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Photo: Goldman Environmental Prize

**YOU ARE NOT ALONE:  
INSPIRING STORIES  
OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS  
WHO ARE RISKING THEIR TODAY  
FOR OUR TOMORROW**



UNIVERSAL RIGHTS GROUP

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## INTRODUCTION

'Environmental human rights defenders' (EHRDs) are individuals or groups who peacefully protect the environment and the human rights that depend upon it from the unsustainable use of natural resources, climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. Through their determination and perseverance, EHRDs have achieved numerous successes in protecting the Planet and the human rights of all people.

The vital work of EHRDs has been acknowledged, *inter alia*, by the United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 40/11, which recognised 'the positive, important and legitimate role played by human rights defenders in the promotion and protection of human rights as they relate to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.'<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, as EHRDs protect the environment, they also defend their rights, and the rights of their communities, to life, health, water, food, adequate housing, equality, non-discrimination, and work, among many others, as well as the rights of future generations. To do so, they assert their human rights and political freedoms. As John Knox explains,

*Ideally, all EHRDs should be able to exercise their human rights to freedom of expression and association, to information, to participation in decision-making, and effective remedies to help to protect the environment - and the rights that depend upon it - from unsustainable exploitation. In this way, the relationship between human*

*rights and the environment should be a virtuous circle: the exercise of human rights helps to protect the environment, and a healthy environment helps to ensure the full enjoyment of human rights.*<sup>2</sup>

Just as the rights they defend are wide-ranging, the individuals and groups who defend the environment are diverse. They come from various backgrounds, have different identities, and use different terms to identify themselves.

Many defend the environment as part of their professional work: several lawyers, journalists, scientists, academics, diplomats and politicians, for example, embed the protection of the Planet in their daily expert activities. But most EHRDs defend their natural surroundings due to the impact that environmental degradation and climate change have on their lives. Coastal communities, small-scale fisherpersons, forest protectors, Indigenous Peoples, rural communities and many other individuals and groups on the frontlines of environmental degradation and climate change vigorously defend the Planet, in many cases, risking their lives and integrity to protect it.

EHRDs have different identities. Women, children, youth, Indigenous Peoples, afro-descendant individuals, persons with disabilities, LGTBQ+, elderly, and many more. These identities may overlap, and they influence the human rights that, in addition to and in connection with the environment, EHRDs defend. For example, some Indigenous Peoples who defend biodiversity also strive to secure their rights to self-determination and the integrity of their territories; women EHRDs who fight against pollution may also advocate the realisation of their rights to work and participation as fundamental to their environmental defence activities.



Also diverse are the strategies used by EHRDs to protect the environment. Many of them rely on activism, marches, strikes, peaceful resistance, and campaigns but multiple others implement less visible tactics such as empowering and educating local communities, safeguarding territories, developing sustainable livelihood projects, implementing community-based resource management strategies and restoring natural resources, among others.

Furthermore, not all EHRDs identify themselves as environmental human rights defenders or environmental defenders. Environmentalists, ecofeminists, or climate, forest, water, human rights, land rights or indigenous rights defenders or activists are some of the terms also used by these brave advocates to identify themselves.

Despite this diversity, EHRDs share a crude reality. Defending the environment, they oppose powerful political and economic interests that threaten their rights, lives and integrity. Adversaries of these defenders use a wide range of strategies to silence these brave advocates and prevent them from carrying out their work: killings, physical violence, unlawful use of the law and judiciary, digital attacks, surveillance, smear campaigns and countless more are some of the risks faced by EHRDs across the world.

EHRDs' identities, strategies, and individual and collective contexts influence the risks they face, and the way in which they experience and address these hazardous situations. Intersecting patterns of violence, discrimination and marginalisation based on, *inter alia*, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status shape the concrete tactics through which adversaries of environmental and climate protection seek to silence these defenders.

Their contexts, identities and strategies influence the risks faced by EHRDs, and the way in which they experience and address these hazardous situations. Intersecting patterns of violence, discrimination and marginalisation based on, *inter alia*, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status shape the concrete tactics through which adversaries of environmental and climate protection seek to silence these defenders.

For example, women and LGBTQI+ defenders usually face sexual violence, in addition to physical assaults, and are more prone to be subjected to illegal and degrading searches by law enforcement agents. Young advocates from the Global North may not directly experience physical violence but commonly face digital threats, restrictions to their right to participation, and other forms of harassment.

However, thanks to growing solidarity by peer defenders, civil society organisations, States, and the public in

general, these attacks are significantly losing their capacity to silence EHRDs.

Increasingly, voices and actions of solidarity are joining in enlarging the strength and power of defenders, raising their visibility, amplifying their calls, and helping them to, in the midst of violence, persist in their work and continue making an indispensable contribution to the enjoyment of human and environmental rights.

A well-known example of how support has helped to counter the pervasive impact of attacks aimed at silencing EHRDs is the case of Berta Cáceres in Honduras. The shocking and sad assassination of Berta awakened a wave of solidarity across the world that gave international visibility to the claims of the COPINH, the grassroots organisation led by Berta, and, more broadly, to the calls of the entire Lenca community. As the sad, irreparable loss of one of the greatest EHRDs in the world afflicted millions worldwide, this remarkable wave of support, crystallised in the maxim '*Berta did not die, she multiplied,*' helped mobilise political will to stop the Agua Zarca dam (the project that Berta and her community opposed to due to its negative environmental and socioeconomic impacts) and prompted the State of Honduras to secure accountability for the crime against Berta, convicting the authors of the crime including, in a landmark step, the Executive Director of DESA, the company that ran Agua Zarca.

