



CIVIC SPACE AND ENVIRONMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS: ESSENTIAL FOR ACHIEVING CLIMATE JUSTICE

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Photo: Protesters hold placards during a rally before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) decides in three separate cases if states are doing enough in the face of global warming in rulings that could force them to do more, in Strasbourg, eastern France, on 9 April 2024.

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HOW DID WE GET HERE?

INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING THE CLIMATE CRISIS AND WHY WE NEED CLIMATE JUSTICE

The accelerating climate emergency is a profound human rights crisis. Amnesty International recognizes that climate change impacts the rights of people today as well as the rights of future generations. It makes existing inequalities worse and puts many human rights at risk – including civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

The science is clear – The worsening climate crisis is fueled by global heating, primarily caused by human activities. This is having devastating consequences. Across the world, we witness and experience this daily in the increasing frequency and intensity of weather events, such as heatwaves, droughts, wildfires, extreme rainfall and violent storms. These climate-driven disasters damage the environment, destroy biodiversity and cause disproportionate harm to marginalized groups already facing systemic injustice.¹ The people who have historically contributed least to climate change are suffering the

most. People living in lower income countries and in low lying island states, as well as groups experiencing discrimination in countries at any level of income, experience disproportionate harm.

As the impacts of climate change become more visible and dangerous, government action remains inadequate, and corporations responsible for the majority of greenhouse gas emissions deny their role, a greater number of activists, social movements and grassroots groups are mobilizing, taking to the streets, speaking out or engaging in acts of non-violent direct action and civil disobedience².



THINK ABOUT IT

- Have you seen or experienced any climate-change related disasters in your own community or in the news?

- Who in your community might be most affected if an extreme weather event were to happen tomorrow?

- Why might some communities have fewer resources to recover from extreme weather events?

- Have you seen or participated in a protest, campaign or action calling for climate justice? What motivated you to get involved?

- Why do you think activists and organizers are essential for driving action on climate change?

PURPOSE OF THIS EXPLAINER

In many countries, defending human rights and the environment has long been a dangerous activity, and many environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs) face serious human rights abuses, including criminalization and attacks ranging from threats and intimidation to killings. These risks are often made worse when their demands clash with powerful interests.³ Even in countries where the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly have strong legal protections, EHRDs have been under increasing attack, leading, for example, to unlawful bans on protests and the unlawful criminalization of EHRDs.⁴

Like all human rights defenders (HRDs), EHRDs are also impacted by shrinking civic space. That is, the increased restrictions on the ability to exercise human rights, that prevent them from speaking out, organizing and advocating for human rights change. These restrictions and poor governmental protection of the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association are not only visible on a national level, but also at multilateral forums, namely at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD). Amnesty International currently engages at meetings of the UNFCCC

“THEY ARE AFRAID OF US BECAUSE WE ARE NOT AFRAID OF THEM”

Berta Cáceres, Lenca-Honduran Indigenous leader and EHRD killed on 2 March 2016, at the time she was campaigning against the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam projects and its impacts on the territory of the Lenca Indigenous People.



Filipino singer Bullet Dumas performs for the group of young demonstrators as they participate in the global climate strike in Tacloban City, Leyte, Philippines © Eloisa Lopez/Amnesty International



Hereditary Chief Na'Moks of the Wet'suwet'en Nation © Iqbal Badruddin / Amnesty International

and the CBD, including the Conferences of the Parties, known as COPs. The goal of our climate justice advocacy in these forums is to influence decision-makers, particularly from countries that have historically emitted the most greenhouse gases (GHGs) and others in a position to take action, particularly high-income high-emitting fossil fuel producers, to adopt and implement human-rights consistent climate commitments and provide remedies, including compensation, for the climate harm they have caused.

The protection of civic space and the ability of EHRDs to do their important work is central to Amnesty International's action to promote climate justice. A movement for climate justice must be centred on the demands, experience and knowledge of the individuals, groups and communities most harmed by climate change and by the activities of extractive industries, including the fossil fuel industry. These individuals, groups and communities must play a meaningful role in climate decision-making at all levels. This explainer aims to provide an overview of the importance of the protection of civic spaces and the work of EHRDs to achieve climate justice.



RIISING AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICES

Some countries have experienced repressive regimes for decades. In other contexts, authoritarian practices are on the rise. This has particular resonance for climate change. Authoritarians seek to silence alternate viewpoints and sources of power, such as independent journalism, scientific research, and human rights activism. Thus, some current authoritarian actors deny climate science, want to limit public access to reliable climate information, and aim to sabotage multilateral action, which is key to solving the global problem of climate change.

WHY IS OPEN CIVIC SPACE AN ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE?

Individuals, groups and communities worldwide are speaking out and pressuring governments to respond effectively to the climate crisis. They are mobilizing for and demanding climate justice.

BUT WHAT IS CLIMATE JUSTICE?

Climate justice is a framework used by civil society organizations across the world to acknowledge that the climate crisis is not *only* an environmental issue. It is a crisis rooted in and exacerbated by inequalities. Climate change is an injustice: It is the result of powerful people taking actions that inflict harm on everyone else. A climate justice approach looks at the root causes of the climate crisis and calls on powerful actors to address these imbalances and develop a future beyond fossil fuels that fully respects and protects human rights for all generations now and to come. The future should not replicate the extractivism and discrimination of the present and the past.



CLIMATE CHANGE IS AN INJUSTICE

IT IS THE RESULT OF POWERFUL PEOPLE TAKING ACTIONS THAT INFLECT HARM ON EVERYONE ELSE.

EXTRACTIVISM

Extractivism is a concept that was coined in Latin America in the 1990s. The term *extractivismo* is used to describe the large-scale extraction of raw materials and natural resources primarily for export. Beyond the physical extraction of materials, extractivism also refers to a political and economic system rooted in colonial histories that prioritises profit over ecological health and community well-being. It often causes environmental destruction, worsens existing inequalities, exploits marginalized communities and worsens the climate crisis.⁵ The profits of these activities rarely benefit local people, but often end up abroad through debt repayments or as the profits of large companies in higher income countries, who often do evade accountability for the pollution or other harms they cause or contribute to.

