

# The right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment

## Factsheet

States are obliged to respect human rights, to protect the enjoyment of human rights from harmful interference, and to fulfill human rights by working towards their full realization. All of these obligations, including substantive and procedural rights, as well as protections against non-discrimination, apply fully in the environmental context. More than 1,100 civil society organizations, 15 UN agencies and seventy-plus member states have expressed support for recognition of this right. The time has come for the United Nations to formally recognize the human right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, or, more simply, the human right to a healthy environment.

## Substantive rights

Environmental degradation can harm a wide variety of human rights, including the rights to life, health, food, water, culture and the rights of children and Indigenous peoples. The right to a healthy and sustainable environment, which is now recognized by more than 80 percent of UN member States (156 out of 193), includes both substantive and procedural elements. The substantive elements include:



**Clean air**



**Safe and sufficient water**



**Healthy and sustainably-produced food**



**Healthy ecosystems and biodiversity**



**A safe climate**



**Toxic-free environments**

## Procedural rights

Procedural rights are a key link between environmental and human rights law—they lay out formal steps and procedures to be taken in enforcing legal rights.

These include:



**Access to information**



**Participation in decision-making**



**Access to justice with effective remedies**

## International Cooperation

States have an obligation to work together to address transboundary and global environmental threats to human rights.

## Right to non-discrimination



States have obligations, among others, to protect against environmental harm that results from or contributes to discrimination, to provide for equal access to environmental benefits and to ensure that their actions relating to the environment do not themselves discriminate. In order to protect the rights of those who are particularly vulnerable to or at risk from environmental harm, States must also ensure that their laws and policies take into account the ways that some parts of the population are more vulnerable or susceptible to environmental harm and the barriers that some face to exercising their human rights relating to the environment.

## Human rights defenders

States have obligations to protect environmental human rights defenders, namely, individuals and groups striving to protect and promote human rights relating to the environment, and those who work to protect the environment on which human rights depend.

## Businesses

In accordance with the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, business enterprises have the responsibility to conduct human rights due diligence, avoid causing or contributing to adverse human rights impacts through environmental harm, to address such impacts, and to establish transparent and effective grievance mechanisms.