous industries. It also fails to clearly spell out the human rights obligations of development finance institutions, and to detail the corresponding necessary steps to consult, respect and protect the work of environmental human rights defenders.

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