With extreme weather events hitting different countries across the world, social movements and grassroots groups are mobilizing, taking to the streets, speaking out or engaging in acts of non-violent direct action and civil disobedience to demand adequate and effective climate action. People are increasingly concerned.

Civic space – the freedom to speak out, organize, and advocate for change – is at the heart of climate justice.



WHAT IS CIVIC SPACE?

Civic space is the political, legal and social environment that allows individuals and groups to freely express their views, organize, advocate, and participate in decisions affecting their lives and communities.⁶ It is the space for freedom of expression, peaceful assembly (including peaceful protest), association, and participation in public life, both on and offline.⁷ In multilateral climate forums, civic space includes the ability to attend and influence negotiations, advocate for policy change, meaningfully participate in decision-making processes, and engage in peaceful protest.⁸

When **civic space** is open, safe and protected, it allows the people most affected by the climate crisis – including frontline and fenceline communities, Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, and historically marginalized groups – to be heard. It ensures a diverse range of voices to bring their critical knowledge, perspectives, lived experience, and demands into climate decision-making processes. Without them, climate policies risk entrenching inequality, excluding

those most affected by the climate crisis, and failing to address the structural drivers of climate injustice.



“Fenceline” communities: communities of people who live near industrial infrastructure producing or transforming fossil fuels. Fenceline communities directly experience the adverse impacts of pollution and environmental degradation emanating from extractive projects and fossil fuel processing. They tend to live in so-called “sacrifice zones”.

“Frontline” communities: people who bear the brunt of direct and indirect impacts of the climate crisis (for example, communities who are most affected by climate-change related severe weather events and slow onset impacts like sea-level rise), many of whom are marginalized and experience intersecting forms of cultural, economic, social and racial discrimination.

Sacrifice zones: heavily contaminated areas inhabited by low-income and marginalized groups who bear the disproportionate burden of the human rights consequences of exposure to pollution and toxic substances.⁹

An open civic space allows EHRDs to expose abuses linked to extractive industries, corruption, and corporate impunity with low risk of retaliation and adequate safeguards. It's how defenders hold governments and corporations to account, and how communities push for solutions that are inclusive, fair, responsive to those most affected, and grounded in human rights.

But when civic space is shut down or restricted, those efforts are increasingly silenced and stopped. It becomes more difficult and dangerous for EHRDs to speak out and hold powerful actors accountable. Attacks on the right to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association have real consequences: they undermine urgent climate action and delay the urgent and equitable transitions needed to prevent further catastrophic global heating. They undermine effective climate action by shutting out the very people who should be leading it.

If we want climate justice, we must defend civic space. We need inclusive discussions around climate change, involving the people most affected by it. That means making sure EHRDs and all affected communities can participate meaningfully in climate decision-making, from local forums to international negotiations like the UN climate conferences. It means protecting their right to protest peacefully, to raise their voices, and to challenge harmful projects without fear of reprisals.



INCLUSIVE CIVIC SPACE

Where all EHRDs without discrimination can freely speak, assemble, and hold power to account – is essential for achieving transformative climate justice action.



Criminalization of the Wet’suwet’en Land Defenders¹⁰



In **Canada**, members of the Wet’suwet’en Nation, have opposed the construction of a gas pipeline by the Canadian company Coastal GasLink Pipeline Ltd. (CGL) through the Nation’s unceded ancestral territory.

Despite their opposition to the project, the construction on the 670-kilometre pipeline began in 2019 without their free, prior and informed consent (FPIC).¹¹ Committed to protecting their ancestral lands and everyone’s right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, the Wet’suwet’en land defenders began taking action to defend their land against the pipeline, and preserve their culture and way of life. Their peaceful actions have been met with surveillance, intimidation, harassment and criminalization.

Between January 2019 and March 2023, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) conducted at least four largescale raids against the camps set up by Wet’suwet’en land defenders and their supporters, over 75 people were arrested and detained.¹² In 2022, the British Columbia Prosecution Service prosecuted 20 land defenders on charges of “criminal contempt” for allegedly disobeying an injunction order to stay away from pipeline construction sites, even though these sites are located on Wet’suwet’en territory.¹³ Seven of the 20 land defenders pleaded guilty because of restrictive bail conditions, as well as the familial, psychological and financial impacts that the criminal proceedings imposed on them. Five other defenders had their charges dropped.¹⁴

Several land defenders went on trial in 2023 and 2024. In November 2023, land defender Sabina Dennis was found not guilty of criminal contempt.¹⁵ In February 2024, Likhts'amisyu Clan Wing Chief Dtsa'hyl was found guilty of criminal contempt for violating the terms of the injunction order. He was sentenced to 60-days house arrest which he served in July and August 2024.¹⁶ Amnesty International found his detention to be arbitrary and declared him a Prisoner of Conscience.

In January 2024, land defenders Sleydo', Shaylynn Sampson and Corey (Jayohcee) Jocko were found guilty of criminal contempt for allegedly breaching the terms of the injunction order.¹⁷ The land defenders had simultaneously filed abuse of process applications alleging that their human rights were violated by the RCMP during their arrests in November 2021. On 18 February 2025, the British Columbia Supreme Court ruled that the conduct, including anti-Indigenous racist statements, by RCMP officers during the arrests violated the land defenders' rights under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. However, the court failed to stay all charges against the defenders and said it would instead consider reducing their sentences.¹⁸ Sleydo', Shaylynn and Corey will have their sentencing hearing in October 2025.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

If you are engaging learners on the topic of EHRDs and protecting civic space, it may be helpful to consider the following questions:

- Why do you think the police are arresting the Wet'suwet'en Nation land defenders ?

- Whose interests do you think are being protected by the police and by the government? Those of the Wet'suwet'en Nation, or those of the pipeline company?

- How do you think the pipeline construction affects the Wet'suwet'en Nation?

- How do issues of civic space and EHRDs play out in your own community, and what lessons from the Wet'suwet'en case could apply locally?