The case of Berta is one of the best-known examples of the vital contributions of EHRDs to the protection of the people and the Planet. It also shows how solidarity with these defenders can help to strengthen them and address the threats faced by them, in some cases, even countering the pervasive impact that these hazards seek to have on the environmental protection movement.

With the objective of encouraging people, organisations and states across the world to join the growing and unstoppable wave of solidarity in support of EHRDs, this brief tells 12 different inspiring stories that highlight the vital work of defenders across the world.

The stories told in this report hail from all corners of the globe and range from children to indigenous women leaders, international organisations to indigenous communities, and include individual attorneys and decentralised groups. They illustrate the diversity that the term 'environmental human rights defenders' encompasses and, therefore, the many different ways in which our Planet and rights are being protected by these brave advocates.

This brief, thus, also aims to contribute to shifting the narrative about EHRDs, from a focus on the risks faced by them to an emphasis on their important contributions to human and environmental rights.

# INSPIRING STORIES OF HOW ENVIRONMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ARE PROTECTING HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

## RUTH BUENDÍA MESTOQUIARI – CARE (PERU)

### Defending the Amazon from hydroelectric projects



Ruth Buendía Mestoquiari - Photo- Casa de América

Ruth Buendía Mestoquiari is a Peruvian environmental activist and indigenous leader known for her unstoppable defence of her culture and the environment. Buendía, a member of the Asháninka people, was forced from her home at only 12 years old due to the conflict between the government and the 'Sendero Luminoso' guerrilla organisation. Ruth moved to Lima, but in 1995 returned to her hometown of Satipo, where she joined the grassroots organisation 'Central Ashaninka del Río Ene' (CARE).

CARE is an indigenous political organisation; it represents 18 communities that live near the Ene River and 33 other annexed communities. Buendía became the first woman president of CARE in 2005.

Shortly after her election, Buendía became aware of a bilateral energy agreement (BEA) entered into between Peru and Brazil.<sup>3</sup> The agreement had been executed without prior consultation with the Asháninka, despite the fact that both Brazil and Peru had signed the International Labour Organization's Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 1989, also known as ILO Convention 169. The BEA 'opens the door for Brazilian companies to build a series of large dams in the Peruvian Amazon,' which would flood ancestral indigenous territories in Peru.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, one of the dams, the Pakitzapango, would result in the displacement of over 10,000 Asháninka people and in a food shortage for 18 Asháninka communities, who made their living off subsistence farming, hunting and fishing and lived within the designated construction site.

As CARE's leader, Buendía worked with CARE colleagues and the local Asháninka communities to help them articulate their concerns and present strong, peaceful opposition to the dams. To achieve this, under Ruth's leadership, they worked with the communities to raise awareness about the importance of the free, prior and informed consultation and the negative impacts of the dams and developed community strengthening and internal organisation activities. Buendía further filed multiple lawsuits and claims before the Peruvian authorities and courts as well as the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, aiming to secure the consent of the Asháninka before the project could proceed. She also met with government representatives and with the directives of the companies that were to develop some of the dams to explain the negative social and environmental impact of the projects and launched a media campaign that achieved international coverage.

In response to Ruth's advocacy, in December 2010, the Peruvian Ministry of Energy decided not to extend the concessions for one of the dams, the Pakitzapango. In 2011, the main shareholder of a second dam, the Tambo 40, announced that it was withdrawing from the project, citing the necessity to respect the local communities' views.

Following her victories, Buendía began working to promote the Asháninka's land rights and developing a management plan for an Asháninka Communal Reserve that aims to protect ancestral lands from commercial development while allowing local communities to benefit from sustainable economic opportunities.

Buendía's work focused on the enjoyment of the rights to self-determination, prior consultation and participation by the Asháninkas. By securing the respect for these rights, Ruth achieved to protect, among others, of over 7,093 square kilometres of the Amazons, including the Otishi National Park, which is 'one of the last remaining contiguous forest ecosystems in the Andean- Amazonian region. Mainly mountainous with large areas of minimally disturbed forests, the area is endowed with astounding biodiversity characterised by endemic wild flora and fauna, some in danger of extinction.'<sup>5</sup>

For her work, Buendía won, in 2014, the Goldman Environmental Prize, in acknowledgement of her contribution to environmental protection, and the XXIII Bartolomé de las Casas Prize, which recognises her work with the local communities.



**2014 Goldman Environmental Prize winner Ruth Buendía at a meeting to elect new leaders of the Meteni community, Rio Ene, Peru**

Photo- Goldman Environmental Prize



**Ashaninka Children Watch the Ene River**

Photo - International Rivers

## ZAPOTECA INDIGENOUS JOINT COMMUNITIES (MEXICO)

### Forest conservation based on sustainable management of natural resources and indigenous community management

In Mexico's mountainous 'Sierra Norte' region of Oaxaca, eight Zapoteca communities, that have been inhabiting the region for over 2,500 years, came together to create the grassroots ecotourism organisation '*Expediciones Sierra Norte*,' which works to conserve almost 250 square kilometres of land; 130 square kilometres of which are temperate forests.<sup>6</sup>

Expediciones Sierra Norte works to preserve ancestral lands while providing the local communities with economic opportunities. Its innovative conservation strategy allows for sustainable forest management through productive activities that offer all ancestral inhabitants employment and income opportunities. All jobs are consistent with the communities' traditional indigenous practices and beliefs and, therefore, centred on the protection of the region's ecosystems.

The strategy of engaging all members and responding to their most pressing income needs has allowed the eight Zapoteca communities to fight back against private timber enterprises that were severely affecting the Sierra Norte region. Organising as a strong, unified actor allowed the local communities to enter into dialogue with relevant authorities, secure the protection of their territories, and prevent third-party concessions from

destroying the forest, they live in and depend on.<sup>7</sup> The communities now control access to the forest, production planning, woodcutting, extraction, and industrialisation.

