

“The safeguarding of the environment cannot be divorced from ensuring justice for the poor and finding answers to the structural problems of the global economy.”

— Pope Francis, in a 2019 public letter to young economists and entrepreneurs worldwide.



**While heads of state meet to talk about how to address climate change, more and more activists in the Global South are being harassed and killed for protecting the forests, waters and biodiversity that are crucial for people and the planet. The most vulnerable members of our human family are bearing the triple burden of experiencing the worst impacts of climate change, of being overlooked in top-down climate ‘solutions’ and of being threatened and/or criminalized for speaking out.**

As we develop national and global policies to mitigate climate change and transition to a just economy based on integral human development, we must focus on the most vulnerable peoples of the Global South and especially those who are working to protect people and the planet.

Canada can do better. We can protect environmental and human rights defenders by enacting a human rights and environmental due diligence (HREDD) law that makes it an enforceable requirement for companies to actively prevent human rights abuses and environmental harms abroad.

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# People and Planet First

## Climate plans at COP26

During the COVID-19 lockdown, many of us were relieved to learn about the reprieve from global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. With the coming economic recovery, however, 2021 emissions levels are expected to be only 1.2% below the 2019 peak<sup>1</sup>. As we approach the COP26 United Nations Climate Change Conference, we cannot help but to be eager for real progress to prevent catastrophic climate change.

The conference brings together the parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to accelerate action to tackle the climate crisis. At COP21, these parties adopted the 2015 Paris Agreement, a binding international treaty that sets out the goal of limiting global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius, preferably to 1.5 degrees, as compared to pre-industrial levels. The treaty also provides a framework for financial, technical and capacity-

building support to less-developed countries to mitigate the impacts of the changing climate and to assist them with adapting to a less carbon-intensive economy.

At COP26, countries will present their nationally determined contributions (NDCs), which represent the actions they will take to achieve the global reductions needed. Development and Peace — Caritas Canada joins many Canadians and civil society organizations in calling on Canada to set ambitious GHG emission reduction goals and to increase its financial and technical contributions for adaptation and mitigation.



## Stories from the field: the hidden cost of climate action

The shift to renewable energy sources and sustainable production is critical to the planet. Let's make this change in a way that respects marginalized peoples and the ecosystems in which they live.

In Honduras, international climate funding has been used to build over 30 solar energy projects that are to power the country and sell surpluses to other Central American countries. Namasigüe, in the Choluteca Department, has attracted most of these projects because of its abundant sunshine. However, the rights of the region's many small-scale farmers have not been respected in the development of these projects. In the village of Los Prados, which has unreliable access to electricity, the community was neither informed nor consulted prior to the construction of a major solar farm. They lost land, forest and food sources to the solar project whose energy output is being sold for profit on the state's energy grid.



↑ Solar panels in the village of Los Prados in the Namasigüe Municipality, Choluteca Department, Honduras.

Development and Peace's local partner, **Caritas Choluteca**, is accompanying eight affected parishes in 10 municipalities. By applying Catholic Social Teaching to situations of injustice, the communities can organize and defend their rights, including the right to their land and to a healthy environment. Caritas Choluteca trains and accompanies community leaders and supports them in advocating for policies that respect human rights. Thanks to collaborative work with other parishes, municipalities and regional and national organizations, the communities affected by industry can acquire training in citizen participation, defend their rights and live peacefully on their territories. In fact, these communities are the same ones that Development and Peace supported in the wake of hurricane Mitch in 1998. Since that devastating event, they have come together with our partners' support and are now the driving force of our current environmental work in the region.

*"We don't believe clean energy is a bad thing, but it is the way they are installing it. It's not good that they are destroying very old trees and nature, that is why we are resisting these projects."*

— Félix Pedro Pastrana Escobar of the community of Costa Sur in Namasigüe, Honduras.



## Human rights must be central to climate solutions



As we work collectively to cool the planet, we must ensure that actions taken to prevent or mitigate climate change do not themselves infringe on human rights.