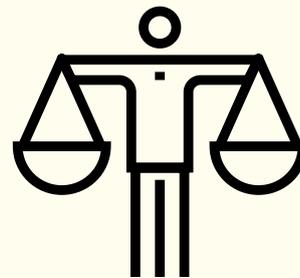
Attacks on EHRDs who speak out for climate justice silences critical voices. Silencing EHRDs doesn't just violate their rights — it undermines global efforts to address the climate crisis. It undermines the EHRDs ability to demand the just, effective, and sustainable climate action that governments have committed to under international law and to hold them accountable. When governments, corporations, or other actors suppress defenders or restrict civic space, or fail to protect those at risk, they violate and abuse a broad range of internationally recognized human rights.

WHO ARE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS?

Environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs) are people who, by themselves or together with others, stand up for human rights by protecting the environment we all depend on. They peacefully promote and protect climate justice, clean air and water, biodiversity, land rights, and the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.¹⁹

WHY DOES AMNESTY USE THE TERM ENVIRONMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER?²⁰

A human rights defender (HRD) is a person who, by themselves or with others, acts to defend and/or promote human rights at the local, national, regional or international level. A HRD can be any person, irrespective of their age, occupation, nationality, and so on, who speaks out against human rights abuses and violations, and/or who promotes human rights in other ways.



International human rights law and standards such as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders recognize and protect the right to defend human rights as an autonomous and independent right and lay out what states should do to guarantee a safe and enabling environment in which HRDs can work safely and without fear of reprisals.

Environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs) include anyone who, by themselves or together with others, takes action to defend the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, a right recognized by the UN General Assembly in 2022²¹.

The recognition of this right means that individuals who might describe themselves as environmental or climate activists rather than as an environmental human rights defender also fall under the protections afforded to human rights defenders as laid out in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. For this reason, Amnesty prefers to use EHRDs as an umbrella term, to highlight that the work of such activists is not only legitimate, but should also be protected.



Climate Strikes in Pakistan (Islamabad) in September 2019 © Iqbal Badruddin for Amnesty International

EHRDs come from all walks of life. For example, they may include grassroots activists, land defenders, women human rights defenders, youth climate activists, people with disabilities and those from rural or marginalized and affected groups who are organizing to protect their homes and ecosystems. EHRDs are also scientists, researchers, health workers, judges, lawyers, journalists, and others who use their professional roles to speak out and defend human rights when the environment is under threat.

EHRDs take action by organizing or participating in events and campaigns, through education, legal action, promoting their stories and implementing alternative solutions, conducting advocacy or providing information

and support to victims. Through these actions, they push back and challenge practices that harm the environment and demand justice for those affected by human rights abuses. Their work helps to stop destructive projects, hold powerful actors accountable, and build alternative solutions grounded in justice and sustainability.

EHRDs are essential to the climate justice movement. For example, they bring frontline and fenceline perspectives to global climate policy debates, challenge fossil fuel expansion, oppose harmful energy projects, and push for climate action that respects human rights. They do not just defend nature – they defend dignity, survival, and the right to shape our collective future.

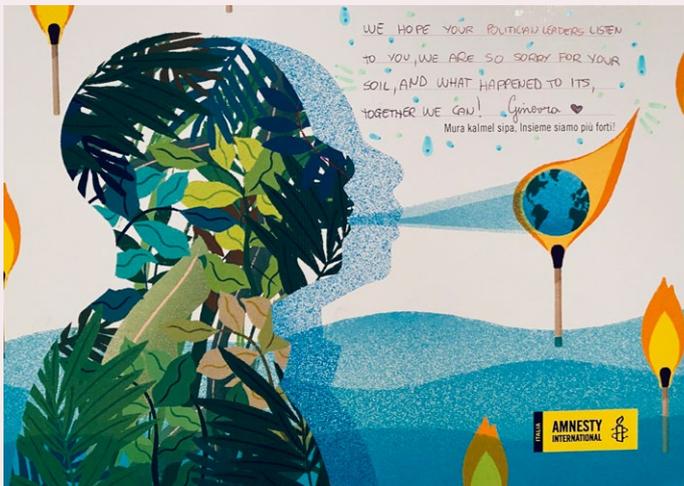


EHRDS ARE A POSITIVE FORCE FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE WORLDWIDE

By mobilizing, EHRDs achieve positive steps to protect the climate and the environment – victories that positively impact the rights of entire communities and are milestones towards climate justice.



In **Australia**, Uncle Pabai and Uncle Paul, community leaders of the Guda Maluyigal Nation have been courageously fighting for climate justice on Boigu and Saibai, outer islands of the Torres Strait, for years. In 2021 they filed a court case arguing that the Australian government had breached a duty of care to protect the Torres Strait Islands from harm caused by climate change.²²



Solidarity postcard for Uncle Pabai and Uncle Paul from a W4R activist © Amnesty International Italy

People living in the Torres Strait are at serious risk of becoming the first community in Australia to be displaced by climate change. Rising sea levels and storm surges have caused flooding, erosion of beaches, damage to cultural sites and cemeteries where ancestors are buried, and salination of fertile crop-growing land, while warmer sea

temperatures and acidification impacts corals and seagrass, reducing totemic sea life, and seasonal patterns and migratory birds are changed.²³ It is increasingly difficult for Torres Strait Islanders to practice *Ailan Kastom*.²⁴ If emissions are not drastically reduced, and fast, people will be forced off their islands, putting their culture and identity at great risk.