This environmentally friendly Zapoteca enterprise also contributed to securing the peaceful coexistence between the eight communities that share one common land, setting an amazing example of cohabitation, conservation and self-determination while preventing land and other types of conflicts between the different communities.

In 2016, due to their success in forest conservation, the eight Zapoteca communities were awarded the 'Premio Nacional al Mérito Forestal,' which is the main acknowledgement by the Mexican government in this regard.

Today, Expediciones Sierra Norte allows over 20,000 tourists to visit annually, and its forest is considered to be one of the best-protected areas in Mexico. The Zapoteca communities are a world-leading example of the harmonisation of economic interests, traditional livelihoods, conservation, and the protection of the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

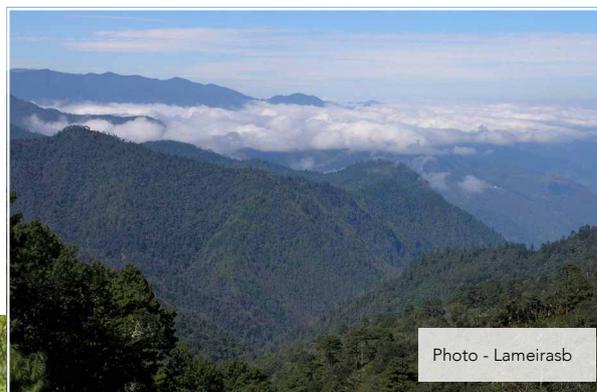


Photo - Lameirasb

**Zapoteca communities work to preserve ancestral lands while providing local communities with economic opportunities.**

Photo - Oisin Prendiville



## ALFRED BROWNELL – GREEN ADVOCATES INTERNATIONAL (LIBERIA)

### Working with local communities to prevent the destruction of tropical forests



Photo - the EITI

Alfred Brownell is a Liberian environmental lawyer and activist that stopped palm oil plantation developers from clear-cutting Liberia's tropical forests, even as he was under the threat of violence.<sup>8</sup> Brownell, the 2019 Goldman Environmental Prize winner, is the executive director and founder of Green Advocates International (GAI), a Liberian NGO that represents communities seeking to protect their environmental and human rights.

Liberia's forests, which are known as 'the lungs of West Africa,' form part of the Upper Guinean Forest (classified as one of the 25 most important biodiversity hotspots in the world). Stretching from Sierra Leone to Nigeria, this ecosystem sequesters carbon and provides a home for local communities and numerous endangered species. But the forest has come under threat due to large mining, timber, and palm oil concessions.

In 2010, an agro-industrial company called Golden Veroleum Liberia (GVL) was awarded a 65-year lease of almost 2,225 square kilometres of forest to develop palm oil operations. These activities were going to result in the clearing of community forests and sacred sites without notice or sufficient compensation to its communities. Local water sources were also expected to be severely affected.

Moreover, local residents that opposed the project were harassed, including through physical violence.

Once Brownell became aware of this project, he started working with the local communities to stop the forest's environmental destruction. Among other things, he filed a complaint with the global certification body for palm oil - Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) - which placed a stop-work order on GVL, freezing the expansion of its palm oil operations. This prevented GVL from continuing to clear forests and harass its local communities. A total of almost 2,100 square kilometres (approximately 94% of the forest leased to GVL) were protected.

Brownell, however, was threatened and forced to leave Liberia. In exile, he has investigated and raised awareness of the unsustainable use of natural resources in his home country. He has coined terms such as 'blood diamond,' 'logs of war,' and 'conflict timber.'

Brownell's campaign not only protected over 2,020 square kilometres of primary forest that constitute one of the world's most important biodiversity hotspots (thus also protecting the rights of the indigenous communities that live in the forest). Along with other organisations, Brownell and GAI achieved significant global natural resources policy and institutional reforms. For example, thanks to their efforts, diamonds must be legally certified as conflict-free, and timber acquired from legal sources. Further, in response to Brownell's work, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on Liberia, mandating forestry and natural resource sector reforms. Brownell was involved in drafting the country's new forestry laws.

In addition to this work, Brownell established the Alliance for Rural Democracy (ARD), a network which works to connect community-based organisations to collaborate on environmental justice work throughout Liberia. Brownell also founded West Africa's first public interest legal network, the Public Interest Lawyering Initiative for West Africa (PILIWA), which identifies young lawyers and law students across the region, providing them with training to support environmental activists.<sup>9</sup> This network now covers more than seven countries and has brought cases in domestic and regional courts, as well as non-judicial grievance mechanisms.

**Alfred Brownell works with local communities to stop the forest's environmental destruction**

Photo - blk24ga



## RIDHIMA PANDEY (INDIA)

### Youth climate activist working to save the planet for current and future generations

Ridhima Pandey is a 13-year-old youth EHRD from India who has worked both at the national and international levels to advocate for action to combat climate change.

Pandey's home city Haridwar is a holy city on the Ganges River, and she regularly finds a range of trash on the banks of the Ganges, including statues, clothes, and plastic.<sup>10</sup> For Pandey, the Ganges is *mata*, or 'mother,' and therefore a goddess that deserves respect instead of pollution.

