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Strengthening support for environmental and climate defenders: New reports present recommendations to donors and civil society organisations

The Alliance for Land, Indigenous and Environmental Defenders (ALLIED)¹ and the Universal Rights Group, with support from Freedom House and the Lifeline Fund for Embattled Civil Society Organisations, published two complementary reports presenting specific recommendations to donors and international civil society organisations on how to increase support for environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs) and climate activists.

The two reports, '[Supporting environmental human rights defenders](#)' and '[Understanding and responding to the protection needs of climate activists and movements](#),' outline practical recommendations for donors and international civil society organisations to incorporate into their strategies toward the protection and prevention of harm of indigenous, environmental and land defenders.

Despite their vital contributions to human rights and sustainable development, EHRDs are the most at-risk group of human rights defenders: Fifty-nine percent of the human rights defenders killed in 2021 were working on defending the land, the environment, and indigenous peoples' rights.² Many more faced violence, stigmatisation, smear campaigns, digital attacks, and other violations and abuses of their human rights. In response, many entities, including donors and civil society organisations, have put in place strategies to help EHRDs confront these and many other threats.

For instance, with regard to donors, in recent years, foundations have become increasingly conscious of the importance of mainstreaming protection strategies for their indigenous grantees and others who work on environmental, land, and climate issues, in addition to providing funding for project-level activities. However,

¹ ALLIED is the Alliance for Land, Indigenous and Environmental Defenders - a coalition of 178 members in 76 civil society organisations formed to build a bridge between international, national and local work, and overcome gaps between siloed communities who may be failing to build on each other's work.

² Front Line Defenders. (2022) GLOBAL ANALYSIS 2021. Available at: https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/2021_global_analysis_-_final.pdf

funding strategies for different key issues (e.g., environment, human rights, civic space, land rights, climate change) remain largely siloed, preventing more robust responses to support EHRDs. In particular, working at the intersection of climate and human rights, climate activists are facing the protection gap once seen by other EHRDs.³

Against this backdrop, ALLIED published a report to present specific recommendations to donors and international civil society organisations on how to increase support for EHRDs. Building on this work and responding to the concern that many climate activists do not see themselves as human rights defenders, the Universal Rights Group, with support from Freedom House and the Lifeline Fund for Embattled Civil Society Organisations, published an accompanying report focusing on the need to safeguard climate activists' work and to enhance their protection.

Key observations

- 1. OVERLAP:** Both EHRDs and climate activists come from diverse backgrounds and settings: women, indigenous defenders, urban activists, children, students, scientists, and rural communities, among many others. Despite this diversity, there is considerable overlap between the work of many human rights defenders, EHRDs, and climate activists. Due to the interlinked nature of the three environmental crises, most EHRDs also defend the climate; likewise, the protection of the environment is embedded in the work of many climate activists. At the same time, because of the intertwined relationship between human rights and the environment, many EHRDs and climate activists also advocate for the realisation of their human rights to life, health, food, water, and many others. Moreover, EHRDs and climate activists claim the protection of, among others, their rights to defend human rights, peaceful assembly and association, and freedom of opinion and expression to defend the environment, including its safe climate component.
- 2. INTERSECTIONALITY:** The risks faced by EHRDs, including climate activists, are influenced by their specific contexts and identities. Intersectionality plays a key role in the risks faced by these defenders, as various identities increase the likelihood that violence or other tactics might be used to limit their activism or impede their resiliency. This is particularly evident in the case of women and indigenous peoples. Intersectional risks not only increase the vulnerabilities faced by defenders, but further act as a barrier to effectively seeking support.
- 3. OPPOSITION TO POWERFUL INTERESTS:** In defending the environment and climate, EHRDs, including climate activists, oppose powerful political and economic interests. This often results in threats to their human rights, including their rights to life, integrity, mental health, participation, access to information, and many more.
- 4. COLLECTIVE WORK:** Notwithstanding the shared traits with other human rights defenders, there are certain particularities that shape the specific risks and hence support needs of EHRDs and climate defenders. For example, EHRDs and climate activists rarely work alone but rather as part of groups - communities, networks, and movements. Because the causes they champion tend to be collective, so are their advocacy strategies. Consequently, the risks and threats they face typically impact (and target) entire groups. Additionally, most of these defenders are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of environmental degradation, which also affects entire populations.