On 15 July 2025, the Federal Court of Australia found that the government does not currently owe a duty of care to protect the Torres Strait people from climate harm, but it recognized that the “Torres Strait Islands and their inhabitants face a bleak future if urgent action is not taken to address climate change”.²⁵ The court heard evidence that communities on Boigu and Saibai could have less than 30 years left before their islands become inundated. The Judge found that Australia’s emissions targets set between 2015 and 2021 did not consider the best available science, and that climate change is an existential threat to humanity.²⁶

Uncle Pabai and Uncle Paul and their community have shared their heartbreak on the decision²⁷, but said they will continue their fight to defend their islands.²⁸ By taking the Australian Government to court, Uncle Pabai and Uncle Paul have forced the government to confront the harm caused by failing to take action to prevent climate change.²⁹



In **Cambodia**, Mother Nature Cambodia is a leading grassroots activist group fighting for environmental and human rights. Using a combination of community mobilization, direct action and public awareness raising, they achieved major victories in halting a hydroelectric dam project in the Areng Valley in 2015 and banning coastal sand exports in 2016, protecting Indigenous People, rainforests, mangroves, and marine species.³⁰

Because of their activism, EHRDs associated with Mother Nature Cambodia have been repressed and criminalized for several years. In 2024, ten of them were sentenced to six to eight years in prison for “plotting” and “insulting the King” solely for their work as EHRDs.³¹ Several of the activists had previously been imprisoned for their peaceful environmental activism in 2020 and 2021.³²



Mother Nature Cambodia activists, Phnom Penh, 2 July 2024. © Private



In **Ecuador**, a group of nine girls and young women called “*Guerreras por la Amazonía*”³³ (the Amazon warriors) successfully sued the government in a case challenging the impacts of gas flaring, despite experiencing stigmatization and intimidation for their activism.³⁴ With the Union of People Affected by Chevron-Texaco (UDAPT) and the collective “Eliminate the Flares, Ignite Life”, the defenders obtained a ruling against the government from the Provincial Court of Justice of Sucumbíos, which ordered full reparation for damages, the gradual and progressive elimination of the gas flares, studies on their health impacts, and the establishment of hospital cancer care centres. Their campaign continues as the ruling has not been fully implemented.³⁵



One of the 13 Amazonian girls and adolescents called “*Guerreras por la Amazonía*” (GxA) who face stigmatization and intimidation in Ecuador for their activism, 2024 © Private

Gas flaring is directly linked to global warming through the emission of super pollutants such as methane, threatening the enjoyment and guarantee of human rights now and in the future. Flaring can be avoided in fossil fuel extraction.

MAKING HISTORY IS DANGEROUS

EHRDs are standing up for the planet and its people – and paying a high price for it. They work on the frontlines of the impacts of climate change and are often the first to resist fossil fuel projects, deforestation, land grabs, and harmful energy developments. They also raise awareness about how these historical and ongoing projects damage the environment and threaten the rights of their communities. In doing so, they often oppose powerful interests, and this puts them at serious risk.

According to the NGO Global Witness, at least 196 land and environmental defenders were killed in 2023 worldwide.³⁹ Many more faced threats, harassment, or violence. According to the organization, most of these attacks are carried out by state authorities, companies, or armed groups, and others are often involved too.

EHRDs are the most targeted of all human rights defenders.⁴⁰ **Indigenous and Afro-descendent EHRDs** are especially at risk, as their land rights claims often challenge state and corporate control

over lucrative natural resources.⁴¹ **Women EHRDs** face a double threat: targeted not just for their activism, but also due to their gender and face sexism, exclusion, and gender-based violence, including sexual assault and online abuse.⁴²

Children and youth climate EHRDs are also often targeted, along with their families.⁴³

Despite all this, EHRDs keep defending our planet, our rights, and our shared future. They need protection, solidarity, and space to keep doing this vital work.



Women from the Maasai community take part in a Global Climate Strike organized by Fridays For Future at Magadi in Kajiado county on 22 March, 2022. © AAFP via Getty Images



In **Viet Nam**, Đặng Đình Bách, a leading environmental justice lawyer, was arbitrarily detained on 24 June 2021, as he campaigned against the country’s heavy reliance on coal as an energy source, and sentenced to five years imprisonment.

Bách has dedicated his life to improving the health and livelihood of people in Viet Nam and protecting them from the threats of pollution and climate change. His organization, the Law and Policy of Sustainable Development Research Center (LPSD) was the first in Viet Nam to take legal action against the government and corporations for serious environmental and public health violations. The illegal disposal of pesticides and the increased risk of cancer caused by industrial pollution are just some of the issues the organization has fought against.⁴⁵



Đặng Đình Bách. © Private

When Bách was arrested, his newborn son was just two weeks old. LPSD was forced to close. Bách was charged with “tax evasion” and later sentenced to five years in prison following a trial which UN experts considered unfair.⁴⁶ The court refused to hear Bách’s defence, and the prosecutor failed to disclose evidence. His wife was not allowed to attend her husband’s “public” trials.

Since 2021, at least five leaders of environmental and climate NGOs have been arrested and accused of “tax evasion”,⁴⁷ a tactic used by the Vietnamese authorities to silence the growing movement of activists calling on the government to protect the environment.



In **Indonesia**, Ilham Mahmudi and Taufik, two fishermen from North Sumatra Province, were arrested in April and May 2024

respectively, for their efforts with the local community to save a protected mangrove forest from the encroachment of palm oil operations. They feared that the encroachment would destroy the mangrove ecosystem in the area, which in turn could affect the livelihood of fishermen, lead to coastal erosion and cause the village to sink.⁴⁸



Taufik (left) and Ilham Mahmudi (right) attend their trial in Stabat District Court in Langkat Regency, North Sumatra Province, Indonesia on 15 July 2024 © Srikandi Lestari

Reported to the police by a man linked to the encroachment activities, Ilham and Taufik were brought to trial for allegedly participating in group violence and property damage during a protest on 21 March 2024, during which a makeshift hut in the forest was damaged. On 5 September 2024, the men were sentenced to a two-month suspended prison sentence with four months’ probation, meaning they were not to serve the sentence in prison. Since then, Ilham and Taufik have returned to their community and remained committed to continuing their conservation efforts.