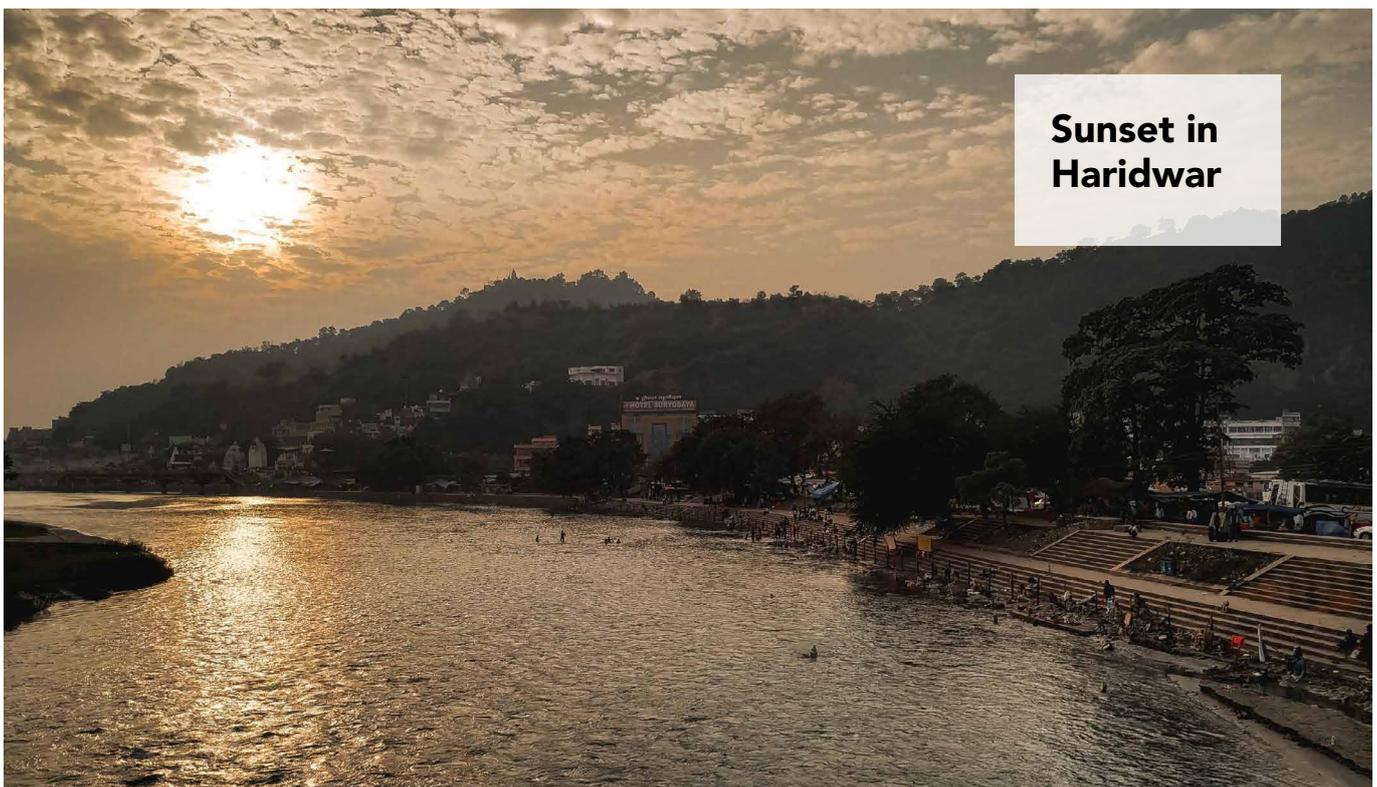
Pandey began to take an interest in climate change in 2013 (at age five) following floods that devastated her home state. Her father, who is a wildlife conservationist, explained climate change-related issues to his daughter, to which she took a deep interest. Her mother is also an EHRD, working for their state's forest agency.<sup>11</sup>

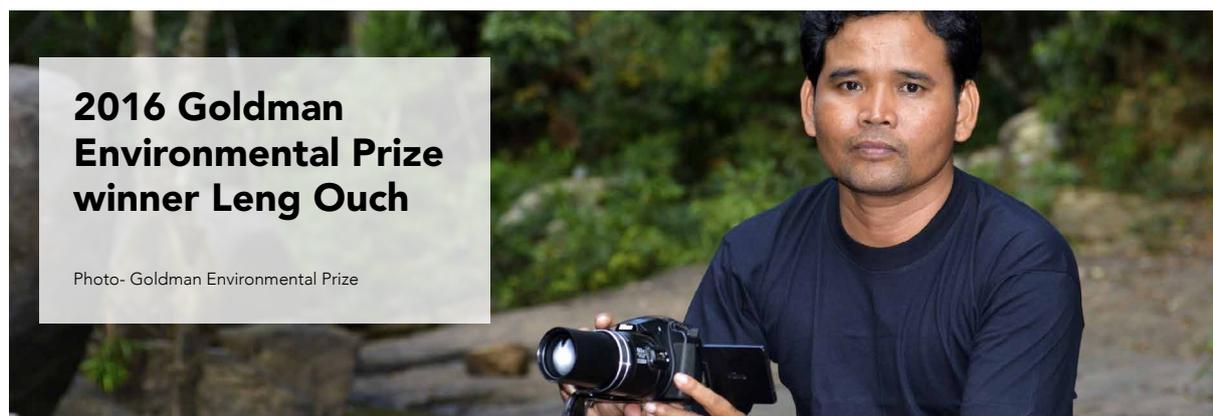
Following in the footsteps of her parents, in 2017, Pandey filed a petition with India's National Green Tribunal, which oversees environmental issues. Her petition claimed that

the Indian government was not taking sufficient steps to combat climate change, stating that it 'has failed to take steps to regulate and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, which are causing extreme climate conditions' and arguing that this inaction will affect her as well as future generations.<sup>12</sup> She urged the government to include a fuels budget and atmospheric recovery plan, and to follow scientist-created guidelines, demanding a reduction in the use of fossil fuels, greater protection of forests, and greater reforestation efforts. Her claim was dismissed, but she took the case to India's Supreme Court, where it remains pending.<sup>13</sup>

Following her claims at the national level, in 2019 Pandey joined a group of 16 climate activists presenting a complaint to the United Nations, where they denounced the lack of action by the world's countries in the face of climate change. The complaint calls on States to uphold their obligations to youth under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Pandey is now starting her own non-profit climate advocacy group. She continues to fight for her rights and those of future generations related to climate change and influencing global policy. She was, for example, part of the Civil Society and Youth Advisory Council on Climate Change for COP26. Pandey further works to raise awareness among the youth; she has made several speeches in schools across India to inspire other children to take action on climate change.