We know that the people who have contributed the least to climate change unjustly and disproportionately suffer its harms. As Catholics, we believe in integral human development, the right to life and the preferential option for the poor. Impacted persons and communities must be meaningful participants in and primary beneficiaries of climate action, and they must have access to effective remedies when they are wronged.

When forests are cleared for agribusiness or mining, or when lands are flooded for hydroelectric dams, local ecosystems are devastated. The loss of biodiversity affects the soil, decreasing productivity, destabilizing agriculture and fisheries while removing natural water filters – all undermining the right to food, food sovereignty and the right to clean water. The destruction of forest results in changing rain patterns and raises local temperatures, further affecting the growing season and the livelihoods of farmers. Such local environmental changes increase people's vulnerability to natural disasters like droughts and floods. These compromise people's safety and expose them to infectious diseases whilst also reducing their access to healthcare, thus undermining their rights to life and health<sup>2,3</sup>.



### Environmental rights

80% of UN member states have codified the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment through constitutions, legislation, court decisions and/or regional treaties. Canada has not yet codified this right<sup>4</sup>.

## Biodiversity and Indigenous peoples

The best way to protect biodiversity is to protect the rights of Indigenous peoples and others who depend directly on natural ecosystems<sup>5</sup>.

The regions of our planet that are most vulnerable to climate change and the loss of biodiversity are also home to Indigenous peoples and some of the world's poorest communities<sup>6</sup>. While the loss of biodiversity affects us all, its most immediate impacts are disproportionately felt by communities that depend on local ecosystems for food, water and medicines.

For Indigenous peoples, lost lands and harmed ecosystems can often represent a loss of homes, livelihoods, spirituality and culture.

Even in countries that legally recognize Indigenous peoples' rights, communal property and traditional land titles, the necessary procedures are often long and difficult. Land concessions for mining, agribusiness or development projects are often granted in areas where the recognition of Indigenous or rural people's land rights is absent, incomplete, in process or simply devalued in favour of "development."



↑ Women prepare bamboo shoots for steaming in Kampun village, Cambodia.

Resource extraction projects often fail to recognize the value of subsistence livelihoods based on respectful relationships with the natural world. Those who pursue such livelihoods and depend on nature for their subsistence and culture often bear the brunt of land and biodiversity losses while the products and profits of extractive industries are enjoyed by people far removed from their local impacts<sup>7</sup>.

*"The forest is very important for the next generation and for us. There are vegetables and wild animals living in this forest. So, it is important to protect them from being destroyed, and animals from being killed."*

— Snay Thong, Tuen Village, Cambodia.



## Stories from the field: protecting Indigenous lands and forests

The land and forests are the very basis of the way of life of Indigenous communities in Cambodia. They rely on the forests for fruits, vegetables, honey, medicinal herbs and many other non-timber products. Yet, deforestation is occurring legally and illegally, with permits or without, for wood harvesting and/or for building mining access roads, all of which encroach on their land.

*"If we didn't have the logging patrol group, there would be a lot of offenders breaking the law and there would be no more land and forest left for us. Indigenous people like us need the forest and land. Without forest and land, there is no life for us. Therefore, I work very hard to protect our land. I go on patrol day and night. We go on patrol often."*

— Ngeng Kry, Indigenous member of the Community Forestry in Kombak Village, Cambodia.



Development and Peace's local partner in Cambodia, **Development and Partnership in Action (DPA)**, trains community leaders and supports them throughout the lengthy process of securing official title to their lands. This process requires community leaders to survey their land, to negotiate with other neighbouring communities and with companies about the boundaries they share, and to follow a rigorous application process. Once the land title is secured, it is up to the community itself to patrol the land to defend it against encroachment and illegal activities. DPA also assists with documenting illegal activity and reporting it to authorities, organizing with neighbouring communities, and, whenever possible, working with companies to reach mutually beneficial land use/sharing agreements.



↑ Community forestry patrol, Cambodia.

