



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

ISSUE BRIEF

Environmental Defenders

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This USAID Issue Brief on Environmental Defenders provides an introduction to the range of issues facing environmental defenders worldwide, followed by a discussion of key areas of engagement and donor support that demonstrate possible responses to protect the rights and well-being of environmental defenders.

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– Global Witness,
Last Line of
Defence, 2021

A Rising Tide of Violence and Intimidation

Environmental defenders are under threat. In 2020, there were 227 reported killings of environmental defenders, a rate of nearly 5 per week, and the worst year on record. Global Witness and its partners documented 2,177 killings of environmental defenders from 2002-2022.¹ The actual numbers are very likely higher as some deaths go unreported by official sources or the circumstances are difficult to verify.² As John Knox, the former UN Special Rapporteur

on Human Rights and the Environment has noted, “for every one killed, there are 20 to 100 others harassed, unlawfully and lawfully arrested, and sued for defamation, among other intimidations.”³ Beyond the risks to individuals, human rights violations against environmental defenders create a broader chilling effect on community leaders and advocacy organizations seeking to voice and address economic, social, and environmental concerns.

Who are Environmental Defenders?

Environmental defenders are people who “take a stand and peaceful action against the unjust, discriminatory, corrupt, or damaging exploitation of natural resources or the environment.”⁴ They are made up of diverse groups and individuals, including Indigenous Peoples, rural communities, local conservation and forest monitors, environmental activists, human rights advocates, journalists, lawyers, and women and youth leaders. Although attacks on defenders are especially prevalent in Latin American countries such as Colombia, Mexico, Honduras, and Brazil, there are also many examples from Asia (Philippines, Cambodia, India, Burma, and Bangladesh) and Africa (Democratic Republic of the Congo and Tanzania).

The grievances of environmental defenders are enmeshed in broader governance challenges—including many areas of continuing focus for USAID programming and core

USAID policy concerns, such as the [Strategy on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance](#), [Biodiversity Policy](#), [Climate Strategy 2022-2030](#), [Policy on Promoting the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), [National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality](#), and the [U.S. Strategy on Countering Corruption](#). The Strategy on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance, for example, calls for “responding to human rights violations by supporting and protecting human rights defenders and other watchdog groups.” Similarly, the Biodiversity Policy recognizes the cross-cutting nature of environmental defenders’ concerns, observing that “a strong [environmental] constituency will include all groups within society, with special attention given to Indigenous Peoples, women, the disabled, and other traditionally excluded groups [to] promote rights-based approaches, collective action, and stewardship.”

Grievances about Corruption, Criminality, and Flawed Governance

Environmental defenders seek to voice grievances to address the harmful impacts of climate change, oil spills, water contamination, illegal logging, encroachment of Indigenous lands, and other environmental threats to their livelihoods and cultures. Land grabbing and insecure land tenure are often at the root of many of these problems. According to the [Land Matrix Initiative](#), when governments and companies impose large-scale land acquisitions, “the exclusion of local communities from their land, as well as from the decision-making processes and institutions governing the land, are putting enormous strain on land rights and governance systems.”⁵

Politically influential business interests, both legal and illegal, are often engaged in activities like mineral extraction and agro-industry that are high-value but linked to deforestation, biodiversity loss, and pollution. They may also generate few economic benefits for local inhabitants. Concessions for land and minerals are sometimes acquired illegally through corruption, deepening communities’ sense of injustice and contributing to perceptions of impunity.⁶ With the

rise of renewable energy technologies, the global demand for key [green energy minerals](#), such as lithium, cobalt, and graphite, is expected to increase more than 500 percent by 2050, which is likely to lead to increased conflicts between local communities and mining companies.⁷

Testimony from environmental defenders indicates that security forces—police, military, militias, and private security guards—sometimes engage in intimidation and abuse of those exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. Threats and attacks are also common from groups seeking land for criminal activities such as illegal logging, money laundering, or drug trafficking. The state’s presence in these rural areas may be limited and ineffective—or even complicit in violence. Researchers have found that killings of environmental defenders are more frequent in countries with governments that mix elements of democracy and autocracy, especially when combined with significant foreign direct investment, mineral extraction, or large Indigenous populations.⁸

Vulnerability and Heightened Risks for Indigenous Peoples and Women

The land, culture, and livelihoods of Indigenous Peoples are central to the concerns of many environmental defenders. Logging, ranching, agribusiness, and mining contribute to rapid rates of land conversion in many Indigenous areas, often without the adequate consultation and consent of the affected communities.⁹ The lives of Indigenous leaders have frequently been endangered for reporting corruption, claiming land or water rights, or advocating for a healthy environment. In 2020, “over a third of all fatal attacks [targeted] Indigenous people despite only making up 5 percent of the world’s population.”¹⁰

While most attacks and killings are directed at men, there is a strong gendered dimension to assaults on environmental defenders. Women are often subject to

gender-based violence by personnel from public and private security forces. They also experience intimidation, verbal, and media abuse that attacks them for breaking gender norms, labeling them as bad mothers and wives.¹¹ Despite these attempts to stigmatize women in an atmosphere of violence, women have played a leading role among environmental defenders. Women have been active in organizing non-violent protests on issues ranging from deforestation in India to mining activities endangering water access for rural households in Latin America.¹² In response to these challenges, Indigenous women have created organizations such as the [Fuerza de Mujeres Wayuu](#) in Colombia and the [Mujeres Amazónicas](#) in Ecuador to mobilize against environmental threats and protect their land and traditions for future generations.