## OUCH LENG - CAMBODIA HUMAN RIGHTS TASK FORCE (CAMBODIA)

### Exposing illegal logging activities to prevent deforestation

Ouch Leng is a Cambodian environmental human rights defender and founder of the Cambodia Human Rights Task Force (CHRTF), an organisation dedicated to environmental and land rights. The CHRTF investigates and reports on illegal logging activities in Cambodia (particularly rosewood logging) by corrupt officials and business leaders.

Cambodian forests are a crucial resource for the majority of the country's population - 80% of its residents live in rural areas and depend on small-scale agriculture.<sup>14</sup> Cambodia, however, has the fifth-highest level of deforestation in the world (losing approximately 2,080 squared kilometres per year),<sup>15</sup> which affects not only its people but also the planet. The government began issuing Economic Land Concessions (ELCs) at the turn of the 21st century with the purpose of promoting large-scale agricultural development. These concessions, however, also provided an opportunity for illegal logging operations ran by foreign corporations, which smuggle highly sought rosewood to other countries for high-end furniture. The concessions further resulted in the forced displacement of rural communities living in poverty.

Both in his personal capacity, and as the founder of the CHRTF, Leng has worked for over 20 years to expose the Cambodian forest industry's corruption and greed, even having gone undercover to gather evidence of illegal logging activities.<sup>16</sup> Leng's work has revealed the corruption and criminal collusion between timber companies and Cambodian government officials, showing the relationship between the country's ELCs and illegal logging in the country. Leng has faced threats, harassment and arbitrary detentions as a retaliation for his work.

The efforts of Leng and the CHRTF have successfully protected Cambodia's forests. In 2014, the Cambodian government cancelled 23 land concessions that covered almost 1,000 square kilometres of forest, including two ELCs inside the country's biodiverse Virachey National Park, which has federally protected status.

Further, thanks to a Global Greengrants Fund grant, the CHRTF will be able to support a forest control team charged with investigating and documenting illegal logging, as well as mapping impacted forest areas and putting-up notifications that said areas are being monitored by the team. In addition to organising a youth team to protect the forest, the CHRTF will also be lobbying the Cambodian government to end timber exports to countries such as Vietnam and China, as well as working to convince the international community to end its purchases of wood from these countries. This indigenous-led programme will benefit over 400,000 families in eight different provinces in Cambodia.

Leng was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2016, which has allowed him to, inter alia: raise his profile (with important security benefits), strengthen his international networks, and support and gain international media coverage. This has helped mobilise international support and build political will to tackle corruption in environmental issues.



## STANDING ROCK SIOUX TRIBE (USA)

### Fighting to shut down an oil pipeline and protect tribal land



Photo - Expert Infantry

The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe are members of the Dakota and Lakota Nations and govern the almost 10,000 square kilometre Standing Rock Indian Reservation, which includes jurisdiction over all reservation lands, including all rights-of-way, waterways, watercourses and streams running through any part of the reservation.<sup>17</sup> While the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe has been working on environmental issues for decades (declaring in 1996 that 'illegal dumping sites' polluting the soil and contaminating ground waters were its main environmental problem), the Tribe is most well-known for its opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline, which it has opposed since 2014.

The Dakota Access Pipeline runs approximately 1,880 kilometres from North Dakota to Illinois, crossing

communities, farms, tribal land, and sensitive natural areas and wildlife habitat.<sup>18</sup> The Standing Rock Reservation is less than 1.5 kilometres from the pipeline, which has raised concerns among its inhabitants that a spill could pollute the water that the Tribe relies on for fishing, drinking, and religious ceremonies.

In addition to gathering thousands of protestors that gathered to stop the pipeline's construction, the Tribe (represented by Earthjustice) filed a complaint against the US Army Corps of Engineers in 2016 for a violation of the National Historic Preservation Act (among other laws), arguing that the Corps' decision to reroute the pipeline to the border of the Standing Rock Reservation without adequate environmental analysis and consultation was in contravention of environmental and historic preservation laws.<sup>19</sup>

The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe achieved a significant victory when a federal judge ordered that a new environmental review of the pipeline be carried out, finding that its 'effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial and that the federal government had not adequately studied the risks of a major spill, or whether the pipeline had an adequate leak detection system.' Despite the legal victory, construction on the pipeline was able to continue, pending a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) by the Army Corps of Engineers. The Tribe won another legal victory in February 2022, however, as the US Supreme Court rejected a case by Dakota Access pipeline operator Energy Transfer, which was seeking to overturn the ruling requiring the full EIS.

Therefore, while the pipeline was still constructed, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe was able to force the US government to carry out a full environmental study in order to protect the environment from potential oil spills that could negatively affect their land, water, and way of life.