³ Knox, John. (2017). Environmental human rights defenders: risking their today for our tomorrow. Universal Rights Group. Available at: <https://www.universal-rights.org/urg-policy-reports/environmental-human-rights-defenders-ehrds-risking-today-tomorrow/>

Effective strategies to deliver support for EHRDs, including climate activists:

- a. **Increase awareness of the role** of climate activists as human rights and environmental defenders, and the role of EHRDs and human rights defenders.
- b. Place a **stronger focus on the prevention** of attacks through strategies to secure an open civic space and strong environmental protection frameworks that guarantee a safe and enabling context for the defence of the environment, including its safe climate component. A pressing need of EHRDs within these efforts is the construction of positive narratives around the defence of the environment and climate, with a view to debunking misconceptions and stigmas that increase the vulnerabilities they face.
- c. Most EHRDs and climate activists are aware of the concrete obstacles and threats they face, the ways in which these should be addressed, and the types of support they need to counter such threats. Thus, at the core of effective support strategies is the recognition that **EHRDs must be agents of their own protection**. This recognition goes hand-in-hand with acknowledging that support must be tailored to their specific contexts and identities. At a practical level, it means that organisations should open spaces for the meaningful participation of EHRDs during the design, implementation, and evaluation of all support strategies.
- d. **Building resiliency** to help EHRDs, including climate activists, identify and address the risks that affect them. This includes:
 - mainstreaming and strengthening collective protection;
 - increasing access to information, including through safe physical and digital spaces and peer exchange spaces;
 - reinforcing digital protection for defenders;
 - addressing the 'hidden costs' of environmental and climate defence, including by supporting defenders through funding and capacity building to keep their organisations and communities afloat and cover living and administrative expenses;
 - offering psychological assistance, including emergency professional help;
 - providing legal advice and training to claim their rights, including but not exclusively in cases of criminalisation;
 - offering flexible funding to support environmental and climate defence activities as well as to facilitate access to other assistance strategies - such as legal support;
 - strengthening and fostering the creation of networks and alliances as key avenues to increase access to protection and support.
- e. Adopt an **intersectionality and a gender approach** to bolster specific support for and acknowledgement of women defenders, including by breaking silos with women's rights organisations and empowering women.
- f. Adopt **flexible approaches to promptly respond to emergency situations**, namely, to imminent risks to EHRDs' lives, integrity, and work. Specific areas where emergency support is most needed include digital security, legal defence, physical protection, psychological wellbeing, and humanitarian aid.
- g. **Help EHRDs claim their rights**, including justice, reparation, and non-repetition, by training and empowering them and their communities and increasing legal support.



Recommendations to increase outreach and support capacity

Meeting the support needs of EHRDs, including climate activists, does not require devising new types of support but rather new forms to disseminate and articulate existing forms to assist human rights defenders and to reach the most isolated and at-risk defenders. Indeed, two key conclusions of both reports are: 1. there is a fissure preventing effective communication between support organisations and many EHRDs, indigenous and rural defenders, and 2. many organisations lack the capacity to respond to all the support requests they receive. Some recommendations to address these issues include:

- a. **Increase outreach, share information and enhance communications to facilitate identification and access to potential sources of support.** Local and grassroots organisations and media are effective channels for informing the most isolated EHRDs, as is disseminating information about support resources and the mechanisms to access them in context- and language-appropriate formats.
- b. **Make support accessible to EHRDs most in need.** To achieve this, simplify application procedures, explain, and describe the support offered in simple terms, local languages, and context-appropriate formats, revise lengthy and stringent eligibility requirements and verification processes and remove *de facto* barriers (i.e., age and language).
- c. **Create and strengthen networks.** Networks and coalitions are a vital support system for EHRDs, their communities, and organisations; they catalyse and channel different forms of solidarity and protection and help identify opportunities for collaboration and cooperation between organisations.

Working through networks and creating effective referral pathways within existing networks and coalitions is an effective way of increasing the capacity to support EHRDs across the world, as well as to reach the most isolated and at-risk defenders. Working through networks includes strengthening local organisations by offering funding and capacity-building and working closer with them. It also includes ensuring that supporting actors' work and strategies on human rights, environmental defence, climate change, livelihoods, and women's rights are not siloed but rather interconnected. It may also be necessary to engage with non-traditional supporting actors and create or strengthen two-way relationships with academia, scientists, and the private sector to explore opportunities for increasing support for EHRDs. Effective networking also means ensuring that existing international networks increase coordination between them, and that supporting actors' (including donors and foundations) strategies on human rights, environmental defence, climate change, livelihoods, and women's rights are not siloed but rather interconnected.

- d. **Increase the capacity of existing emergency and non-emergency funds** (i.e., general funds such as the Lifeline fund or Frontline Defenders Fund and specific funds like Natural Justice Emergency Fund and ILC emergency funds) to enhance support to environmental and climate activists. Specific ways to boost support capacity include increasing funding and breaking silos (as explained above).

The next step is for human rights, environmental protection, security and climate activism funds and organisations to work together in a coordinated way to increase protection for environmental and climate defenders. This may not require creating new funds and structures, but rather increasing the capacity of those that already exist and devising effective mechanisms for their coordination and collaboration.

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