Mural of Berta Cáceres in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Photo by David Díaz from Pixabay

Environmental Defenders and Environmental Peacebuilding

In some countries, the situation of environmental defenders is aggravated by recent trends toward democratic backsliding. In these politically turbulent contexts, those who seek to silence or eliminate environmental defenders often try to falsely link them to dissident or armed groups that the public fears or perceives to be destabilizing. Opponents spotlight and isolate them as dangerous individuals rather than as advocates for their communities and territories. One of the main goals of environmental defender advocates is to reframe public understandings and “reverse the tide of marginalization” by deepening linkages and support for environmental defenders in broader environmental, peace, and human rights networks ([Geneva Roadmap](#)). In December 2019, 24 Latin American and

Caribbean countries signed the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation, and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, better known as the [Escazú Agreement](#). This is the first international treaty to have provisions on the rights and protection of environmental defenders.¹³ These efforts seek to demonstrate how environmental defenders are not sources of disruption but rather a positive vision for the future and validate them as community builders who promote values in line with global standards like the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) and the principles of the [UN Global Compact](#) for businesses on human rights, labor, environment, and anti-corruption.



Recommendations to Protect the Rights and Safety of Environmental Defenders

- Support the establishment and strengthening of protection programs, following do-no-harm principles and protocols, to ensure that at-risk and threatened environmental defenders are effectively protected and their risk mitigated
- Identify and address the differentiated/intersectional needs of Indigenous and women environmental defenders, who are often already excluded from exercise of their basic rights, and are at heightened risk of abuse and violence
- Work with civil society organizations to facilitate multistakeholder dialogues on environmental defender issues
- Support investigative journalism that helps to better inform the public about key problems identified by environmental defenders
- Convene dialogues or briefings with other bilateral and/or multilateral donors on critical environmental issues, limits on freedom of expression and assembly, and threats and intimidation faced by environmental defenders
- Raise concerns about environmental defenders' challenges and safety with trusted host country officials at the appropriate level
- Support the work of ombudsman offices that monitor and report risks faced by environmental defenders and government implementation of Early Warning Alerts
- Support Indigenous Peoples' organizations and communities to legally secure their territorial claims
- Monitor judicial proceedings and collaborate on technical assistance to ensure that due process is being observed in cases involving environmental defenders
- Meet with businesses and sectoral organizations involved in high-risk or high-impact natural resource activities to discuss the concerns and safety of environmental defenders
- Encourage businesses to follow norms such as the [Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) and BSR's [10 Human Rights Priorities for the Extractives Sector](#).
- Support organizations promoting sustainability, land rights, and human rights such as the [Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil](#) and the [Global Roundtable for Sustainable Beef](#).

More Information

For more detailed information and recommendations about environmental defenders, see the USAID technical brief, *Environmental Defenders Under Threat: Global Lessons from the Colombian Amazon*.

Contacts:

Kim Thompson (kthompson@usaid.gov) and
Daniel Abrahams (dabrahams@usaid.gov)

Author:

Jeffrey Stark, Environmental Governance Lead, Integrated Natural Resource Management Activity (INRM)

Note:

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Notes

- 1 Global Witness. 2021. [Last Line of Defence: The Industries Causing the Climate Crisis and Attacks Against Land and Environmental Defenders](#).
- 2 For example, Brazil's [Instituto Igarapé](#) reported 1,398 women were killed in 2020 alone in the country's Amazonian states, but these figures include a broader categorization of human rights defenders and gender-based violence.
- 3 UN Environment Program. 2018. ["Promoting Greater Protection for Environmental Defenders Policy."](#)
- 4 Global Witness, Ibid. 2021.
- 5 Lay, Jann et al. 2021. [Taking Stock of the Global Land Rush](#). Land Matrix Initiative.
- 6 White House 2021. [United States Strategy on Countering Corruption](#).
- 7 De Jong, Terah U. et al. 2021. [Mining and the Green Energy Transition](#). United States Agency for International Development.
- 8 Le Billon, Philippe and Päivi Lujala. 2021. "Environmental Defenders: Killings, Perpetrators, and Drivers of Violence." In Menton, Mary and Philippe Le Billon (eds.). *Environmental Defenders: Deadly Struggles for Life and Territory*.
- 9 Forest Peoples Programme. 2016. ["Local Biodiversity Outlooks. Indigenous Peoples' and Local Communities' Contributions to the Implementation of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020."](#)
- 10 Global Witness. 2020. [Defending Tomorrow: The Climate Crisis and Threats against Land and Environmental Defenders](#).
- 11 San Pedro, Paula. 2019. [Women Defenders of Agricultural, Territorial, and Environmental Rights in Colombia: Risking Their Lives for Peace](#).
- 12 IUCN. 2020. ["Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders: Facing Gender-Based Violence in Defense of Land, Natural Resources, and Human Rights."](#)
- 13 The Escazú Agreement includes commitments for access to environmental information, public participation in environmental decision-making, and environmental justice, consistent with [Principle 10](#) of the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. The Escazú Agreement went into force on April 22, 2021, but it has not been ratified in a number of key countries, including Colombia, Brazil, Peru, and Guatemala.

Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM)

Sound management of natural resources is central to long-term development and resilience. Faced with an urgent need to reduce environmental degradation while improving human well-being, solutions that effectively integrate investments in natural resource management with economic and social development are increasingly urgent. INRM promotes integrated programming across environment and non-environment sectors and across the Program Cycle. INRM supports USAID to amplify program impacts, strengthen gender equality and social inclusion, and identify best practices for integration.

For more information: <https://land-links.org/project/integrated-natural-resource-management-inrm-activity/>

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Author: Jeffrey Stark, Environmental Governance Lead, Integrated Natural Resource Management Activity (INRM)

Front cover photo: Surui Reforestation Project in Brazil. Photo by José Caldas.

Back cover photo: Kayapo fire warriors in Brazil. Photo by Eric Stoner.

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**U.S. Agency for
International Development**

1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW

Washington, DC 20004

www.usaid.gov