

UN General Assembly, 71st session

SIDE-EVENT

Empower environmental defenders, safeguard our future

24 October 2016, UNHQ, Room XXX

In many parts of the world, human rights defenders who challenge environmental degradation and detrimental corporate practices, defend their lands, and protect their rivers, are now facing worsening, grave dangers. The Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders' report to the 71st session of the UN General Assembly highlights this global crisis and urges action. The report focuses on the risks faced by environmental human rights defenders and provides wide-range recommendations to empower and protect them. The Special Rapporteur warns that, without the protection of those on the frontline, the vision espoused in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is 'doomed to fail'. Action is urgently needed.

Proposed event

The event will be held on the margins of the meeting of the UNGA's Third Committee, on 24 October 2016, in UN Headquarters Room XXX.

It will explore the implementation of key recommendations contained in the Special Rapporteur's report, and will provide a platform to debate five recommendations that are critical to the effective promotion and protection of the work of environmental defenders.

Panelists will debate why these recommendations are important, what would be required to implement them effectively, and what could be the main challenges to their effective implementation. The intention is to hone in on the practical realities of implementation, and share different experiences and viewpoints to demonstrate that positive change is both possible and urgently required. Key to this will be a diverse panel consisting of the Special Rapporteur, State representatives, and environmental human rights defenders. The event will be moderated so as to encourage a rich and frank conversation between panelists and the audience.

Cosponsors of the event would include States from diverse regions concerned with the protection of environmental human rights defenders, and NGOs working for their promotion and protection.

Context

In its 2016 report '[Dangerous Ground](#)', Global Witness announced 2015 as the worst on record for the killings of land and environmental defenders, with 2015's death toll showing a shocking 59% increase from the year before.

Amnesty International concluded in its recent report, '[We are defending the land with our blood](#)' that Latin America is the most dangerous region for people working on rights to land, territory and the environment and that attacks against defenders are perpetrated by State and non-States actors.

In his report to the UNGA, the Special Rapporteur speaks to the killing of environmental human rights defenders as 'only the tip of the iceberg' of a 'disturbing trend of increasing violence, intimidation, harassment and demonization'. Entrenched impunity, criminalization of defenders and failure to implement effective protection measures are critical components of what puts environmental defenders at risk. Their protection requires a comprehensive approach, encompassing systemic and structural reform as well as the establishment and effective implementation of protection mechanisms and measures. It requires trade deals to be contingent on the protection of defenders, and the development and implementation of national action plans on business and human rights.

The Special Rapporteur touches on all of these in his comprehensive list of recommendations. The event will focus on the following recommendations:

- 1 / Raise the visibility of the legitimate role of human rights defenders in protecting the land and environmental rights.
- 2/ Document more systematically information on the situation of environmental human rights defenders at risk, especially in countries of concern, with a view to advocating more actionable and effective measures for their protection.
- 3/ Ensure that any future bilateral and multilateral trade agreements involving countries where environmental defenders are under threat, include measures to prevent and address violations against defenders and mechanisms to investigate and remedy violations.
- 4/ States should guarantee the effective implementation of any precautionary or urgent measures granted to environmental defenders by regional human rights mechanisms.
- 5/ Formulate national action plans on business and human rights and ensure that they, as well as environmental impact assessments, are developed in full transparency and meaningful participation, prior to the granting of permission or concessions for the implementation of any business or development project.