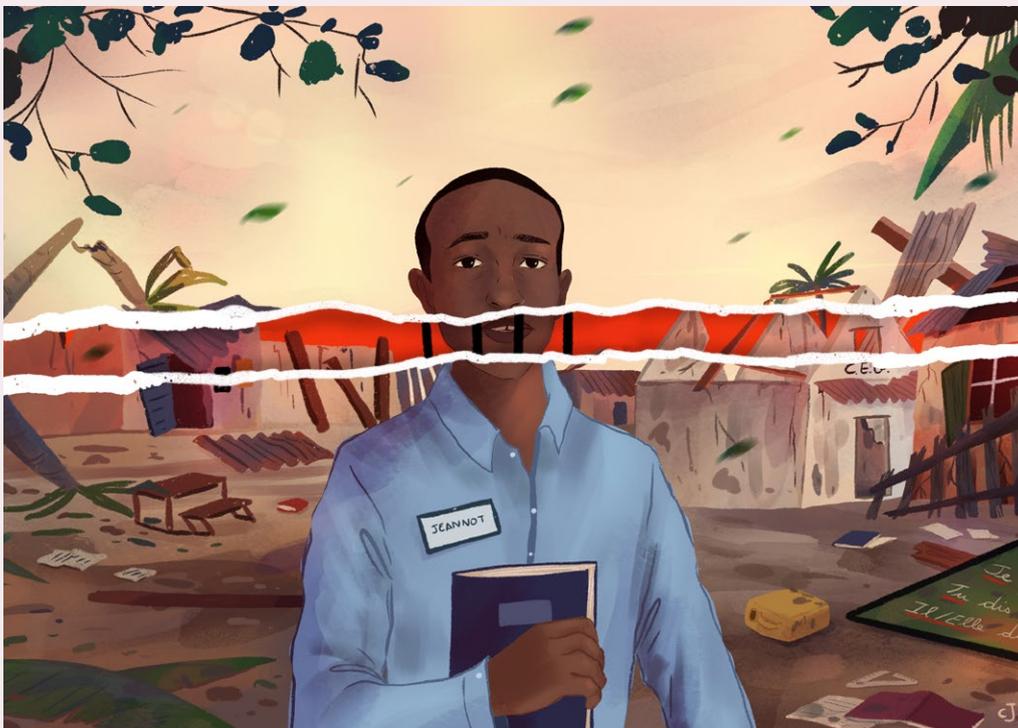
Local NGOs and advocates believe the criminal proceedings to be a form of criminalization aimed to stifle the local community’s work in conserving the mangrove forests and defending their right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.⁴⁹



ATTACKS AGAINST EHRDS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN AFRICA



Cyclones Batsirai and Emnati hit **Madagascar** on 5 and 23 February 2022.⁵⁰ They resulted in landfalls in the districts of Nosy Varika and Mananjary, prompting a global call for international humanitarian aid. At the end of February, Jeannot Randriamanana, a school teacher in Mananjary, began posting on social media that the local population had not received any of the humanitarian aid promised by the local authorities. On 2 March, the Public Prosecutor brought charges against Jeannot for “defamation and humiliation of members of Parliament and public servants and identity fraud”. He was charged with fraudulent use of the function of a journalist (identity fraud), solely for having shared information on his social media, although he never claimed to be a journalist.⁵¹ Jeannot was arrested on the same day.



*Jeannot Randriamanana, a school teacher who was convicted for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression.
© Catmouse James for Amnesty International*

On 12 July, the Court of Appeal of Fianarantsoa upheld his conviction and two-year suspended sentence. Jeannot Randriamanana was convicted solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression when he denounced on Facebook the alleged mismanagement and embezzlement of humanitarian aid by several authority figures in the district of Nosy Varika, in east Madagascar.⁵²



In **Tanzania**, since 2009, the authorities have resorted to ill-treatment, excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests and detentions to forcibly evict the Maasai Indigenous People of Loliondo while leasing their land to private companies. It is particularly disturbing that they have carried out these forced evictions under the pretext of “conservation”, while in reality, they have allowed Otterlo Business Corporation (OBC), a trophy hunting company, to conduct illegal trophy hunting activities, in clear violation of Tanzania’s Wildlife Conservation laws.⁵³

On 10 June 2022, Tanzanian security forces resorted to the use of unlawful force, including using live ammunition and tear gas, to stifle peaceful protests by Maasai residents of Ololosokwan village in Loliondo. The demonstrators had gathered to resist a demarcation exercise by the security forces, who were trying to displace them from their ancestral lands in the name of so-called “conservation”. More than 40 people were wounded, others were left homeless, and many were forced to flee the country. The eviction marked the fourth time the Maasai have been forcibly expelled from their land, following previous forced evictions in 2009, 2013, and 2017.⁵⁴



*Maasai men attend a livestock auction at the Msomera village in Handeni, Tanzania, on 15 July, 2022.
© AFP via Getty Images*

STRATEGIC LAWSUITS AGAINST PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SLAPPS) TARGETING EHRDS

Persecution through the abuse or misuse of the legal system is increasingly used as a tool to silence and intimidate: EHRDs and civil society organizations are being threatened with costly lawsuits or dragged into courtrooms simply for speaking out.

One tactic that is spreading fast is the use of SLAPPs – strategic lawsuits against public participation – which consist in the malicious and/or abusive use of legal tactics by powerful actors, such as state authorities or corporations. SLAPPs are not necessarily aimed at protecting the honour or reputation of an individual or a corporation, but rather used with the aim of intimidating, deterring, silencing or punishing critics or those who expose wrongdoing or human rights abuses. They target journalists, whistleblowers, community leaders, human rights defenders, civil society organizations, activists and other critical voices, with the goal of draining their time, energy, and money, and scaring others into silence.

Private companies, especially those in the fossil fuel sector, are often at the centre of these attacks on EHRDs.⁵⁵ These companies influence climate policy by lobbying, funding and running disinformation campaigns, and taking over important multilateral spaces such as the UNFCCC Conferences.⁵⁶ But it's not just about lobbying against climate regulation:⁵⁷ they file and fund SLAPPS to silence critics, drain activists' resources, and intimidate defenders into stepping back.⁵⁸

This isn't just about business interests – it's about power and inequity. When EHRDs raise their voices against environmental harm or stand up for their communities, too often they are met with threats, lawsuits, or criminal charges. This global pattern of silencing dissent is a direct threat to civic space, human rights and the future of the planet.



THINK ABOUT IT

Think about this sentence:

“Despite the real threats EHRDs face, they keep tirelessly pursuing justice, defending our planet, our rights and our shared future”

- Do you know any individuals, groups or movements in your community who are speaking out to protect the environment and human rights? What are the current risks that they face?

- Why do you think so many EHRDs continue their work despite the threats they may experience?