*"We are not against the production of energy, but we are opposed to a system that doesn't include us."*

— Leonardo Armador, community leader in Los Prados, Namasigüe, Honduras.



## Indigenous peoples

**~5%**  
of world's  
population

**15%**  
of the  
extreme poor

Life expectancy  
**20 years  
lower**  
than non-Indigenous  
people worldwide

**40%**  
of murdered  
environmental  
defenders are  
Indigenous

Indigenous lands  
encompass at least  
**40%**  
of global protected areas

At least  
**36%**  
of the world's intact forests  
are within Indigenous lands

**1 in 3**  
(2.5 billion) people  
depend on Indigenous  
and community land<sup>e</sup>

## Violence by proxy and impunity



↑ A woman protests the criminalization of environmental defender Víctor Vásquez. Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

As communities and organizations work to document abuses and seek justice for crimes against environmental and human rights defenders, the trend is clear: those who oppose corporate projects are the victims of “violence by proxy” perpetrated on behalf of corporations by hired thugs, contract killers, police and paramilitary officers, private security forces or militia groups<sup>9</sup>. Commonly, threats and preliminary acts of violence are ignored by authorities, with national and international observers noting that officials are often complicit in attacks.

The dignity of the human person is the basis of Catholic Social Teaching, and as such, we cannot ignore the moral and human cost of these realities. In confronting the culture of violence with a deep respect for human life, we join others, like John Knox, the former UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights

and the Environment, in ringing the alarm bell: “There is an epidemic now, a culture of impunity, a sense that anyone can kill environmental defenders without repercussions, eliminate anyone who stands in the way. It [comes from] mining, agribusiness, illegal logging, and dam building<sup>10</sup>.”

The impunity with which multinational companies can operate is a major driver of the violence against human rights and environmental activists. As local communities and organizations seek justice, they face large businesses with corporate legal teams, multinational jurisdictional roadblocks, and conflicts between local and international law. It is the story of David vs. Goliath, with Goliath’s legal team, private security guards and court system, who often do not even speak David’s language!

**“Human rights defenders are essential in any society, but especially so in those affected by conflict, where they monitor and document human rights violations, pursue accountability and push for the implementation of international standards. But they should not have to do this alone.”**

— Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, June 2021.



## Defend the defenders

As climate change continues to exacerbate local issues, environmental, land and human rights defenders are increasingly being harassed, criminalized and murdered for their efforts to protect vulnerable populations and ecosystems.



### Environmental defenders

Environmental defenders are people or communities who, in their personal or professional capacity and in a peaceful manner, strive to protect and promote human rights related to the environment, including water, air, land, flora and fauna<sup>11</sup>.

Around the world, local environmental and community leaders are being denounced, discredited and/or criminalized, especially in countries with histories of oppression. The criminalization of human rights and environmental defenders most often occurs where there is a gap between the recognition of international human and environmental rights and their local implementation, resulting in intimidation tactics like surveillance, direct harassment, violence, sexual assault and even murder.

There are a few types of narratives used by states and corporations to make excuses for the dismissal of dissenting voices. One narrative justifying repression focuses on the pursuit of economic and political priorities, advancing a limited definition of “growth” as though it were a sacred quest<sup>12</sup>. In another narrative, the defenders are labelled as trespassers on their own land or as violent criminals when expressing unpopular opinions.

## Stories from the field: empowering and supporting local communities

Development and Peace’s local partner, the **Honduran Centre for the Promotion of Community Development (CEHPRODEC)**, accompanies communities that are defending their rights, land and livelihoods. They train local leaders in the defence of human rights, in documenting violations and to contribute to international analyses and strategic lawsuits. They offer legal services to people who are criminalized for defending their land, for advocating for mining legislation reform or for consulting communities before the approval and implementation of extractive projects.



PHOTO BY : JERSSON RAMIREZ

↑ Víctor Vásquez at his trial in May 2021.