Photo - Oceti Sakowin Camp

## EXTINCTION REBELLION (INTERNATIONAL)

### Non-violent protest and civil disobedience to convince governments to combat climate change and biodiversity loss

Extinction Rebellion (XR) is an international, politically non-partisan network created in 2018 that uses Non-Violent Direct Action (defined as 'methods of protest, resistance, and intervention without physical violence in which the members of the non-violent group do, or refuse to do, certain things')<sup>20</sup> and civil disobedience in order to convince governments 'to act justly on the Climate and Ecological Emergency.'<sup>21</sup>

XR has three main demands, which have been adopted and pursued by more than 1,200 groups worldwide: 1) tell the truth – governments must tell the truth and declare a climate and ecological emergency and ensure that the urgency for change is communicated; 2) act now – to stop biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net-zero (by 2025), and 3) go beyond politics – arguing that a Citizens' Assembly on climate and ecological justice must be created and lead government decisions on climate change.

XR is driven by concern over two of the world's gravest environmental crises: climate change and biodiversity loss.<sup>22</sup> XR works to combat biodiversity loss (affecting food systems, economic systems, and resiliency in the face of extreme weather) and 'mass extinction,' as the world loses approximately 27,000 species per year. It also focuses on climate change and carbon dioxide levels, recognising the grave consequences of rising temperatures and greenhouse gas emissions.

XR, which is not bound by political or cultural lines, is made up of individuals across the globe 'from all walks of life, different backgrounds, cultures, and political affiliations that come together to solve the climate and ecological crisis.' It is composed of more than 1185 groups in 84 countries and engages in peaceful protests, blockades, and other types of civil disobedience (such as turning off crude oil pipelines).<sup>23</sup>

The movement has been credited with a number of successes, including compelling the enactment of legislation, encouraging governments to take action, and shifting public discourse on the climate and ecological crises through its non-violent protest actions. It is also recognised as a key actor in raising the public's awareness about climate change and biodiversity loss, raising the visibility of policies and laws that negatively impact the environment, and placing these issues on the agendas of governments and in the daily lives of all citizens.





Photo - Maria Aufmuth/TED

## HINDOU OUMAROU IBRAHIM (CHAD)

### Using indigenous knowledge to fight climate change and meet communities' basic needs

Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim is an expert on indigenous peoples' adaptation to climate change, traditional ecological knowledge, and climate change mitigation strategies. She is Co-Chair of the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change, founded the Association for Indigenous Women and Peoples of Chad (AFPAT) and works to empower indigenous voices and ensure their inclusion on international platforms. Ibrahim has several projects that improved access to the basic need of Indigenous Peoples while promoting their unique contribution to environmental protection.

Oumarou is originally from Chad's Mbororo pastoralist community, an ethnic sub-group of 250,000 individuals that form part of the Fulani, which is the greatest nomad community in Central and West Africa. She was able to witness first-hand how her community (which depends on agriculture and cattle raising) is being affected by climate.

Ibrahim has worked to demonstrate how climate change affects the lives of the Mbororo and the Lake Chad regional ecosystem.

She has shown how climate change has made it increasingly difficult for the Mbororo to survive, increasing the distances that the community must walk, shortening the rainy season, and causing both less regular rainfall and, at times, intense rainfall that floods their lands, negatively affecting food security.<sup>24</sup> Year-round temperature rises are another effect of climate change that the Mbororo have been facing. Women were

becoming overworked, cows were producing less milk, and social responsibilities were changing, all due to the effects of climate change.

Oumarou also led the first major dialogue among the numerous communities that inhabit the Lake Chad area (which is a water source for 40 million people that has lost 90 per cent of its surface area in just 40 years)<sup>25</sup> to create a 3D map of the environmentally fragile region in order to inform conservation and resource management, while also promoting security.

Through her organisation AFPAT, Oumarou builds capacities of members of her community, helping them assert their human rights. Through training courses on education and access to health, she has raised awareness about basic social rights and access to justice. Moreover, through AFPAT, she conducts training sessions and discussions with communities on how to adapt to climate change using traditional knowledge and skills.

As a result of her fight against climate change, and integration of indigenous knowledge with Western science to create a healthier planet, Oumarou has won numerous awards, such as the Pritzker Emerging Environmental Genius Award, and has been listed by Time Magazine as one of 15 women championing action on climate change. She has also been appointed as a UN Sustainable Development Goals Advocate, Conservation International Senior Indigenous Fellow and a National Geographic Explorer, and was a Member of the Advisory Committee to the Secretary-General's 2019 Climate Action Summit.

Ibrahim is proof of how indigenous knowledge can be used to fight climate change as, 'for centuries, Indigenous Peoples have protected the environment, which provides them food, medicine and so much more,' and they can now use their traditional knowledge to 'bring concrete solutions to implement sustainable development goals and fight climate change.'

## UROŠ MACERL (SLOVENIA)

### Mobilising local communities to prevent air pollution



Photo - Hladnikm

Uroš Macerl is an organic farmer from Slovenia. He grew up on a small farm near a Lafarge Cement plant, often seeing snow and tap water at home turn black from coal dust and pollution.

In 2003, Lafarge took over a 130-year-old cement plant in Macerl's hometown of Trbovlje and began burning petcoke, which is carbon material derived as a by-product of the oil refining process, and often used to fuel powerplants.<sup>26</sup> Burning petcoke, however, emits extremes levels of pollution (the industry is responsible for approximately five per cent of global carbon dioxide emissions). In a region long subject to pollution, the most vital elements for the survival of local farmers – clean air, soil and water – were decimated; first by local manufacturing operations and then by plants such as

Lafarge that came into operation as a part of the EU shift away from coal towards 'greener' energy sources.