- What forms of support and solidarity do you think are the most meaningful?



VERDICT AGAINST GREENPEACE SETS A DAMAGING PRECEDENT FOR DEFENDERS OF CLIMATE JUSTICE⁵⁹

In the **United States of America**, a jury in North Dakota ordered Greenpeace to pay at least US\$660m to the fossil fuel company Energy Transfer, having found the organization responsible for defamation and the actions of protestors opposed to the Dakota Access pipeline in 2016 and 2017.

Energy Transfer's chosen path of legal action bears of the hallmarks of strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP). It had the effect of stifling the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly of the protestors and inflicting significant harm on Greenpeace, draining their resources through a protracted case and exorbitant damages, and impacting their ability to fight back. Besides punishing Greenpeace, this verdict could also have a chilling effect on the Standing Rock Sioux tribe and other Indigenous Peoples who protested against the pipeline's construction on their territory. Greenpeace plans to appeal this decision.



A Native American protestor is threatened by private security guards at a work site for the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) oil pipeline, North Dakota, 3 September 2016 © AFP via Getty Images

UNDER THREAT: THE RIGHT TO PROTEST

As the climate crisis accelerates and government actions continue to fall short, people are stepping up. The climate justice movement is growing and strengthening its ability to mobilize, led by impacted communities and EHRDs of all ages and walks of life who are taking to the streets, raising their voices, and demanding urgent action.

Peaceful protest has always been a vital tool for driving social change and defending human rights. Across the globe, people have mobilized to oppose and bring attention to destructive mining, fossil fuel, energy and infrastructure projects that pollute, exploit and abuse human rights. These protests shine a light on human rights abuses, often making visible the harm that would otherwise remain hidden from the wider public. They bring awareness to issues affecting communities that may not have access to media platforms or political power. Protestors demand respect of human rights – including the right to a healthy environment, the right to access information, the right to participate in decision-making regarding projects that may affect the environment, the right to self-determination, and the rights of Indigenous Peoples to FPIC. These protests have also been a way to voice demands for climate justice, especially when authorities have long ignored these demands.

But instead of listening, many governments and powerful corporations are pushing back.

Authorities worldwide are finding new ways to silence EHRDs, using increasingly more sophisticated legal, administrative, and coercive tools to stifle environmental advocacy and stop people from speaking out. These tactics include criminalization, disinformation, judicial harassment, restrictive laws, and the misuse of security frameworks to justify repression.

Some states criminalize peaceful protesters by labelling EHRDs as threats to “national security” or “economic development” using vague or repressive laws — like anti-terror or national security laws — to treat peaceful protest and civil disobedience as a threat.⁶⁰ Others target civil society with restrictions on NGO registration or access to foreign funding.⁶¹

Amnesty International’s research shows that these abuses are not isolated incidents – they’re part of a pattern. When states and companies feel threatened by demands for climate justice, they often respond by shrinking civic space and silencing the very people who are standing up for our future.

Authorities worldwide are finding new ways to silence EHRDs, using increasingly more sophisticated legal, administrative, and coercive tools to stifle environmental advocacy and stop people from speaking out.



STIGMATIZATION AND REPRESSION OF CLIMATE PROTESTS IN EUROPE

Recent Amnesty International's research exposes that, across Europe, governments are increasingly adopting authoritarian tactics to suppress and criminalize activism and restrict the right to peaceful protest, including by targeting climate justice protesters. Authorities across 21 countries, including Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the UK, have deployed repressive laws, excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests, and intrusive surveillance to stifle dissent.⁶²



In **Italy**, a new law – dubbed pejoratively by some political figures as the “law against eco-vandals” – was introduced in 2024 increasing the sanctions and further deterring climate activism, peaceful protests, and acts of civil disobedience. The use of administrative measure known as “an order banning presence (*“foglio di via”*)⁶³ against activists has increased.⁶⁴ A ‘security’ decree-law approved in April 2025⁶⁵, further restricted the right to peaceful protest and increased, among others, providing penalties for modes of protest recently used by climate and environmental activists, such as road blockades, which could result in a sentence of up to two years in prison.⁶⁶



In **Germany**, administrative detention has been increasingly used against climate activists in Bavaria, Berlin and North Westphalia, to prevent them from participating in protests.⁶⁷ In Bavaria in particular, since October 2022, the police have placed several climate activists in preventive detention for up to 30 days activists repeatedly blocked streets causing traffic congestion.⁶⁸

Climate protesters are increasingly stigmatized by political and media rhetoric, being labelled as ‘threats’ to public order, ‘eco-terrorists’, ‘extremists’, or ‘criminals’. Peaceful civil disobedience, protected under international human rights law and standards, is increasingly framed as a security threat, and the use of anti-terrorism and organized crime statutes to target climate protesters signals a concerning shift and a warning that states are relegating legitimate civic engagement on climate issues to matters of national security. The cumulative effect of all these trends is a chilling environment where fear, discrimination, bureaucratic hurdles and criminalization deter public participation.

In **Italy, Spain and Germany**, authorities have resorted to terrorism-related provisions and laws related to combating organized crime to target activists, particularly engaged in climate protests, including peaceful acts of civil disobedience.⁶⁹ This resulted in lengthy and invasive investigations, prosecutions that raise concerns regarding the weaponization of ‘public order’ and ‘national security’ as justifications to silence dissent, and generate a chilling effect for individuals, social movements and civil society overall.



