

THE UNITED NATIONS PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

TOGETHER WE ACHIEVE

Backgrounder

Indigenous Human Rights Defenders

The 1998 *UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders* refers to individuals, groups and associations working for the effective elimination of all violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms of peoples and individuals. Many indigenous peoples are also human rights defenders, struggling to protect their lands, environment and rights.

A risky environment

Human rights defenders face serious risks all over the world for their work to protect their communities, peoples and environment. Due to the nature of their work, they often become targets of both State and non-State actors who seek to discourage, discredit and disrupt their activities.

According to Front Line Defenders, 281 human rights defenders were killed in 25 countries in 2016, a major increase compared to 185 in 2015, and 130 in 2014. Most of the cases were related to land, indigenous and environmental rights and a majority occurred in Latin America and Asia, although indigenous human rights defenders in all regions of the world face increasing levels of reprisals.

Many human rights defenders are subjected to violent attacks and threats, enforced disappearances, illegal surveillance, travel bans, blackmail, sexual harassment and other forms of violence and discrimination. Criminalization of the activities of human rights defenders is a common tactic to silence protesters and to dissuade others. Lawsuits are also used as deterrents to exhaust human rights defenders' financial resources and discourage their motivation.

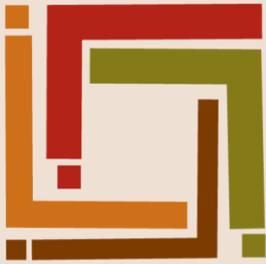
To a large degree, perpetrators of crimes against human rights defenders act with impunity. Protection for human rights defenders is overall lacking or ineffective. The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders has noted that in almost every affected Latin American country, Government and corporate actors are involved in the crimes committed against human rights defenders (Report on the situation of human rights defenders 2016, 1/71/281).

Indigenous human rights defenders

Indigenous human rights defenders face severe risks, as they live in territories that are rich in natural resources and that are coveted by State and non-State actors alike.

Indigenous peoples frequently oppose land grabbing, natural resource extraction, mega projects and deforestation activities on their lands and territories, arguing that these endanger their traditional livelihoods, and are harmful to the environment and ultimately unsustainable. Many indigenous environmental activists promote alternative visions of development that place a primacy on sustainability, human rights and the rights of Mother Earth, such as the concept of *Vivir Bien* (living well).





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Many of the violations against indigenous human rights defenders take place in the context of the extractive industry, land rights and large-scale projects, such as hydro-electric dams or oil and gas pipelines. The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders in 2016 noted an increase in reprisals against environmental human rights defenders protesting the harms caused by projects funded by international financial institutions. Despite their role as protectors of biodiversity and nature, indigenous human rights defenders are often presented as obstacles to progress, anti-development or even as enemies of the State or terrorists.

Responding to violations against human rights defenders

The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has been closely following the situation of indigenous human rights defenders. During its fifteenth session in 2016, a key message emerging from the Permanent Forum's report was the need to combat pervasive violations against indigenous human rights defenders, including criminalization, persecution, violence, imprisonment and killing. To follow up on this, the Permanent Forum will consider the situation of indigenous human rights defenders at its sixteenth session in particular during the dialogues with the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples and the Chair of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on Monday, 1 May.

In 2000, the United Nations established a specific mandate on human rights defenders (the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders) to examine and respond to information on the situation of human rights defenders, to engage with Governments and others on the implementation of the Declaration and to recommend strategies to protect human rights defenders.

The Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples also regularly draws attention to the threats against indigenous human rights defenders in country visits, reports and statements.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states that indigenous individuals have the rights to life, physical and mental integrity, liberty and security of person – and that they shall not be subjected to any act of violence (article 7). In addition, the UN Declaration on the rights of human rights defenders articulates existing human rights in the specific situation of human rights defenders. These rights include the right to protection, the right to criticize Government bodies and agencies, the right to provide legal assistance and the right to access resources for the purpose of protecting human rights, including the receipt of funds from abroad.

Further background information:

[A/71/281 Situation of human rights defenders. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders](#)

[Declaration on the rights of human rights defenders](#)

[Front Line Defenders: Annual Report on Human Rights Defenders at Risk in 2016](#)

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