While Lafarge promised to provide local jobs and denied that its emissions would be harmful, Macerl and Eko Krog (a civil society organisation of which he is president) collected air quality data showing a 'dramatic increase in dangerous pollutants' since the plant's inauguration. While they presented this information to the media and local and national authorities, job creation was prioritised over the environment and health of residents.<sup>27</sup>

Following years of pollution from the Lafarge plant, in 2009, the company applied for an environmental permit to co-incinerate hazardous industrial waste alongside petcoke, claiming that only areas within 500 metres of its main chimney stack would be affected by its emissions. Macerl's property fell within the pollution zone, which gave him the legal standing to challenge the permit application. The permit was approved by the Slovenian government, allowing the plant to incinerate over 100 tons of hazardous industrial waste every day.

Macerl, however, challenged the permit before Slovenia's national courts, which ruled in favour of his petition. When the national authorities failed to implement the ruling, Macerl and Eko Krog presented a claim before the European Commission of Human Rights, and mobilised affected communities.

The European Commission sided with Macerl, requesting that the European Court of Justice hear the case, before the Slovenian authorities, at last, ordered the plant to shut down. In March 2015, the company finally complied.

Since the plant closed, air quality in the region has improved notably; trees are growing once again, and wildlife not seen for decades has returned. In 2021, Macerl was continuing his defence of the environment by collecting signatures for a referendum on changes to Slovenia's water law believed to threaten the quality of and public access to water.<sup>28</sup>



## MAŁGORZATA GÓRSKA (POLAND)

### Civil society organisations protecting wilderness from unsustainable development



Małgorzata Góraska - Photo - Goldman Environmental Prize

Małgorzata Góraska is a Polish conservationist that fought to stop a controversial highway project in Poland's Rospuda Valley, one of Europe's 'last true wilderness areas.'<sup>29</sup> Góraska worked on the Via Baltica campaign that included a coalition of Polish NGOs - the Polish Society for the Protection of Birds, Polish Green Network (OTOP) and WWF Poland (also backed by international partners and experts) - in an eight-year fight to protect the country's wilderness from unsustainable development.<sup>30</sup>

Poland's north-eastern countryside contains some of Europe's last unspoiled natural environment, with forests, bogs and wetlands serving as flora and fauna reservoirs for the entire European continent. The Rospuda Valley has a unique, environmentally significant, and biodiverse ecosystem that is home to a number of endangered species. In 1996, however, developers began to plan the Via Baltica Expressway from Helsinki to Warsaw, which was to cut directly through the Rospuda Valley. Poland joined the EU in 2004, and a number of its natural areas were listed as Natura 2000 sites, meaning that development projects that threaten the protected areas must explore alternate plans. The Rospuda Valley (along

with two forests and a marsh) were Natura 2000 sites threatened by the Via Baltica Expressway.

Góraska, who worked for OTOP, played a crucial role in working to protect the Rospuda Valley, joining public opposition to the expressway and gathering a coalition of environmental activists and organisations to prevent the development project's construction. In addition to working with lawyers focusing on a legal case against the expressway, Góraska organised a national campaign in support of saving the Rospuda Valley and compiled findings of other civil society organisations that showed the environmental harm that would result from the expressway's construction.

When Góraska's national-level campaign did not work, she helped submit a complaint to the European Commission in 2006 about 'very serious concerns' regarding the proposed expressway's noncompliance with the EU Natura 2000 regulations. The Commission investigated the case and then opened legal proceedings against Poland. Góraska further led the submission of a complaint to the Petitions Committee of the European Parliament, which resulted in it preparing a report (later adopted by the European Parliament) calling for a change in the expressway's route. Afterwards, the case was sent to the European Court of Justice (ECJ), which called for an immediate halt to the part of the project threatening the Rospuda Valley. While the case was being considered by the ECJ, Polish national courts determined that the project violated national law and should not go forward; in March 2009, the government announced it would not build the project through the Rospuda Valley.

Góraska did not stop with this success, however. She also worked to stop the Via Baltica's construction through the other three protected sites. While Góraska was initially ignored by developers, in October 2009, the Polish government agreed to reroute all sections of the expressway that were to cut through the protected natural areas. For her work in defending Poland's natural environment, in 2010, Góraska won the Goldman Environmental Prize.



### Lake Rospuda Augustowska in Augustów (Poland).

Photo - Witia

## STEVEN DONZIGER (USA)

### Taking on a petrol giant to protect local communities



Steven Donziger is an American environmental lawyer that filed a lawsuit against Chevron regarding one of the worst environmental disasters to ever occur in the Ecuadorian Amazon.<sup>31</sup>

When Chevron acquired Texaco in 2001, it acquired all its civil liabilities in addition to its assets. One of Texaco's greatest liabilities was the 'Amazon Chernobyl,' which was a 4,400 square-kilometre environmental disaster in Ecuador's Amazon caused by Texaco's intentional discharge of 72 billion litres of toxic water. The discharge polluted the water supply, poisoned the land and food supply, and created 1,000 unlined waste pits. Even though there were thousands of excess cancer deaths in the region, Texaco claimed the wastes contained vitamins and were medicinal. Texaco's environmental audits showed that the company never conducted basic monitoring of pipelines, and inspections found oil contamination at levels up to 900 times higher than the Ecuadorian legal standard.

Against this backdrop, in 1993, Donziger took on the environmental case on behalf of the local communities affected by the environmental disaster. The case eventually became a 30,000-person class-action lawsuit in New York federal court. Texaco lobbied and succeeded in moving the case back to Ecuador.