Activists from Amnesty International march in Brussels, Belgium, on 23 October 2022 © 2022 SOPA Images



In **France**, groups opposing the construction of Highway A69 counted hundreds of arrests, prosecutions and detentions, carried out between February 2023 to August 2024, the majority for peaceful actions such as activists (locally known as *écureuils*, squirrels in french) sitting in trees to prevent them from being cut down, or people chaining themselves to machinery to prevent its use.⁷⁰ Media, NGOs and the UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental defenders reported that the ‘squirrels’ had been deprived of equipment, water, food and sleep, and that their lives had been endangered on several occasions since 2023.⁷¹ Environmental and climate organizations are increasingly being targeted by the French authorities. In June 2023, the organization *Soulèvements de la Terre*, an environmental movement mobilized against mega projects and their harmful consequences on the environment active since 2021, was dissolved by a government decree,⁷² after the Minister of Interior accused the group of ‘eco-terrorism’.⁷³ The dissolution was however later suspended by the Council of State.⁷⁴

Amnesty International has also documented numerous cases where children’s right to protest has been restricted, denied or violated, in a context where children and young people have led and participated in demonstrations calling for climate, racial and social justice or in support of rule of law.⁷⁵ Several states have failed to recognize or grant children and young people the additional protections to which they entitled during demonstrations.⁷⁶ Some authorities, for example in **Portugal** and **Belgium**, used negative narrative about children’s participation in protests⁷⁷, while in **Sweden**, activist Greta Thunberg, who was 17 years old at the time, was charged with ‘sabotage’ and sentenced to 30 days’ community service after an act of civil disobedience.⁷⁸

RESTRICTING CIVIC SPACE AT MULTILATERAL CLIMATE FORUMS

Civil society organizations, Indigenous Peoples, frontline and fenceline communities, people living with disabilities, children and young people are pivotal in pushing for ambitious, inclusive and fair climate commitments on the global stage. When they attend climate negotiations, they bring crucial knowledge from their communities.

The safe and meaningful participation of frontline and fenceline communities and EHRDs in multilateral climate negotiations leads to fairer more sustainable decisions. But too often, they are sidelined or excluded. When governments and institutions restrict protests, limit side events, or block access to negotiations, they make climate policy less inclusive, less effective, and less just.

These challenges are especially visible at the UNFCCC climate talks, namely the annual preparatory meetings in Bonn, Germany, and the high-profile Conferences of the Parties (COPs) hosted by a different country each year.

Despite the UNFCCC's recognition of the importance of public participation, many EHRDs –especially those from marginalized groups or from lower-income countries – face major obstacles in accessing and participating in negotiations and influencing outcomes. They face challenges such as discriminatory visa practices, unaffordable accommodation, lack of funding, complex and slow accreditation systems, and sometimes outright hostility or repression from host governments. Many activists have also reported being intimidated, closely surveilled, or silenced when trying to speak out or organize inside and outside official spaces.



Protesters at a COP29 action where speaking freely was not permitted © Amnesty International

Civil society and Indigenous Peoples' voices have often been restricted at the annual Bonn Climate Conference, as well as at COPs . At recent COPs attended by Amnesty International, civil society voices have been stifled, especially when the host country has a poor record on human rights. Indigenous Peoples and grassroots campaigners have often found themselves pushed to the margins, denied access to key spaces, or unable to influence negotiations that directly affect their lives and communities.

Timeline

	2018 	At COP24 in Poland in 2018, activists from environmental organizations were denied entry to the country and others were interrogated in their hotel rooms. ⁷⁹
	2019 	At COP25 in Spain in 2019, activists staged a demonstration inside the venue of the negotiations and were abruptly and aggressively evicted by the UN security services and all observers were temporarily banned from the negotiations. Up to 300 protesters were “banned”, although their badges were returned later. ⁸⁰
	2021 	At COP26 in the UK in 2021, in Scotland, protesters reported instances of excessive use of force by police, and instances of police misusing their “stop and search” powers in individual interactions with protesters. ⁸¹
	2022 	At COP27 in Egypt in 2022, the conference was marked by reports of harassment and unlawful surveillance of some civil society participants, ⁸² and the arbitrary detention and interrogation of dozens of Egyptian nationals in the run-up to the conference. ⁸³
	2023 	At COP28 in the UAE in 2023, the conference took place in an extremely repressive atmosphere, which led to the self-censorship of a large number of participants. ⁸⁴
	2024 	At the 2024 Bonn Climate Conference, climate campaigners raised concerns with the German foreign ministry about “discriminatory treatment”, after dozens of delegates from Africa and Asia – both from states parties and from observer organizations – experienced trouble getting visas, a form of structural disenfranchisement and discrimination. Some activists have called for decolonization of the system and for the Conferences to be moved out of Germany. ⁸⁵
	2024 	At COP29 in Azerbaijan in 2024, ⁸⁶ climate activists had trouble accessing the conference, including due to difficulties in travelling to the venues, visa issues, ⁸⁷ costs involved, ⁸⁸ being crowded out by fossil fuel lobbyists, ⁸⁹ being “debadged”, ⁹⁰ as well as facing heavy handed policing and misuse of “stop and searches” powers, illegal surveillance, ⁹¹ and repression, with a chilling effect on participants. ⁹²



Participants at COP29 at a protest calling for climate justice © Amnesty International

In contrast, such forums are often heavily attended by corporate lobbyists, particularly those from the fossil fuel industries.⁹³ For example, at COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh, authorities arrested journalists and LGBTQ+ activists,⁹⁴ while granting access to 636 fossil fuel lobbyists.⁹⁵ At COP28 in Dubai a record 2,456 fossil fuel lobbyists attended the conference.⁹⁶ At COP29 in Baku, at least 1,773 fossil fuel lobbyists were granted access to the conference.⁹⁷

Some host governments also conduct digital repression via surveillance, digital threats, and disinformation campaigns.⁹⁸ Authorities monitor activists' online communications, movements, and organizations, disrupt social media organizing, and deploy spyware against activists, creating fear and inhibiting mobilization.

At recent COPs attended by Amnesty International, civil society voices have been stifled, especially when the host country has a poor record on human rights.



Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber (L), President of the COP28 UNFCCC Climate Conference, and Majid Al-Suwaidi, Director General of the COP28, attend a plenary session on day eleven of the UNFCCC COP28 Climate Conference in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.
 @ Sean Gallup/Getty Images

HOW TO ENSURE THE PROTECTION OF PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS AT UNFCCC FORUMS?

To combat this, we need to see public recognition of the important work of EHRDs and efforts to prevent reprisals against anyone participating in future Bonn Climate Conferences and COPs.

If climate policy is to be fair and effective, EHRDs must be heard, not shut out. Their safety, participation, and leadership are not optional. They are essential to shaping a climate future grounded in human rights and climate justice.

