

The Americas: Governments should strengthen, not weaken, environmental protection during COVID-19 pandemic

GENEVA / WASHINGTON (13 August 2020) – Too many countries in the Americas have loosened environmental safeguards in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, when they should be improving them to protect their people’s health, a UN human rights expert and an expert from the Organization of American States (OAS) said today.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment and the Special Rapporteur for Economic, Social, Cultural and Environmental Rights from the OAS’s Inter-American Commission for Human Rights today issued a joint statement to highlight challenges related to the Covid-19 pandemic and the global environmental crisis:

“The current pandemic has revealed the already fragile state of environmental protection in many countries of the Americas. The pandemic has exacerbated existing patterns of inequalities, and it is no coincidence that areas with higher levels of environmental pollution and higher death rates from COVID-19 are the same in which historically discriminated against people live.

The situation of the environment and human rights in the Americas was already a cause of concern prior to COVID-19. Instead of seeing Governments improve environmental safeguards in response to the pandemic, a number of regressions have been observed, with consequences on the enjoyment of the right to a healthy environment in the region.

Such unfavorable policy decisions are likely to result in accelerated deterioration of the environment and have negative impacts on a wide range of human rights including the rights to life, health, water, culture, and food, as well as the right to live in a healthy environment.

We call on States to strengthen their environmental laws, policies, programs and regulations. It is the obligation of States to prevent further damage and to put in place strong institutional frameworks, fulfilling the obligations contained in regional and universal human rights instruments, in particular, those contained in the San Salvador Protocol and the Escazú Agreement.

In this matter, States should suspend or refrain from approving or investing in any large scale industrial or agricultural activity if the appropriate consultation and participation mechanisms have not been implemented according to international

standards, including the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous peoples. They should further assure that all environmental protection institutions are properly financed, staffed and equipped to continue their monitoring and enforcement duties in their respective jurisdictions.

In case a decision needs to be made to reform specific environmental norms, those decisions will need to respect both procedural and substantive elements of human rights. All decisions should be made in a transparent manner, involving ample public participation, and providing access to justice for concerned individuals, communities and other organizations. States must ensure that any changes respect the principles of non-discrimination and non-retrogression.

A crucial aspect of public participation involves the protection of environmental human rights defenders. States should take all relevant measures that will provide for the protection of environmental human rights defenders and the prompt investigation and prosecution of individuals responsible for threats or violence against these people.

In conclusion, the growing risk of emerging infectious diseases is caused by a “perfect storm” of human actions that damage ecosystems and biodiversity, such as deforestation, land clearing and conversion for agriculture, the wildlife trade, expanding human population, settlements and infrastructure, intensified livestock production, and climate change.

In the Americas, as well as in the rest of the world, human health is inextricably tied to ecosystem health, and putting all efforts towards the protection and the restoration of nature is an outstanding long-term investment.”

ENDS

THE EXPERTS: *Mr. David R. Boyd, [UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment](#), is part of what is known as the [Special Procedures](#) of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council’s independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms. Special Procedures mandate-holders are independent human rights experts appointed by the Human Rights Council to address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. They are not UN staff and are independent from any government or organization. They serve in their individual capacity and do not receive a salary for their work.*

Ms. Soledad García Muñoz *is the IACHR Special Rapporteur on Economic, Social, Cultural and Environment Rights. The Office of the Special Rapporteur on Economic, Social, Cultural and Environment Rights was created by the IACHR to guide, develop and deepen its work to promote and protect economic, social, cultural and environmental rights in the Americas, taking into account the interdependent and indivisible nature of all human rights.*

*For more information and **media requests**, please contact Viktoria Aberg (+41 22 917 9790, vaberg@ohchr.org), Bashar Jamal (+41 22 917 9126, bjamal@ohchr.org) or write to srenvironment@ohchr.org.*

For media enquiries regarding other UN independent experts, please contact Ms Kitty McKinsey (kmckinsey@ohchr.org)

Follow news related to the UN's independent human rights experts on
Twitter [@UN_SPExperts](https://twitter.com/UN_SPExperts).

Concerned about the world we live in?
Then STAND UP for someone's rights today.
#Standup4humanrights
and visit the web page at <http://www.standup4humanrights.org>