Víctor Vásquez is an Indigenous leader and environmentalist from the Lenca community of Simpínula in Honduras. He has been charged for defending land from encroachment by businesses – land to which his community holds a government-recognized collective title. He also faces charges connected to his role as a human rights accompanier for a community whose farmland was being violently taken over by the employees of the neighbouring landowner. Víctor has been accused of assault, damages, aggravated robbery and forced displacement. The communities and Development and Peace’s partners continue to assert his innocence and accompany him through the legal processes. CEHPRODEC, which is providing the legal defence, points out that this is the first time a land defender has been charged with “forced displacement” under a new law that was actually intended to protect families from being pushed off their land. The local office of the UN Human Rights Council in Honduras and four UN rapporteurs have expressed concern about the criminalization of Víctor and the misuse of the anti-forced displacement law against him. On July 28, 2021, Víctor was sentenced to a year and a half in jail. CEHPRODEC is planning to appeal the verdict.

*“Lack of social and environmental responsibility on the part of businesses displays a complete disregard for ethics, as it goes against the common good and negatively affects the most vulnerable. [...] Ethics must surpass economic interests, and the economy should be at the service of the population.”*

— The Most Rev. Guy Charbonneau,  
Bishop of Choluteca, Honduras.



## Canada's role and responsibility



The extractive industry is the deadliest driver of violence against environmental defenders<sup>13</sup>.

Canada, the home of approximately 75% of the world's mining companies, claims to be a leader in responsible business conduct.

Yet, there is no shortage of allegations

of human rights abuses and environmental damage against Canadian mining companies. Various UN bodies have pointed out that Canada is currently not meeting its obligations under international human rights norms and have called for effective policies and mechanisms to ensure all Canadian corporations, in particular mining corporations, respect human rights when operating abroad, and for an independent mechanism to investigate allegations against Canadian companies<sup>14</sup>.

***“Now more than ever, we need mandatory supply chain due diligence to stop corporate abuse and guarantee global solidarity. Through their operations, irresponsible companies are complicit in acts of violence and suffering. We, Catholic leaders throughout the world, call on states to put an end to this.”***

— Letter of support for human rights and environmental due diligence (HREDD) legislation, dated September 28, 2020, signed by bishops from around the world, including Archbishop Richard Gagnon, president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCC), on behalf of the bishops of Canada.

The Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise (CORE), whose office opened to receive complaints as of March 15, 2021, continues to lack the promised powers needed to independently investigate allegations of abuse by Canadian companies operating abroad. Were the CORE to be empowered, it could help impacted communities access remedy and justice.

To prevent human rights abuses and environmental harm before they happen, the international expectation for companies to perform due diligence must be made legally binding. In Canada, the implementation of a human rights and environmental due diligence (HREDD) law would mean that Canadian companies, and those that sell products in and/or have presence in Canada, would be required to prevent, address and remedy human rights and environmental abuses through their entire supply chains.

We can ensure that Canadian companies are not complicit in human rights abuses, including environmental degradation, and we can contribute to a global standard in which the protection of human and environmental rights is an enforceable obligation. Will you stand with us in demanding the enactment of such a law?

***Sign the petition today!***

## Economic reforms for a just recovery

If Canada is to be a world leader in an energy transition, we must ensure that it is a *just* transition, at home and abroad.

***“Economy, as the very word indicates, should be the art of achieving a fitting management of our common home, which is the world as a whole.”***

— Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 206.

## People and Planet First



As we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and collectively address the climate crisis, we must ensure that with all our plans, people and the planet come first. We must also ensure that all future economic activity operates in full recognition of the human rights of all persons involved, including their right to a safe, sustainable and healthy environment.

All economic activity must respect human rights, including rights related to the environment. For too long, our economic structures have positioned us firstly as producers and consumers in a profit-driven, resource-extractive system. As Catholics, as Canadians, and for the sake of our human family and our common home, we must reject a culture of consumption and disposability, and work towards an economy of well-being, a life of sufficiency, a worldview of integral ecology.

### To learn more

[Online petition](#) | [Paper parliamentary petition and instructions](#) | [HREDD Frequently Asked Questions](#)

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