Amnesty International has repeatedly raised concerns about shrinking civic space at climate summits, including the failure of many host governments to guarantee peaceful protest rights or prevent harassment of and reprisals against defenders,⁹⁹ barriers to participation at UNFCCC sessions, visa denials, the exclusion of participants from lower-income countries,¹⁰⁰ and the over-representation of fossil fuel lobbyists.¹⁰¹

Civil society organizations worldwide, including Amnesty International, have called for major reforms of the UN climate talks,¹⁰² including full transparency around Host Country Agreements (HCAs), in order for participants to be able to have confidence that their rights will be protected when attending UNFCCC meetings. Amnesty International has also called for an adequate complaints process which enables participants to seek redress for harms, such as acts of intimidation and reprisals, suffered in the “Blue Zone”, the area restricted to accredited participants and managed by the United Nations.¹⁰³

Without these reforms, the international climate negotiation spaces will continue to reproduce global power asymmetries that exclude the very communities most affected by climate breakdown.

 **THINK ABOUT IT**

Can you imagine a world where EHRDs are able to meaningfully participate in multilateral climate forums, without fearing for their safety or feeling the need to self-censor?

It is important to think not only about what's wrong with the current system, but also about what a truly just and inclusive process could look like – one that protects our rights and effectively slows the worsening climate crisis.

1 PAUSE AND REFLECT

Think about the barriers described above – from surveillance and visa denials to intimidation and criminalization – and how they affect those most impacted by climate change.

2 NOW IMAGINE

You have been invited to design a future multilateral climate forum. This forum still includes governments, negotiators and observers, but is also safe, inclusive and empowering for EHRDs, Indigenous Peoples, young people, marginalized groups, from lower income countries.

3 REFLECT AND RESPOND TO SOME OF THE PROMPTS BELOW

- What would this climate summit look and feel like?
- Who would be at the centre of decision making?
- How would decisions be made?
- What would make this space feel fair and representative?
- How would safety, participation and accessibility be not only protected, but guaranteed?
- How could this multilateral space ensure both inclusivity and effective climate action?

IT IS OUR FUTURE

An open and inclusive civic space and the respect and protection of EHRDs without discrimination are essential ingredients for climate justice.

Around the world, EHRDs are standing up for their communities, their futures and the future of our planet. Amnesty International is concerned about the increased repression and attacks against EHRDs and the reduction of civic space, as illustrated in this document. Defending human rights and the environment has long been a dangerous activity, and EHRDs across the world are facing serious human rights abuses, including criminalization and attacks ranging from threats and intimidation to killings. EHRDs are also impacted by shrinking civic space, that is, the increased restriction of the ability to exercise human rights that prevents them from speaking out, organizing and advocating for human rights change. These restrictions and poor governmental protection of the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association is not only visible on a national level, but also at multilateral forums such as the UNFCCC Climate Conferences.

But despite these challenges, EHRDs continue to organize, speak out, and inspire others. Their work shows what is possible when courage, commitment and community come together.

Defending human rights and the environment has long been a dangerous activity, and EHRDs across the world are facing serious human rights abuses, including criminalization and attacks ranging from threats and intimidation to killings.

A movement for climate justice must be centred on the demands, experience and knowledge of the individuals, groups and communities most harmed by climate change and the activities of fossil fuel and other extractive industries. These individuals, groups and communities must play a meaningful role in climate decision-making at all levels.

- States must publicly recognize the legitimate work of all EHRDs who contribute to climate justice and guarantee that they can exercise their rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, as well as other human rights, including the right to a healthy environment, the right to access information, the right to self-determination, and the rights of Indigenous Peoples to free, prior and informed consent, among others.
- States must ensure that peaceful assemblies for climate action can take place, including by removing all obstacles and undue restrictions.
- Governments must also guarantee the security and protection of EHRDs through preventive and reactive measures resulting from meaningful consultation with them and that respond to their needs and wishes. Those measures must be holistic, adopt a collective and intersectional approach and include reporting, investigating and seeking accountability and redress for attacks and reprisals against them and public information about the actions taken to do so.



Protesters hold placards during a rally before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) decides in three separate cases if states are doing enough in the face of global warming in rulings that could force them to do more, in Strasbourg, eastern France, on 9 April 2024. © AAFP via Getty Images

While the challenges are serious, defending civic space remains one of the most powerful ways we have to drive real and lasting change. An open civic space allows EHRDs to expose abuses linked to the root causes of the climate crisis with less risk of retaliation and increased safeguards. It's how EHRDs hold governments and corporations to account, and how communities push for effective solutions that are inclusive, fair, responsive to those most affected, and grounded in human rights. Governments

must respect, protect and guarantee the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association of EHRDs.

A better future is within reach, but only if we listen to those who are on the frontlines of the climate crisis. If we want climate justice, we must defend civic space. This how we can move forward to build a future that is safer for current and future generations and is more just, equitable and sustainable than our current reality.

While the challenges are serious, defending civic space remains one of the most powerful ways we have to drive real and lasting change.

RESOURCES

Amnesty International's work to support EHRDs, protect civic space, and advance climate justice draws upon an extensive network of expertise, partnerships, and research. This section provides key resources for those who wish to deepen their knowledge, access support, and take action.

AMNESTY ACADEMY ONLINE COURSES ON THE RIGHT TO PROTEST, HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND CLIMATE JUSTICE

The Right to Protest: This course teaches why peaceful protest is protected by human rights, and how it is under threat throughout the world.

Human Rights Defenders: This course equips and enables you to talk to your family and friends about human rights defenders and the issues faced by them.

Climate Change and Human Rights: This course teaches why climate change is a human rights issue, and how human rights can be used as a tool to combat the climate crisis.

Energy Transition: This course introduces some of the human rights abuses linked to the energy transition. In doing so, you will explore the human rights abuses connected to the mining of raw minerals powering the energy transition.

Freedom of Expression: This course will equip you with the knowledge to understand and claim your right to freedom of expression, and the skills and confidence to take action to defend it.

Indigenous Peoples' Land Rights: this course will explain and promote a crucial right of Indigenous Peoples - the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent.

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