In 2011, after 18 years of court battles, Donziger and the plaintiffs won the case. An Ecuadorian court ruled that Texaco (which had already been purchased by Chevron) was 'responsible for vast contamination' and must pay \$18 billion in damages, the largest environmental judgement ever awarded.<sup>32</sup> After Chevron's appeal before the Ecuadorian National Court, the award was reduced to \$9.5 billion.

Chevron refused to pay and responded by pulling all of its assets out of Ecuador so plaintiffs could not collect.<sup>33</sup> The same year, Chevron filed a lawsuit against Donziger in New York under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act or RICO, arguing that Donziger bribed the original Ecuadorian judge for his decision (as of 2015, Chevron had relocated the judge to the US and was paying him a \$12,000 per month salary). Chevron further carried out a public relations campaign to smear him and hired a team of hundreds of lawyers from 60 firms, resulting in Donziger's disbarment and the freezing of his bank accounts.<sup>34</sup> Donziger was charged with contempt of court for refusing to turn over his electronic devices to company attorneys, for which he served almost 1,000 days of house arrest.

In April 2022, Donziger was finally released from house arrest, stating that Chevron's campaign against him 'backfired' and gave him a larger and broader platform to advocate from. Donziger's story thus provides a powerful example of how an EHRD can achieve incredible results, even in the face of harassment from one of the richest and most powerful companies in the world.

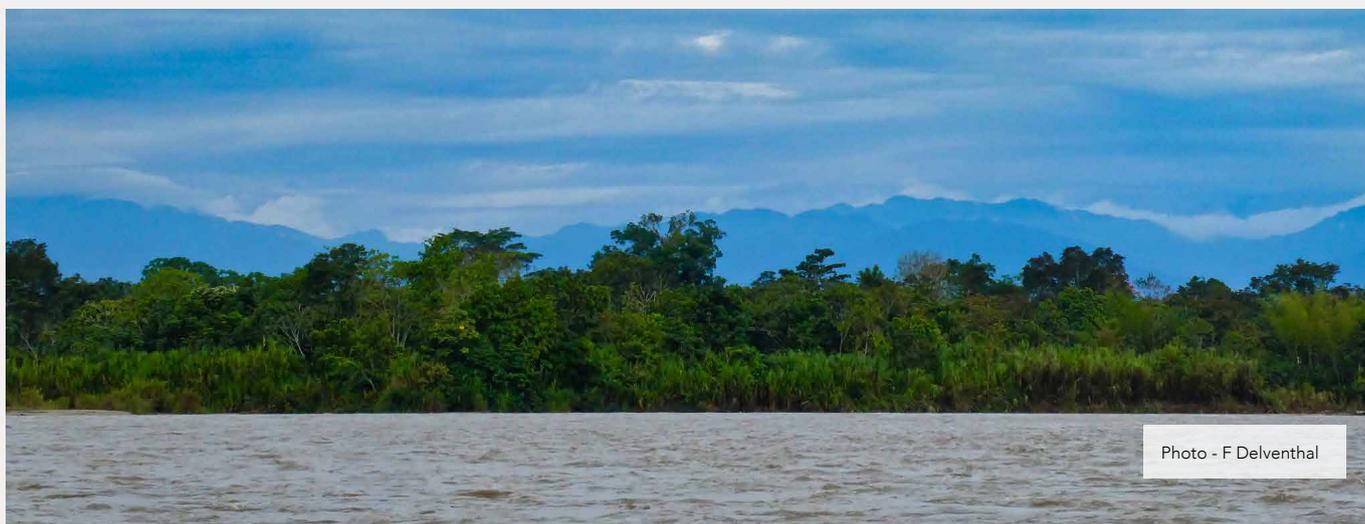


Photo - F Delventhal

## CORPORACIÓN COMPROMISO (COLOMBIA)

### Supporting local initiatives and leaders to protect water resources



Corporación Compromiso is a grassroots organisation created in 1995 in Santander, Colombia. It was founded by a group of human rights defenders who sought to address poverty, inequality, violence, and injustice, and to strengthen democracy in their region by securing access to justice and participation in environmental matters.

The region where Corporación Compromiso is located is rich in water sources, on which local and peasant communities depend. These water sources, however, are being increasingly polluted and privatised by multinational and local corporations, leading to loss of biodiversity, degradation of ecosystems, and violations of the rights to health and food of local communities.

Compromiso works to defend human rights and the environment, particularly the right to water, by supporting local initiatives such as community-run aqueducts

and small-scale sustainable farms. Compromiso also supports social leaders that defend their territories from mega-projects and extractive industry companies.

To this end, Compromiso focuses on empowering peasant communities and opening participation spaces, providing them with environmental and human rights education and training, as well as communications support. It also conducts research and maps areas of environmental conflict. The organisation raises the visibility of these causes by convening marches, partnering with crucial media allies, and working in a network of defenders across Colombia.

Compromiso has also created three observatories that continually report on the region's existing environmental conflicts, land tenure and distribution issues, and human rights violations. These tools have strengthened the defence of environmental human rights in Santander.

Compromiso has also led numerous advocacy campaigns, including a nationwide march to protest against a mining project in the Santurbán Páramo and Sogamoso River. Their efforts have increased the visibility of these conflicts, brought thousands of supporters, and created pressure on national authorities to increase transparency in the licensing and project development processes. Their most visible campaigns have aimed to stop the Hidrosogamoso dam and extractive activities in Puerto Wilches and the Santurbán Páramo.

Defending local water sources, as well as food security and sovereignty in Santander has made Compromiso the target of attacks by those who defend and develop mining projects, large-scale agriculture, fracking, and water-intensive crops and industries. Notwithstanding, the organisation continues to be a major advocate for anti-fracking and environmentally friendly projects, and its actions continue to be a strong example of the protection Colombia's wetlands.



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