

PRESS RELEASE: Civil society calls on world leaders to put human rights at the centre of environmental policy

Over 150 civil society organisations and academics sign open letter calling on world leaders to integrate human rights into global and national environmental policy and practice

In the lead-up to historic agreements on climate and nature being made in the next month, more than 150 civil society and indigenous organisations, and academics, from more than 50 countries, have today published an open letter calling on world leaders to put human rights at the centre of environmental policy.

"The science is unequivocal about the climate crisis, loss of biodiversity, and pervasive pollution," said Dr David R. Boyd, UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and environment.

"And so too is the evidence that a human rights-based approach to these environmental challenges is the best way to achieve just, healthy and sustainable solutions for people and planet."

Last week, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution recognising the Right to a Healthy Environment. On the heels of that, today, Oct 11th, world leaders will gather online and in person in Kunming, China, for the UN Convention on Biological Diversity's COP15 meeting.

At COP15 – which will highlight the urgent, transformative action required to save the planet's nature and biodiversity – rights groups and their allies are battling to gain proper recognition for the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities in the global biodiversity framework.

"International negotiations coming up in the next few months represent a crucial opportunity to halt both global warming and the loss of biodiversity," said Andrew Norton, Director of the International Institute for Environment and Development.

"But any agreements made won't be worth the paper they are written on if they don't include human rights at their heart. To be truly just and sustainable, policies on climate and nature must take into account the needs and rights of communities at the frontline of the crises," said Norton.

In the open letter, the signatories – including prominent human rights organisations and civil society groups from the Global North and South, spanning every continent – stated that:

"As a global community we face multiple, intersecting crises: increasing human rights abuses and environmental harms by companies, land grabs, the loss of food and water sovereignty, increasing poverty and inequality, increased attacks and killings of defenders, climate change-induced disasters and migration, the diminishing health of the oceans and critical biodiversity loss.

"Resolving these crises demands a holistic approach to environmental policy that embeds human rights and tackles systemic problems, including historically rooted social injustice, ecological destruction, state capture by corporations, corruption and impunity, as well as social and economic inequality.

"Just this month the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution recognising the Right to a Healthy Environment. And while there is evidence that the [protection of human rights can lead to better environmental outcomes](#), calls for recognition of the holistic and indivisible nature of human rights

and the environment often go unheard and unactioned in global, regional and national environmental and climate policy forums.

“The time to act is now: we call on you to bring together human rights, climate and the environment once and for all. In doing so, you can help us and our future generations to thrive by living in harmony with nature. In doing so, you can affirm that both nature and people have intrinsic worth and that governments are serious in their duty to respect, protect, fulfil, and promote human rights.

This holistic and indivisible connection of nature and human rights is deeply felt by the peoples who live closest with it.

“Defending human rights and defending the environment is to defend dignity,” said Claudelice Silva dos Santos, a human rights advocate working for justice and safety for environmental defenders in the Brazilian Amazon.

“It’s fundamentally important for us in the Amazon, because in the last few years our struggle to defend to the forest has been attacked and criminalised,” she said.

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Contact information

For further information, to request an advance copy of the open letter, or to arrange an interview, please contact:

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Further information and additional quotes

The open letter urges world leaders to ensure that:

“... all policymaking related to the environment – including the climate and biodiversity crises, ownership and use of land, water and resources, ecosystem degradation, corporate accountability and trade, among others – addresses human rights and the environment in an integrated manner.”

ADDITIONAL QUOTES

Joji Carino, Philippines (Forest Peoples Programme / Indigenous and Local Knowledge Centres of Distinction / Member of IIFBES caucus)

“Indigenous peoples’ values and knowledge provide insights for reciprocal human-nature relationships amidst the crisis of biodiversity loss and climate change. This [biodiversity, climate and human rights] debate needs the voices of indigenous peoples.”

Lakpa Nuri Sherpa AIPP (Asia)

“As global citizens, we are all part of, and not separate from, nature. As indigenous peoples, we have been guardians of our lands for millennia and have deep interaction with the ecosystems where we live. Evidence shows our lands are among the most biodiverse on the planet. Only by recognizing the human rights, knowledge, innovations, and values of indigenous peoples and local communities will we be able to push forward the global agenda to sustainably use and conserve biodiversity.”

Edna Kaptoyo, Indigenous Information Network (Africa)

The transformative change needed to meet the global goals and conserve and sustainably use biodiversity requires us to first identify our own interactions with nature. That way, each of us will see our roles in finding and implementing solutions to the current [biodiversity] crises facing the world.”

Edinho Batista de Souza, Coordinator, Indigenous Council of Roraima (CIR), Brazil, describes the situation:

“The Amazon region has seen the biggest concentration of land conflicts in [Brazil], caused by the imposition of a model of economic development that prioritises particular activities such as logging, cattle ranching and mining.”

“This model, imposed on the region, has not only led to environmental crimes but it has also left a trail of extreme violence towards defenders of human rights and rural workers who struggle for land rights.” said de Souza.