

UN launches Environmental Rights Initiative

Taking a stand against ongoing threats, harassment and murder of environmental defenders, the United Nations on Tuesday launched an initiative enlisting business communities to champion a clean and healthy environment.

“Those who [struggle to protect planet](#) and people should be celebrated as heroes, but the sad fact is that many are paying a heavy price with their safety and sometimes their lives,” Erik Solheim, Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) said Tuesday, launching the UN Environmental Rights [Initiative](#) in Geneva.

“It’s our duty to stand on the side of those who are on the right side of history. It means standing for the most fundamental and universal of human rights,” he added.

By helping people to understand how to defend their rights, and by assisting governments to safeguard environmental rights, UNEP maintains that the initiative will bring environmental protection nearer to the people.

Although, since the 1970s, environmental rights have grown more rapidly than any other human right and are enshrined in over 100 constitutions, in January the international non-governmental organization (NGO) Global Witness documented that almost four environmental defenders are being killed weekly – with the true total likely far higher.

Many more are harassed, intimidated and forced from their lands. Moreover, around 40-50 per cent of the 197 environmental defenders killed in 2017 came from indigenous and local communities.

“Violations of environmental rights have a profound impact on a wide variety of human rights, including the rights to life, self-determination, food, water, health, sanitation, housing, cultural, civil and political rights,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein said, recounting recent visits to Papua New Guinea and Fiji where he was made keenly aware of the impact of extractive industries and climate change on individual rights.

“It is crucial that those most affected are able to meaningfully participate in decisions relating to land and the environment,” he stressed.

Two disturbing counter-trends are underway. The first is the escalating intimidation and murder of environmental defenders, and the second is some countries’ attempts to limit NGO activities.

“States have a responsibility to prevent and punish rights abuses committed by private corporations within their territory, and businesses have an obligation to avoid infringing on the human rights of others,” Mr. Zeid continued. “I hope this new Initiative will be able to encourage States and

businesses to comply with these obligations.”

Leo Heileman, UNEP director for the office in Latin America and the Caribbean called it “an opportunity to give environmental rights the same legal standing as human rights at the global level.”

Among other things, the initiative will help governments strengthen institutional capacities to develop and implement policy and legal frameworks protecting environmental rights, and assist businesses to better understand their environmental rights obligations and provide guidance on how to advance beyond a compliance culture.

“I am proposing to the UN [Human Rights Council](#) that the UN should join countries in recognizing a global right to a healthy environment,” said John Knox Special Rapporteur on [Human Rights and the Environment](#) . “The time has come to recognize this formal interdependence of human rights and the environment, not only at national level but at the UN level too.”